

Rajan's Perspective of Meeting Ali

Chapter One

Saturday, October 8

Rajan floated cross-legged in his ruby, his arms crossed over his chest as he glared at the endless expanse around him. Well, fake endless. If he actually tried to go anywhere, the view never changed. Which made him think the black sky filled with clouds of bright colors around him were just an illusion.

If only he could burn the stupid clouds with his fire. Shouldn't genies at least have access to their magic in their gems? It was like their home base. But no, even here their masters' will controlled them completely. So he had to sit here and do nothing but bear the humiliation of having his gem on display at some museum, like he was a prized trophy to be shown off.

He hoped he got a chance to kill Tyler McMichael. But his current master wasn't from the stupid branch of the McMichael family, so was less likely to screw up a wish. Though even when Rajan was under one of Rand McMichael's monster descendants, he hadn't managed to kill her. Only frighten her, but not enough to make her leave him alone. It only seemed to excite the sicko.

He jumped when he suddenly felt his master's touch on his gem, looking upward as though that would somehow show Tyler's face. "What the hell?!" The magic forcefully pulled him out of his ruby, but this was way too soon for his sentence at the museum to be over. What emergency fire wish did this idiot have that needed Rajan's attention *right now*?

Coming out of the gem glaring, he prepared to light into Tyler for being stupid enough to send him a way to a museum when he apparently desperately needed a wish. But fog surrounded him, hiding his master. He growled under his breath, his fingers twitching. He could blast this fog away if his idiot master would wish for it. But no. That would be useful and practical. Masters didn't make wishes like that.

Suddenly, he heard a timid female voice stutter, "S-sorry. I'm not sure what happened. I think I tripped, or—"

The fog drifted away, and Rajan had a moment of blank-faced staring at the small human before him. The touch on his gem . . . it *had* to be his master. It called him from his ruby, so there was no other option. But this wasn't Tyler. It was a small human female with long, dark brown hair and deep blue eyes staring at him in horror. What the hell was with the horror? That made even less sense than her not being Tyler.

"No," she whispered, taking a step back. Her eyes roved over him, growing wider and wider in dismay. While he hated lustful stares, the whole horrified look was getting a little insulting as time stretched on. He wasn't *that* bad looking.

"Please tell me I'm hallucinating from the fog." She closed her eyes, almost like she thought she could will Rajan away. Human or not, they were reaching beyond rude here. Rajan was still a sentient being.

"Hey!" he barked. His master startled at his voice, almost like she'd really thought she could make him go away by not seeing him.

With his new master's super weird reaction, he was pretty sure he'd figured out what was going on. This girl was a genie hunter, but an inexperienced one, since she was so surprised by him. Or maybe he was the wrong genie and she'd meant to steal a different one? Either way, he

wasn't taking disrespect like this off some human. "If you've come to steal me, have the courtesy to look me in the eye, genie hunter."

"Wh-what?"

Geeze, she was a timid thing. "You heard me." He crossed his arms over his chest, feeling his eyes warm as they flashed red with warning. "If you're going to steal a genie, have the courtesy to look him in the eye." He wasn't an object for her to make off with.

"No." She drew the word out, long and slow as she held her hands up in a *stop* gesture. "That's not what's going on here."

He gave her a dull stare. Seriously? She'd literally just stolen him from his master, and now she was claiming she wasn't here to steal him? Though he was curious how she'd done it. Unless Tyler was dead . . . but he would have sensed that, right? And if this chick had killed Tyler and then came to steal him, she would be acting way differently.

"Who's your master?" she suddenly demanded. It was a little late to be asking that.

"I thought genie hunters were supposed to be smart. You came after me without even knowing who my master is?" She was definitely inexperienced. So maybe someone wiser and smarter was helping her. That made sense. Genie hunters often worked with wizards, didn't they?

"I did not come after you," she said through gritted teeth. She had the nerve to sound like he was the ridiculous one here. "I came to visit the museum. Genies don't belong in museums."

And yet another statement showing how ignorant she was. Why was his luck rotten enough for him to get stuck with a defective genie hunter? Flower Head deserved it. Actually, hearing a conversation between this idiot and Garan would be really funny. They would probably confuse the hell out of each other.

“But you have a master, right?” she asked.

He narrowed his eyes, tightening his crossed arms. Had she lost her nerve and was now trying to get out of stealing him? How could she not know that *she* was now his master? “I did, and I do.”

Her eyes widened with nervousness. It was actually impressive that a human so small could make their eyes that big. “What does that mean?”

His lips twitched, threatening to lift into a snarl. He swallowed it by tilting his head to glare at her. “Shouldn't you already know, Master?”

“But that's not supposed to be possible,” she argued, like she was suddenly an expert when she clearly had no idea what was going on. Had she just been testing out how to steal genies, but hadn't expected it to work?

He clucked his tongue, wishing she would just shut up and get on with whatever her plan was. Or that she would figure out *what* her plan was supposed to be. How could she come in here not knowing what she wanted to accomplish? “What are you whining for? You did this.”

“How?” she demanded. “I touched your gem. That's all.”

He scowled. Yes, this chick definitely deserved Flower Head. She seemed nearly as confused as him. “I don't know. You tell me. You're the one working some sort of ancient magic.” Yes, that had to be it. It was probably some lost genie wizard spell that her wizard partner gave her. Maybe her partner didn't warn her how it would work, and that was why she was so confused?

“Magic?” She stared at him like he'd lost his mind. “I don't have magic. I'm not a genie wizard.”

“Of course you're not.” He rolled his eyes. She was like a quarter of their size for starters.

“Genie wizards can't be genie masters. You must be working with one.”

She stared at him like she couldn't understand his words.

“I see what's going on.” He leaned back with a satisfied smirk. This situation went further than her partner not explaining how the magic would work. “A genie wizard helped you, but you didn't really believe it would work, did you? You tested it out for fun, and now you're trying to get out of this like some innocent victim. I see your game, hunter. You do know who my master is—was—don't you?”

This made more sense than her being that ignorant. She was stupid instead. He clucked his tongue, shaking his head in false pity, but he couldn't help the smirk curling the corners of his mouth. “It doesn't matter how innocent you play, Master. You began living on borrowed time the moment you crossed the McMichaels. Even with a contract, you won't be protected long. They'll kill you the moment the contract is complete.”

Chapter Two

“But why are you in a museum?” she asked, her voice full of desperation, like she could make this problem go away if she found the right answer to her questions. “What kind of idiot puts a genie in a museum? Especially without a case?”

He sighed. Why would anyone need a case with magic involved? This hunter was stupid *and* ignorant. “You’re the idiot here. What kind of hunter doesn’t know this much? Putting genie gems on public display is common. It’s a way to brag without bragging, to let others know you have a genie. My master was especially excited to gloat, since the main branch of the McMichaels just lost their genie.” He couldn’t stop his look from turning disgruntled. “It shouldn’t be possible to steal a genie with a master, so there’s not supposed to be any risk.”

She held both her hands out in a *stop* motion this time, shaking her head. “No. I’m not doing this. I don’t want—” She broke off suddenly. “I don’t want a genie. I’m leaving. You stay here.”

What. The. Hell. She was *walking* away? Like that would change anything? He watched her march away through the lingering fog, disbelief covering his face. “It doesn’t work like that. You can’t pretend you didn’t do this just because you want to run from the McMichaels.” It was way too late for that.

“Don’t care,” she brushed off, flinging a hand without looking at him. “You can stay here and wait for the McMichaels to reclaim you. If genie wizards really can switch a genie’s master, then they can fix this. I release whatever claim I have on you.”

She stopped to look at him with almost hopeful eyes. “What is it I have to say to pass you

off to another master?"

His disbelief morphed into irritation. "To pass me off to another master, another master has to be present." How dare she treat him like an unwanted purchase she wanted to return? This had to be a prank. Some wizard wanted to harass the McMichael family—maybe the same one involved with Tavor's theft—so tricked some idiot human into helping them.

"Right. Fine." She took another step and the last of the fog vanished as the rocks on display around them lit up. She'd activated a trap by trying to leave.

She froze, her gaze jumping to Rajan. "What is this?"

He tilted his head, a dark smile covering his face. "You didn't think the McMichaels would rely *only* on the fact that you can't steal a genie with a master, did you? What now, Master?"

"What's happening?" she asked, her voice nearly as tense as her still frozen body.

He shrugged carelessly. "Don't know. My former master didn't include me in discussions on how to protect my ruby." Because gem forbid the McMichaels let him and any of the other genies see each other long enough to attempt to conspire against them.

She let out a squeak as the temperature rose, and he rolled his eyes. If he had to be stuck with a genie hunter, couldn't it at least be a competent one?

Then the increasing glow of the rocks caught his eye. Aw, he knew who was behind this magic. "Looks like the light genie set up this trap," he commented casually.

"Can you stop it?" his master asked.

An appalled look took over his face before he threw his hands in the air. "Are you kidding me?" he yelled at the ceiling. Why, why, why did he have to suffer through this? She was the *stupidest* genie thief ever. Turning to her, he jabbed at his red hair and eyes. "I'm a fire

genie. FIRE. No, I can't stop a light genie's magic." What kind of an idiot thought fire—a light source—could stop light magic? Then he gave her a sideways look, one side of his mouth curling into a smirk. "But I can recommend you run, or you won't survive the next five minutes. Though, at least then you won't have to face the McMichaels." Dying by the light genie's magic would be a much kinder fate than whatever the McMichaels would do to her.

"Fine, then I guess we're back to Plan A," she declared. She took a step toward an open doorway, and colored beams of light exploded from the crystals, particularly heavy that way, leaving the only option to run through open metal doors in the other direction.

He grunted under his breath in annoyance, snatching the gaudy gold ring currently housing his ruby. With heat being the driving force behind this magic, Rajan didn't *think* it would hurt him much . . . but he'd never gone up against the light genie and didn't want to test that theory.

The human cried out when a beam struck her. The next moment, she weaved and dodged the shooting lights as she dashed toward the closed doors, moving with a dexterity that had him whistling under his breath as he followed her. No wonder the wizard wanted to partner with her. Maybe she was a brand new genie hunter, and that was why she was so confused?

The human dove into a graceful duck and roll at the end to make it into the next room when a stray beam nearly caught her. He almost wanted to clap at her performance.

"Hey, you're pretty agile!" he complimented. "Is that why you thought you'd make it as a genie hunter?"

Another beam traced along the ground toward where they stood, and his master slammed the metal doors shut, breathing heavy as she leaned against them.

She turned to Rajan after catching her breath. "What is a genie hunter? Someone who

steals genies?"

"Tch." He turned away, crossing his arms over his chest. Of course. Even being a new genie hunter, she still thought humans were so much better than genies. She wouldn't tell him anything. "Still playing innocent? That excuse is getting old, Master."

"I'm not anyone's master." She sounded annoyed. "Don't call me that."

He stayed turned away, arms crossed over his bare chest as he stared at the opposite wall. What was he thinking, getting excited like an idiot? For half a moment, as they both escaped the trap—that *she* set off—it kind of felt like . . . maybe they were on the same team. But he was just a lowly genie at the end of the day.

"Look, I wouldn't have come if I'd known a genie was here." She sounded like she was trying to defend herself. "All I wanted was a relaxing weekend visiting the local museum."

He swung back toward her, losing his patience. "If you're not a genie hunter, how do you know about genies?" He looked her up and down with an unimpressed eye. "You're clearly not a member of The Society." She didn't have the fancy clothes or jewelry, and she didn't stand like the whole world belonged to her.

"The what?" She looked confused, which had to mean this was all some stupid act.

So he sneered and turned away, muttering under his breath, "Why do I get stuck with the idiot, pathetic, lying hunter?" If his predictable, though rotten, life was going to be turned upside down, he at least wanted some excitement and entertainment out of it.

"You stay here for the McMichaels to find you," she told him. He made a disgusted noise, rolling his eyes. She was really back to that? "I'm leaving."

"How?" he scoffed, still staring at the wall. The light's genie's trap was still active. And it wouldn't be the only one. The light magic forced them this way for a reason. "Through an air

vent?"

Several moments passed as the human did who knew what. Then the temperature of the room dropped, something he barely noted since he didn't care. Then he heard her whimper. He turned to look at her, but his gaze caught on the room first. Fossil exhibits filled the room, but that definitely wasn't what had frightened the human. Dark shadows swirled around each fossil, giving them life.

He whistled at this latest trap. "That shadow bastard outdid himself this time."

Chapter Three

As one, the large fossils filling the room swiveled their heads toward them. The human backed toward the closed doors—leading back to the first trap—as the shadowy fossils left their exhibit, making their way toward her. Something with fangs lunged at her, but he had to take his attention away from her when a giant fossil with tusks charged him.

“Hey!” He dropped to the ground to avoid being skewered, then huddled against the wall in a crouch as the dumb beast rammed its tusks against the spot where he’d stood. “Why am I a target? Attack the girl, you stupid mammoth.”

Shouldn’t the shadow genie’s trap be focused on humans? What was the use of having it hurt genies too? This wasn’t like the light genie’s trap that shot around randomly. But it looked like that shadowy bastard ordered his creations to go after any movement.

“It’s a mastodon,” the human corrected, walking backward as a fanged fossil stalked her. “Mammoth tusks are more curved.”

Seriously? They were being attacked, and she was nitpicking what he called the stupid things? “Who cares?!” he demanded. “And why do you know?” Talk about useless knowledge.

“I spend a lot of time in museums,” she snapped. “And some people would appreciate knowing whether it’s a mammoth or a mastodon about to skewer them.”

For the briefest moment, he wondered if maybe she *had* come to the museum simply because she’d wanted to relax, like she’d said. But no. Her useless knowledge of fossils was just a coverup for why she was here. Right?

She scuffled with various fossils, which he idly wondered if she knew the names for,

before running for a set of doors across the room. He shouldn't be surprised by now, but seriously? She was *leaving* him after getting him into this mess? He took off after her.

"Why are you following me?" she shouted when she spotted him.

"I'm not following you; you're my master," he snarled. "Why haven't you made a wish? Maybe I could stop these things." He flung a hand behind them at the shadowy creatures. Just because the shadow genie was more powerful than him didn't mean he couldn't do *something* about this mess. Maybe the shadow genie made the fossil creations easily breakable—if he'd been in a good mood when he set the trap.

"They were created to stop intruders, not me, since intruders weren't supposed to have access to my magic." At least, he assumed they weren't created to stop him. A potentially dangerous assumption, but he and the shadow genie got along well enough. Mostly. He paused to smash in the head of a beaver-like creature. The shadows around its skull shivered, then put everything back in place, sealing the cracks until they disappeared. So much for them being easily breakable. Bastard shadow genie.

"I don't do wishes!" the girl yelled, like she had any right to say something like that after *stealing* him.

He made a guttural noise of frustration. "Do you think you won't officially become my master until you make a wish? Again, that's not how this works!" And she was going to die before he could figure out if she really was that ignorant or just playing stupid.

A giant mammoth, or maybe mastodon, but he didn't *care* which it was, blocked their path, swinging its head back and forth, as though debating which of them to charge. Rajan ran one way around the beast while the human chose the other. It chose her to follow, making him smirk. Maybe this place wasn't completely against him.

The beast aimed for the girl with a task and missed, then wailed its frustration. Rajan winced at the eerie sound. The shadow genie definitely added that bit just for fun. Two of the mammoths—who maybe had different looking tusks, so maybe they were two different fossil types—got caught in each other's' tusks while going after the girl, letting her get away.

“You must be a new genie hunter,” he told her as she ran off. He should stop wondering at this stupid mystery and just leave it at that. “Soon you’ll be a dead one.”

“I heard you the first time about being dead soon,” she said through gritted teeth. They finally made it to the next room and she whirled around to slam the doors shut. But Rajan didn't think that was going to do much good. This room held more fossils, and shadows were already crawling up them.

“You said you're following me because I'm your master,” his master said, her eyes frantically searching the room. “But I won't make a wish, so don't waste your time.”

“Tch. You know what? Fine. Handle this alone. It'll be a quicker death than the McMichaels would give you.” Turning into flames, he launched himself into his ruby, not even feeling when it dropped from his hand to hit the floor.

This was so stupid. He shouldn't have gotten involved at all. The moment the light genie's magic started bouncing around, Rajan should have hopped into his gem. It wasn't like the magic would have hurt his ruby, no matter how much stronger the light genie might be than him. And he wasn't *that* much stronger.

And now he was back to the stupid view that hadn't changed for millennia as he floated around. Scowling, he crossed his arms and legs. But so what? This was better than listening to the idiot newbie genie hunter who had no idea what she was doing, and who didn't even believe his powerful fire magic could help her. Let her get killed by her stupidity. She deserved that.

He sat there stewing until his mind flashed to rodent looking fossils that had maybe been eyeing him hungrily. But they wouldn't touch his ruby, right? Even though it moved when it dropped to the ground?

Squeezing his eyes shut, he tried to banish the image of those beasts chewing on his gem. Again, it wouldn't hurt it, but . . . it would be humiliating to have a rodent touch his gem, let alone chew on it. He squeezed his eyes tighter until he finally lost it, bursting out of his gem with a yell.

"I knew it, you bastards!" There were *two* of them fighting over his gem, chewing on the ring with their unnaturally large teeth. "No!" He slammed his foot into the skull of the first one. "No!" He did the same to the second.

Their skulls were already reforming, but that was fine, because he'd already snatched his gem. He cleaned it off with the red sash tied around his waist. It wasn't like it had saliva on it since the creatures were fossils, but still . . . *gross*. His ruby deserved way better treatment than that.

Sticking the ring in his pocket, he looked around the room for his master and found her in a fake tree in an exhibit, surrounded by fossils. None of the fossils paid him attention, so he made his way to the middle of an empty exhibit as he watched her. A small dog-like creature raced around the bottom of the tree, jumping at her. It wasn't anywhere close to reaching her, but a thin fossil with a long, long neck pushed its head into the fake branches, snapping at the human.

"Want to make a wish now, Master?" he offered. Maybe she was as annoyed at this situation as him and would *finally* do something about it.

Her foot slipped at the sound of his voice, and she scrambled to stay in place. "Hey!" she

yelled, ducking around a fake branch to glare at him. "I thought you were hiding in your gem."

"I wasn't hiding," he snapped, straightening the dangling ties of his cloth belt. It got messed up when he used it to clean his ruby. He fidgeted with the ties a moment before muttering, "There were shadow rodents next to me, and I was worried they were chewing on my ruby." He scowled down at his ties as he added, "They were."

She took several moments before answering his offer of a wish. "No. I can handle myself without wishes."

He gave her a flat look, rolling his head to the side as he wondered how long it would take for her to die. "Fine. Then keep up your fuss. It's making the shadows more focused on you than me."

Her eyes suddenly widened as she pointed behind him. "Look out!" she cried.

He whirled around to find a leopard-like creature with fangs way too big lunging at him with an unnatural roar. He cursed and rolled away, scampering to another exhibit. Dimly, the back of his mind caught on the fact that the human *warned* him. Like she was worried about him getting hurt.

"There weren't any major predators at the Ashfall site," she complained once he was safe. "This exhibit must contain fossils from the sandstone under that site."

Rajan groaned. Seriously? "Why do you know these things?" He half turned to keep an eye on the leopard creature still tailing him, though it looked at the crowd around the human's tree, like maybe it might join them instead. "They don't matter!"

"Knowledge prepares you for things. And I know because you don't just walk into a museum blind. You should look up its exhibits first. How do you know if it's worth visiting, otherwise?"

Okay, new theory. This girl really *did* come to the museum because she wanted to visit it, but also because she wanted to test out a genie-stealing spell she'd learned from a wizard—or stole from one. Could wizards teach or transfer spells to regular humans? Or maybe transfer the spell to another person or an inanimate object? He didn't exactly spend his days discussing wizard magic with his jailers.

Her actions the next moment distracted him from his thoughts. She'd left her tree and was running beside the exhibit where he currently stood, leading a giant crowd of fossils right past him. One of them reached out to snap at his hand.

"Hey!" he yelled, leaping from the exhibit to land by his master's side. "Have some courtesy! It's your fault I'm being chased. You sprang this trap with your stupidity." And she'd run *right* by him!

Suddenly, his master changed course for another doorway. Rajan almost halted when he realized she was running for the girl's bathroom. Then he realized it would be just the two of them and wouldn't matter. He didn't know if running in there would stop them from being chased, but this master got him into this mess, it was her job to get him out of it. Or die trying.

Chapter Four

Amazingly, nothing followed them inside. His master still backed up to the sinks while staring at the door with intent eyes, seemingly waiting for something to happen. Though his eyes stayed on the door too.

“What happened?” his master finally asked, her voice snarky. “The McMichaels didn’t think anyone might run to the bathroom? Or could they not figure out how to turn it into a trap?” After she spoke, she eyed the nearest bathroom stall like she expected something to pop out at any moment.

“There’s no way out,” he pointed out dryly. “It doesn’t matter whether we’re attacked in here. We’re not going anywhere.” It wasn’t like they’d escaped. Hanging out in here wasn’t a long-term solution. “Want to make a wish now, *Master*?”

“I’m not your master,” she snapped. “So call me Ali.”

He blinked, shock filling him. She gave him her name? No, that wasn’t the right way to put it. But she’d told him to use her name. Like they were equals. He opened his mouth. “A— Girlie. I’ll call you Girlie, then.” His eyes dared her to say something. He’d almost done it— before remembering she was a newbie. That was why she was talking like this, not because she really meant it. Or she would take it back the first time he used her name.

She shook her head with a sigh. “Fine. That’s better than ‘Master.’ I need something to call you.”

He gave her another look of disbelief. What was wrong with her that she preferred *Girlie* to *Master*? The ridiculousness of the day would never end. “I’m a genie.”

“Are you telling me to call you Genie?”

“I’m a genie,” he repeated. Obviously. All masters called their genies Genie. It simplified things for their weak brains.

“No, we’re not doing that. I’ll call you Flame. Unless you don’t like it.”

He rolled his eyes. “Whatever, Girlie.” That was hardly creative . . . but maybe it was a tiny bit better than being called Genie, as though he was utterly replaceable by any other magical being that came along.

Girlie grimaced at the floor before sliding onto the counter, resting her back against a mirror. “I can’t believe no one downstairs is reacting to the noise.”

“Humans not directly involved with magic avoid it,” Rajan explained. Maybe he should be a tiny bit nice to her given how new this all was to her. And because she was going to die very soon. Within days if not today, once the McMichaels found out what she’d done. “Its aura makes them uncomfortable. So long as all that magic is raging out there, we won’t see anyone else.”

She nodded, seeming happy about that, before she went quiet, her eyes turning distant. He studied her, vaguely wondering what she was thinking. But he was more interested in how she’d ended up here in the first place.

She was almost ignorant enough for him to wonder if she wasn’t a genie hunter, if not for the fact that she’d known about genies. She’d been surprised to see him, but not surprised by what he was. And she kept saying she didn’t make wishes, like she had experience with genies. Or like a wizard partner warned her off making any.

But maybe rather than a wizard wanting to screw with the McMichael family, they wanted to screw with this girl instead for some reason. Poor girl. Usually wizards just killed humans who annoyed them too much. What the heck had she done to get treatment like this?

“Hey, Flame?”

He raised his eyebrows when she called to him to show he was listening.

“Why don't we work together to escape these traps?” She hesitated. “I don't think I can do it alone.”

His eyebrows came together in a confused wrinkle. “Work together?” What the heck was she talking about?

“Right. You know more about the traps. You mentioned light and shadow genies, right? How does their magic work? And yours? How does it work?”

He stared at her for a long time. Finally, he shrugged, settling on the floor in a cross-legged position. If she'd pissed off a wizard enough to land herself here, maybe she wasn't that bad. “There's not much to tell. Light genies can only fulfill wishes involving light, shadow genies can only fulfill wishes involving shadows and darkness, and fire genies can only fulfill wishes involving fire.” A smirk played at the corners of his mouth. “Though our abilities extend beyond what humans might think these elements capable of.” Even Society masters were often ignorant of that, so this girl definitely would be.

“Right.” Frustration tinged her voice, like she'd been hoping for more information.

His expression turned serious as he told her, “We'll probably be okay if we get past the traps. I don't think the magic will follow us outside the museum. The traps are to stop us from leaving—permanently.” His smirk returned for a split-second. “Well, permanently for you. The Society depends on genies remaining a secret. The magic won't follow into a populated area.” Them getting out of the museum was a long shot, but he didn't have a real reason not to humor this girl who gave him her name.

“What about damage to the museum? And what the security cameras capture? How will

that be explained?"

He waved a dismissive hand. "Cameras can't capture magic. The humans will see blurred and disjointed images. And any damage to the museum will be blamed on vandalism."

For some reason, that comment seemed to upset her, though she didn't dwell on it. "So, to escape, we just need to figure out how to evade all the traps and get down the stairs or elevators. Somehow."

"The stairs are a better bet," he immediately said. "We don't have to wait for them to arrive." No way would the fossils sit around and wait for them to get on an elevator. They would be skewered. Well, she would be. He'd just be thrown around.

She frowned at him. "But the elevator is closer, and the stairs are protected by lasers." She rubbed her shoulder where the beams got her earlier. "I don't think we can confuse or outsmart the lasers, but maybe we can the shadow creatures. We just need to convince them to leave the elevator long enough for us to board it."

"You mean long enough for us to push the button and wait . . . then go inside and wait . . . I don't think the shadows will have the courtesy to not pile in after us."

"Then we do it in stages. Step one, we get the elevator doors open from a distance so we're not standing around vulnerable while we wait. Step two, we block the doors so they don't close while we get there. Step three, we make a mad dash for the elevators and push the button to close the doors."

He gave her a dull look. "Your plan have any more detail than that?"

"Not particularly," she admitted. "We might be able to find something in one of the exhibits to wedge the doors open. But maybe everything is glued down."

Seriously? "So, our plan is to look for something to wedge the doors open with, then

distract the shadows away from the elevators long enough to get them open, then look for an opportunity to dive through them?"

"Yes," she said slowly. "That's the plan."

He scoffed and shook his head. "So you're back to pursuing a quick death?" Why was he bothering with humoring this girl?

She scowled at him as she got off the counter. "Let's just go."

He stood back as she peeked out the doors, craning his neck above her head to see that no fossils were waiting for them—though some giant rhino-looking fossils stood around the elevators that he hadn't really noticed before. They looked like they were guarding it. This was definitely a bad decision. But he followed Girlie anyway when she crept to the closest exhibit.

As soon as they stood inside it, it was like a beacon lit up. The rhino fossils glared at them with their shadowy purple eyes, closing in on the elevator. As soon as they moved, other fossils perked up, looking around for what caught the rhinos' attention.

"Hey, these rocks are loose," Girlie whispered, bending down to wiggle one.

The moment she bent down, fossils with overly long necks and the leopard looking one that went for him before snapped to attention before making straight for them.

"Congrats," Rajan said as he squatted beside her, not nearly so excited about the fake rocks. "Now, how will you open the elevator so you can wedge a rock in there?"

"Maybe hit the call button with a rock?" She stared at the elevator doors as though judging the distance, meaning she missed him rolling his eyes. She was good at dodging laser rocks, but that didn't mean she was a good throw.

"And I suppose I play distraction while you figure that out, Girlie?" he demanded. Being used as bait was *not* preferable to being used for his magic.

She winced at his tone. "Could you banish the shadows with your fire? Make it so bright they fade away?"

"Do these guys seem bothered by light?" He pointed to the overhead lights. "They don't seem wary of it to me." And no way would the shadow genie make something Rajan could easily handle with his fire.

She shivered over some thought before asking, "What about frightening them with your fire? Real animals don't like flames."

"*What about?*" His voice was shrill as he watched the fossils climbing past the exhibit railing toward them. If he could die, this girl would definitely get him killed. "First, these are *shadows*, not *animals*. Second, 'what about' is not a wish." He glared at her as she gathered the rocks she found so exciting into a basket she made using the bottom of her shirt. "You use the words 'I wish.' It's not hard. Humans use those words all day long. Especially those with genies."

She still wasn't paying attention to him, so he snatched her chin, causing her to drop a few rocks. "I'll make this clear. If you don't wish, I can't use magic. End of story. You want my help, make a wish." Obviously, her words about working together were just that—words. Which he should have known. She might be ignorant, but she wasn't *that* ignorant.

She jerked her head away. "I'm just trying to brainstorm ideas. Sorry for wanting your feedback."

He rolled his eyes. Right. Like she'd really been trying to include him in some plan. Then a long-necked creature bent down between them, snapping at them.

"Look out!" Girlie cried.

Rajan wanted to give an obnoxious comment about seeing it, but was too busy

scrambling away. The giant-toothed leopard jumped into the exhibit the next moment. Rajan decided to follow Girlie's example from earlier and find a fake tree to scramble up.

After settling into a semi-comfortable position, he saw Girlie manage to get the elevator open—and then fail to get inside. Of course. He watched with emotionless eyes as one of the giant-toothed fossils leapt on her, pinning her to the ground. She fought to keep its fangs away from her, shoving her hands against its skull.

Finally, she uttered the words, "I wish—" then cut off abruptly. His brow furrowed as he leaned forward. He couldn't see her face from this angle, the fossil blocked it. But he couldn't see anything that would have stopped her talking. She was dead serious about the no wish thing, wasn't she? Emphasis on the dead. Her life was in danger. So why wasn't she wishing?

After a few moments, she managed to escape on her own with an impressive bit of maneuvering. She really did have some talent.

As she backed away from the fossils, he asked, "How's the elevator going?"

Her head jerked up to look at him. "Do you think a fire barrier would keep the shadows back? Give us some protection?"

He withheld a groan "That has the same issue as your last *suggestion*." He twisted the last word sarcastically. "Ignoring the fact that it's not a wish, I don't think creatures that have been dead for eons are overly concerned with dying."

"Fine," she snapped. "If you find my ideas dumb, you handle things as you see fit. I grant you permission to use your magic within the museum."

Chapter Five

Rajan stopped breathing. “W-what?” She didn’t just say that, right? He’d heard wrong.

Both leopard-wannabe fossils turned on Girlie, and she backed up before enunciating, “I gave you free rein.”

“You can do that?”

Her head jerked up so her gaze met his before she had to look down again at the fossils closing in on her. Yeah, that was a bigger concern than the personal crisis Rajan was about to have here. But he needed a moment to process this. Free rein. He’d never heard those words before. Well, of course he’d *heard* them, but he’d never heard them *together*. Especially not when talking about genies.

When one of the leopard-like fossils leapt, Rajan dropped from the tree, landing in front of girlie and shoving his arms out as he called on his magic. He thought his heart would burst the next moment when he called for his magic and it came. *He* called for his magic and it *came!*

Flames blasted from his hands in a torrent, sending the fossils tumbling back.

“Hell yeah!” he yelled, pumping his fists. Now *that* was a rush like he’d never felt before. He spun toward more fossils closing in on them, knocking them away with his fire. They stood up, undamaged, but now they had a gap to run through.

“Come on, Girlie!” A manic grin spread across his face as he snatched his master’s arm, pulling her along behind him. The words *I grant* were his new favorite.

They dodged through the shadowy beasts that tried to circle around them. Rajan aimed his flames at the legs of some of the long-necked ones, knocking them on top of several others.

"Where are we going?" Girlie yelled as they ran toward the previous exhibit.

"The stairs. We're doing this my way!" This girl had given him the ability to control his own magic. For that, he would get her out of there.

"You can't knock the rhinos out of the way?"

He nearly stumbled at her still being stuck on her whole elevator plan. "Are you kidding?" He glanced back to flash her a disbelieving look. "My fire blasts can't move something that heavy while it's protected by that shadow bastard's magic."

"Then you can't move the animals in the next exhibit," she yelled as they ploughed through the metal doors. When they entered, all the fossils were back in their exhibits, but within seconds, shadows swirled around the fossils.

"Nah, but I can make barriers." He dropped her arm, unable to stop his grin as he raised his hands, his fingers waving as flames leapt from them. Fire landed at the bottom of false trees scattered around the room, burning white as they consumed the bases. Soon they toppled, landing in front of fossils to block their paths.

Then he looked up, flinging fire above them to collapse the ceiling on top of the fossils, burying them in their exhibits.

"You're destroying the museum!" Girlie cried.

He nearly laughed. Hell, yes, he was. It was the only way out—but he still would have chosen this even if there was another way. If you had to do something, why not choose the most fun way to do it? "Can't make barriers without materials," he quipped, his eyes bright. He moved on, a bounce in his step as the temperature around them rose from his flames. He didn't mind the cold, but this temperature was more to his liking.

"Come on, Girlie," he called from the door. She was way too taken up watching his

magic work. "These barriers won't hold forever."

As the last word left his mouth, a massive beast with fangs leapt from its pile of ceiling debris, barreling into him.

"Flame!" Girlie screamed as he went down, running to his side.

He gritted his teeth as he kept the creature's jaws away from his neck. He could blast it with fire, but his flames wouldn't get the momentum they needed to blast it off him. Plus, it was a *lot* bigger than the fossils he'd blasted away from Girlie earlier.

He yelped when the beast bit down on his finger with bruising force. It wasn't nearly enough to cut his genie skin, but it still stung. The next moment, the creature was suddenly dragged back a few feet before it whipped its head around to snarl at Girlie—the one responsible for dragging it back.

With it distracted, Rajan leapt forward, smashing his shoulder into the fossil's chest and knocking it back.

Leaping to his feet, he snatched his master's arm again. "Come on!" He pulled them both through the doorway, and finally away from all those fossils.

Chapter Six

Rajan eyed the girl as they caught their breath on the other side of the shut metal doors. “You do have a death wish. Genies are hardier than humans, you know?” He still wasn't quite sure he believed she'd tried to yank a fossil off him. But it had moved, and she was the only around who could have done it. That thing could have killed her, while it could only cause Rajan mild pain, and that only because of the shadow genie's magic powering it.

Girlie seemed to ignore his comment as she plastered herself against the door. “Any ideas on what to do now?”

He peered around the currently quiet room. All the rocks and crystals sat stationary, but the moment they stepped into the room, he was sure that would end.

“Ouch,” Girlie suddenly whispered.

He glanced down at her, and his eyes widened at the sight of blood dripping down both her arms. “Whoa. When did that happen?” That was way too much blood for a human to lose. His hands lifted, as though to do something, but *what?* He was a fire genie. What was he supposed to do here?

He paused. She had given him free rein over his magic. He still didn't know who she was or what she was really doing here, but this wasn't a master he wanted to walk away from. And he wouldn't have a choice if she bled out. Untying the red sash around his waist, he ripped it half, tossing one half over his shoulder as he tied the other around one of Girlie's wounded arms. With that taken care of, he wrapped her other arm, idly thinking that he had never used his sash to help a human before.

“There.” He pulled back to study his work. Obviously, he didn't have anything like

medical training, but it would at least stop her from bleeding out. Rubbing the back of his neck, he looked away. "It's not sterile or anything, but it's better than nothing."

"Thank you," she murmured, gently rubbing her hands over his sash.

Thank you. Now those were two words he wasn't used to hearing. And she hadn't even said it over something his magic had done, but over something *he* did.

After a few moments, she seemed to shake a thought off. "You never answered whether you have an idea for this room."

He puffed out his cheeks, folding his arms behind his head as he looked around at the gems. Now he felt pressure to figure this out. But he'd handled the fossils. He could do this too, right? "Maybe if I fill the room with flames, the magic won't sense us walking through—though maybe it'll react to the flames the same way it did us." With a shrug, he dropped his arms to the side and stepped into the room. "Only one way to find out."

The moment his feet touched open floor, the gems around them started glowing.

"Wait!" Girlie cried. "You can melt metal, right?"

He took a step back, keeping one eye on the glowing gems, the other on his master.

"Yeah. So?"

"Iron has a melting point of nearly 2,800 degrees Fahrenheit. Most rocks turn to magma at a couple hundred degrees less than that. Do you think the lasers would stop if you melted the rocks?" She glanced at the floor. "And could you do it without melting through the floor?"

He studied her. When had she noticed he could melt metal? Maybe that was why she'd been so preoccupied in the last exhibit. "I can make the floor and walls melt-proof."

He tapped his foot on the floor, his mind flashing to how the McMichael's ice genie would handle this situation. He'd probably love this girl. The thought of Girlie and him together

made Rajan smile. "You are a nerd, aren't you? You remind me of a genie who loves to strategize and analyze. Except he's smarter than you." But he'd been studying science whenever he could manage for centuries, so it kind of wasn't a fair comparison. "He'd like you using science to solve problems. And he probably would care whether it was a mastodon or a mammoth about to skewer him." Because the ice genie cared about useless knowledge as much as this girl seemed to.

"Let's try it." Rajan stretched his fingers in front of him. Combatting the light genie's magic should be way easier than the shadow genie's. "Stand back. It's gonna get hot."

Girlie huddled against the door as Rajan closed his eyes, and blowing out a slow breath. Excitement built in his chest at the level of magic he'd get to use—and he could make this as hot as he wanted. When he opened his eyes, they burned with magic, making them glow. Or maybe that was just because of his excitement.

Fire sprang up in each of the gem exhibits along the wall at his command, burning a blinding white. Smoke billowed into the air, filling the room as the gems began melting. This went on and on, with Rajan using the amount of smoke to gauge how melted the gems were.

Finally, he turned to find Girlie huddled on the floor and struggling to breath. Whoops. He knelt down, scooping her into his arms. "Up you go." As he hustled them to the next room, no lasers struck at them. He'd succeeded.

Chapter Seven

Rajan kept his fire and smoke contained to the gem exhibit as he dropped to the floor of the next room, Girlie still in his arms. She needed time to recover before they did anything else.

He frowned when she started shivering. Humans shivered in the cold, so why was she shaking? Did other things cause shivering? Sickness could, but she'd been fine a few minutes ago, and the sweat covering her was definitely from the heat of his flames, not some fever.

He should have been more careful. Not that he really wanted to care about what happened to a human, but . . . today had kind of been fun. More fun than he'd had in a long time, even counting the annoying bits. Most humans either cowered at him or tried to dominate him. They didn't banter with him like Girlie. She held her own without trying to make less of him.

Thankfully, she stopped shaking after several minutes, then crawled out of his lap. Or attempted to. She ended up sprawled on the floor, but seemed willing to lay there for a bit.

"How hot can you handle?" she asked as she propped herself into a semi-sitting position with one hand. She really wasn't doing well. Was it the smoke inhalation? He should have thought to keep it away from her. But protecting bystanders from his magic wasn't exactly his top priority in most instances.

He shrugged. "Meh. I've been in volcanic eruptions. If you're talking off Earth, there might be somewhere too hot, but I don't think anything on Earth is hot enough to harm me."

Temperature didn't really bother genies in general. That was a human weakness.

She glanced at the room of melted gems before turning grateful eyes on him "You did it," she breathed, then paused to study him. "What's wrong?"

He looked away from her. "I forget how fragile humans are when it comes to heat." And she was giving him credit even though melting the gems had been her idea.

"I think I'm okay." She didn't sound accusing. "And we're both still alive. That was amazing."

He almost smiled at her words. Of course his magic was amazing. But it was still nice to hear someone else recognize that.

Her voice went higher when she suddenly asked, "Did you melt-proof the doors to the next exhibit?"

"No, why?" He craned his neck to look at the doors leading to the fossils, and saw the magma he'd created seeping into them. "Oh." He drew the word out as the doors began melting. Smoke rose from the bottom as the metal hissed. A moment later, the doors shook, and a loud bang drowned out the hissing.

Girlie scrambled to her feet, backing away. "Maybe we should go. We just need to escape the museum, right?"

Rajan jumped to his feet as the doors shuddered several times before tearing from the doorframe with a shriek. They fell with barely a sound, caught in the magma covering the floor.

In the doorway stood two massive fanged predators, one of which was the one who'd gone after Rajan right before they made it through the doors. They entered the melted gem exhibit, the floor hissing smoke as their cold shadows touch the molten magma.

"Let's go, Flame!" Girlie cried, grabbing his arm.

He resisted her pull, pointing toward the fossils and laughing. For once, the shadow genie's own magic had worked against his creations. The frigid shadows covering the beasts cooled Rajan's magma, hardening it and encasing the fossils' feet in rock.

Rajan placed a hand on his bare chest. "Brilliant! This was *my* part of the plan." Not really, but why not take credit for it?

Girlie smiled as she let out a sigh of relief. "Let's go."

Rajan nodded, whistling as he led the way to the stairs, sticking his hands in the pockets of his puffy white pants.

They reached the end of the stairs, and Rajan looked around before spotting an open doorway that looked like it might lead to the museum entrance. The room itself wasn't interesting, just a bunch of old artifacts, which probably meant this was a historical exhibit. Rajan would never understand humans' obsession with things long gone.

He sauntered toward the doorway until he realized his master was no longer beside him. He turned to look for her, finding her staring at the middle of the room with wide eyes. "What?" he asked, not seeing what had her so upset.

She opened her mouth, but no words came out. He looked at what caught her attention and found a giant stone rectangle box. That couldn't be what had her frozen, could it?

"What?" he repeated, hoping she would spit it out this time.

"Where's the mummy?" she whispered, clutching her hands to her chest as she hunched in on herself.

He looked at the box again and swore as he realized the box was meant to have a lid, and that lid was meant to hide a dead human body. Which was disgusting. "Come on!" He grabbed her arm, yanking her toward the exit. "This'll be one instead of several. We'll get around him!"

If they were fast enough, this would be easy.

They were only a few feet from the door when filthy bandages writhing in shadows covered the exit. Girlie shrieked and jerked back as Rajan cursed again, searching for where the bandages came from.

Then he found it. The mummy stood beside a glass case display in a darkened corner of the room near the exit. Gray bandages covered its thin body while shadows writhed around it. It was creepy as hell, which made it practically sing out as the shadow genie's calling card. That bastard.

He jumped when the mummy jerked toward them in broken shuffle as it favored one side. One hand was extended toward the covered doorway, the bandages covering their escape leading back to it—and its nasty wrinkled gray skin, revealed by the unraveled bandages. The room darkened as the mummy moved, the temperature dropping like it had with the fossils.

“The animated fossils upstairs were perfect,” Girlie whispered. “Why is this one broken?”

“Because the shadow genie finds it funny.” Rajan crossed his arms and glared at the mummy. “Or maybe ironic.”

Slowly, the mummy raised its other arm to point it at Girlie. Its hand dangled uselessly, but that didn't stop the linen around its arm from writhing around before shooting toward her.

“Move!” Rajan shoved her out of the way and behind his back. “You do *not* want to get trapped within a shadow genie's darkness.” The thought of what might happen to her made the hair on the back of his neck rise. He didn't want to see her be swallowed up.

“What should we do?” she whispered from behind him.

“I'll handle this the same way I did the gemstones.” He flexed his fingers. “If I melt the

host, maybe the shadows will fade.” The shadow genie had to anchor his magic to something. Without an anchor, they should fade.

“Uh, bones have a higher melting point than iron and gemstones,” Girlie said. “And those shadows are cold. *Really* cold. Remember the fossils we saw three minutes ago? The magma didn't melt them, it trapped them.”

“Because it wasn't a concentrated flame,” he brushed off with a dismissive gesture. “I've got this.”

“I don't think it'll work. And hot air meeting cold has disastrous results.” What was she, a weather reporter? “Do you have any idea what the results might be with magic involved?”

“It'll be fine.” He gave her an irritated look before shooing her away. “Go stand by the stairs.” The mummy couldn't harm him permanently like it could her.

The mummy shot linen toward Girlie again. Thankfully, she finally took the hint and ran, allowing Rajan to let loose with his flames. He coated the mummy in them. They began as red before he upped the heat, changing it orange, then yellow, finally reaching a blinding white.

But it didn't look like his fire touched it. The flames hovered just barely above the mummy, like they couldn't penetrate the cold of the shadows. Grunting, he thrust his hands forward. The white blaze rose around the mummy, crackling louder.

Suddenly, Girlie snatched Rajan's arm yanking him back. He rounded on her with fury in his eyes. Taking his attention away from anything the shadow genie created was dangerous.

“What?!”

“More shadows,” she yelled, jabbing a finger at shadows writhing in the corner—shadows *not* attached to the mummy. “You're making it worse!”

He cut his fire off immediately, and the shadows settled into long and thin shapes that

vaguely matched the mummy. Girlie grabbed his arm again before yanking him toward the stairs. He fled after her, looking back to watch the shadow mummies crowd the stairs.

#

“Stupid,” Girlie muttered as they reached the last exhibit they'd been in, a room with a bunch of pictures and plaques with long, boring explanations that Rajan didn't care about.

“What's stupid?” he asked, looking back to search for shadowy pursuers. Thankfully, there weren't any. “You're not going to give another lecture about something I don't care about, are you?”

She glared at him when he turned back to her, falling to the ground like her legs couldn't support her anymore. “Cold and hot air don't mix well. When air heats up, its refraction index changes. That means a pocket of hot air, like your fire, will have a different refraction index than a pocket of cold air, like the mummy. The two different refraction indexes combining bends light and causes shadow.”

He dropped to the ground next to her, throwing his hands in the air. “You couldn't have said that earlier?”

“I told you cold air and hot air have bad results when mixed.”

He groaned, tilting his head back to stare at the ceiling. “That sneaky, shadowy bastard did this on purpose. He set a trap to counter my magic just for spite.” He should have known getting out wouldn't be easy just because they'd gotten past two other traps.

“But he shouldn't have thought you'd get out,” Girlie argued.

“I know,” Rajan groaned, flopping onto his back. “But nothing stops the shadow genie's spitefulness, not even reality.” Couldn't he have taken things easy just this once? But no, on the off chance that someone tried to steal his gem, the shadow genie apparently wanted to make the

thief's life miserable before they died, because the shadow genie wanted to make all humans miserable. Except kids. That was his one and only standard.

They both stopped talking, and he frowned at the ceiling when he heard a quiet cracking sound. Where was that coming from?

"The fossils are escaping the lava rock," Girlie gasped.

Rajan withheld a groan as he tilted his head to look into the next room. They just could not catch a break, could they? Stupid shadow genie. The fossils whipped their bodies from side to side, making the hardened rock at their feet crack as they weakened it.

"Is the shadow genie more powerful than you?" Girlie asked, her voice almost a whine.

Rajan shot to a sitting position and snarled, "Genie classes have a hierarchy of power, okay?" It wasn't his fault that shadow genies were overpowered. And it wasn't like he was a weak fire genie.

"Are you more powerful than the light genie?" Now she sounded intrigued.

He smacked his face with his palm, shaking his head. "This isn't the time for a magic lecture, Girlie." This girl had some warped priorities sometimes.

The sound of more cracks filled the air, and Rajan gave his master a side-eyed glance. "Hey. You figured out how to beat the light genie's magic. What's your secret technique against the shadow genie?"

He wasn't sure what she'd think of him asking her for a solution, but she seemed to take his question seriously. After a few moments, she looked into his eyes. "You can melt stone."

"Umm, yeah?"

"Stone and iron have the same melting point," she said, getting excited. "So we know you can do it."

“Great.” He wrapped his hands over his crossed knees. “Why do we care?” It was almost as hard to get a straight answer out of her as it was Flower Head.

“If we can get the mummy back into his sarcophagus, made out of stone, you can seal him in. And maybe that will weaken the other shadow mummies—or at least even the odds of us escaping.”

His eyes flickered bright as his mouth curled into a smile. Asking her for a solution had definitely been the right move, but then his face fell into a pout. “And how do you think we’re going to get the mummy into his sarcophagus?” It didn’t matter what Rajan could melt so long as that creepy dead body was wandering around.

“Well . . .” She paused and straightened her spine. “The shadow creatures are more interested in me than you, so I’ll have to lead him in there.”

He nodded slowly. “You get him in, then I seal him there.” That should work . . . but how would her body handle *more* intense heat from him melting the stone? She already looked like she could barely stand. He hesitated, then scooted closer to cup her face in his hands. He tightened his hold when she tried to jerk back. “Hold still. I’m making you resistant to heat.” He probably should have warned her before grabbing her face, but it was an impulse decision.

“You can do that?” she whined. Then she sighed, shaking her head. “Never mind.”

Never mind. Like she didn’t care that she was in this state, and he could have prevented it. He hadn’t thought of it at the time, and honestly, he wasn’t sure he would have done it then. But he could have, and she’d decided she wasn’t upset over it.

“Thank you,” she said as he slid his hands away, his magic finished.

His mouth twisted to the side, as he stared at her. “You’re an odd one. Let’s hope that’ll help you trap the mummy.”

Chapter Eight

Rajan paced the exhibit full of useless words as he gave Girlie time, taking care to mostly stay away from the open doorway to the gem exhibit. So long as the fossils didn't see him, they went still, but if he moved too much in front of them, the shadows swirled around them and they got agitated.

He didn't know how long he waited before he spotted something shimmering from the molten mess he'd made of the gem exhibit during one of his passes by the doorway. He backtracked, looking for the shimmer again, while keeping one eye on the fossil beasts. There.

Moving casually in the hope that that would trigger the fossils less, he sauntered into the room, bending down near where he saw the gleam. One of the gems had survived. Partially. Only a small piece of gem encased in rock remained. Surrounding a small area of the molten mess with white flames, he softened the space around the semi-intact gem. Sliding his hand into the goop, he pulled the gem out, keeping it pointed away from both himself and the fossils. He didn't know if their movements might set it off.

"Now what can I use you for?" he murmured, eyeing the rock part of the gem in his hand. Maybe if Girlie hadn't gotten the mummy into the sarcophagus yet, they could use this to force it in. He waited only a few moments before nodding to himself. Yep. He'd given Girlie enough time. If she hadn't tricked the mummy in there yet, they would think of something else.

Holding his prize carefully, he made his way downstairs just in time to see Girlie dropping into the stone box right on top of the mummy, its shadows wrapped around her.

He raced to her side. "Whoa, the mummy was supposed to go in, not you!" Angling the

crystal so it could catch the moving shadows around the mummy, he yelled "Try this, you shadowy bastard!" Relief filled him as yellow light burst from the gem, set off by the mummy's motion and burning its face. The shadows around it reared back, then fled to the space where the light burned, releasing their grip on Girlie.

The moment the shadows released her, he snatched the back of her shirt to haul her out of there. She gasped for breath, nearly collapsing as he steadied her. "You all right, Girlie?" he asked.

Her only response was an unfocused look and teeth chattering.

"Hey." He pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her, though he wasn't quite sure if she was cold or terrified. He still couldn't tell as she pushed into him, making him blush. He'd never been this close to a human before. Not that he'd ever wanted to be.

She stammered something against his chest through chattering teeth that he didn't catch.

"What?" He pulled back to look at her.

Winching, like the movement hurt, she pointed to the other side of the stone box. "L-lid."

"Oh, right!" He'd kind of forgotten about that part, after witnessing Girlie do something so crazy. This human needed looking after. But he couldn't think about that right now. There was no point to getting the dead body inside its stupid sarcophagus if they didn't trap it in there. Racing to the other side of the box, he struggled to lift the stone lid. It wasn't too heavy for him, but was way too long for him to lift on his own.

Girlie stumbled over to him, picking up the other side of the lid, which had him blinking at her. He *was* taking most of the weight, but wasn't it still too much for a human of her size? Her hands slipped, but she caught it with her legs, letting out a gasp of pain. Their second attempt, they got the lid on.

“My turn.” He announced, white fire shooting from his hands to coat the edges of the lid.

“Where did you get the laser?” she asked, backing up from his fire.

He grinned. “One of the gems only partially melted. I could handle the mangled end and figured these shadows would be less resistant to the light genie’s magic than mine. I saw it glinting right before I came down and brought it along.”

His grin disappeared when he saw willowy shadow mummies wavering behind Girlie. He’d forgotten about those ones. Nodding to them, he warned her, “Our other friends are back.”

She turned around to watch them. “Would natural light hurt them?”

“Don’t know. Maybe, but I need them not to interfere.” His voice came out strained as he poured his magic into his flames. The stupid mummy’s shadows were trying to creep out. He’d melted part of the lid down, but not enough to keep the dead body from breaking out if the shadows really tried. And the mummies trying to circle them weren’t helping. “If they make the air any colder, I won’t be able to finish melting the stone.”

He heard scuffling behind him followed by the sound of shattering glass. He jumped at the suddenness of it, glancing over his shoulder to find Girlie snatching a weapon from a case that she then started hacking at the wall with. He grinned briefly, wishing he had the energy to tease her that she was the one ruining the museum now.

Despite her efforts, the shadow mummies drifted closer, the cold breeze they brought making his flames flicker. He sneered at them, pouring more magic in his white flames until they gained a blue tinge at the bottom. He stopped paying attention to them, as he turned all his focus onto sealing the lid, hoping Girlie would manage to do something against them.

He barely heard her cry “Ha!” before he yelled, “Done!” The mummy was sealed.

Girlie dropped her ax and raced for the exit, her eyes on Rajan, making sure he followed.

He tried to give her a grin, but sweat poured down his face, and he didn't want any to drip into his mouth. It took a lot to make a fire genie sweat.

This time, nothing stopped them as they left the stupid ancient history exhibit. They made it to a front room with a clerk, who called after Girlie since Rajan was invisible to him. Eyeing the computer, Rajan pointed his finger, shooting off a dark flame at it.

"What was that for?" Girlie asked.

"To burn through their computer systems. If there's no record of you, the McMichaels can't find you." After going through all this effort to keep his master alive, he was *not* giving her up to those bastards.

"Brilliant!" she gasped as they continued running out of the museum and down the sidewalk outside.

Chapter Nine

They ran for a block before Girlie stopped to bend double, her hands on her knees as she gasped for breath. Rajan was more than happy to stop right alongside her, taking in deep breaths. He didn't think he'd be able to do any magic for the next couple days. A smile almost flickered across his face at the thought that at least this master wouldn't demand wishes, so it wouldn't be a problem.

"You were right about the magic not leaving the museum," she huffed after several moments, letting out a small laugh. Then she straightened and threw her hands in the air. "We did it!" She spun in a circle before suddenly throwing her arms around Rajan. He stiffened at the unexpected contact, and she jumped back.

His hands twitched with the desire to . . . do something, but he didn't know what. He just hadn't expected her to hug him like that. If he'd known what she was about to do . . . maybe he might have hugged her back. Maybe.

"Sorry!" she folded her arms behind her back, her cheeks turning pink.

"S'no problem." He looked away, rubbing the back of his neck. She felt kind of nice when she was close like that, and it had been the second time, since he'd held her in the museum. Kind of. He pulled his mind away from thoughts like that. "Sooo," he drew the word out, "where to now, Girlie?"

Her face fell, like she'd finally realized that now that they'd escaped the museum, she had a brand new genie. Well, that was her problem, not his. He was perfectly content to stay right by her side. And she'd actually worked together with him to escape, so she'd get used to

having him around, right?

“What about a contract?” she asked, her eyes desperate. “Could we create a contract to fix the museum?”

He raised his eyebrows, then gestured at his hair and eyes, as he had before. “Again, hopefully for the last time: I. Am. A. Fire. Genie. My magic relates to heat, fire, and smoke. That’s all. I can’t reverse damage I cause. Besides—” His mouth curled into a grin, his red eyes shining. “This was the most exciting day I’ve had in centuries. I’ve never had a master as entertaining as you, and I am not leaving your side. No contracts for me.” His grin broadened as he tilted his head, eyes locked on hers. “And you don’t want wishes anyway, right?”

She didn’t answer, but he forced himself to get serious, his voice quieting to say, “I know my magic better than anyone, and I knew how to handle the shadowed fossils better than you. I have never had a master with the humility to allow me to use my own judgment with my magic, or any who would have given me that trust. I did not ask for your trust, but you gave it.”

He wanted her to know how much it meant to him to truly work together with her, and for her to let him control his own magic. Placing a hand over his heart, he bowed, something he didn’t think he’d done to a human in over a thousand years.

He spoke as he rose from the bow. “I will not betray that trust if you will not betray mine. Ali.”

She blinked at him, a little happiness seeming to leak into her gaze at him using her name. It made him want to use it again to see what she would do. Instead, he held out the ring housing his ruby to her. She stared at it, then sighed, hanging her head.

“I don’t suppose you’re looking for a roommate?” she asked as she took the ring.

“What?”

She shook her head. "Nothing. Let's go home."

"I can appear us there if you focus on your home."

She blinked at him. "You can what?"

"Appear us. You know, like make us appear at your home." All Society members knew what appearing meant—but he already knew this chick wasn't part of them. Maybe once they got home, he'd find out how he really ended up with her. Or maybe it would take a little longer for her to trust him with that information, but that was fine.

Her eyebrows scrunched together in a confused expression. "You mean teleport?"

He rolled his eyes. "That's a modern word. Genies have existed much longer. We *appear*." Genies weren't changing their word just because humans invented a word that meant the same thing in the past couple decades, or whenever they came up with that stupid word.

In a strained voice, Ali said, "You can instantaneously transport yourself from one location to another, yet we just spent the past several hours trapped inside the museum?"

"Obviously, I couldn't appear us to your home while inside the museum." He rolled his eyes again. This girl was clever. Shouldn't she have figured that out? "Binding other genies from appearing is one of the most basic of magics. All genies can do it; we just all have a different way of doing it. The shadow genie's shadows would have consumed us if we'd tried to leave the museum by appearing at your home."

His words made her pale. Then something else seemed to occur to her. "Uh, could we appear right outside my apartment instead of inside it?"

"Yes." He eyed her curiously. Was there something she wanted to hide from him? Maybe that wizard partner he'd wondered about her having earlier? He really hoped not. But if there was a wizard in her life, she definitely never would have given him free rein with his magic in

the museum like she did. "You just need to focus on that space in your mind."

He stepped next to her to appear them to her home, and she stumbled back, her eyes wide.

"We have to be close to do this." He gripped her arm, pulling her against him before appearing them. She gasped as flames erupted around them, the method fire genies used to appear. The next moment, they found themselves in a boring, undecorated hall in front of a white door.

It took a couple moments for Ali to peep one eye open before she looked around the hall, probably searching for witnesses. Finally letting out a sigh of relief, she led the way into her apartment.

He took only a few steps before he stopped. This apartment did *not* match the outside. It looked like her apartment walls were made of gray stone instead of whatever material humans used for indoor walls these days, except there were *plants* sprouting out of the wall. And things got weirder from there. There were tiny caverns lining some walls with dishes in them, a slab of stone with moss that kind of looked like an abandoned sacrificial alter, and stone statues of flowers and mushrooms.

"You got some weird tastes, Girlie," he told her, second-guessing his decision to stay with her for the first time.

She sighed wearily. "It's not *my* tastes." After those puzzling words, she yelled the very, *very* last thing he ever would have expected her to say. "Tavor!"

He jumped, spinning to stare at Ali with wide eyes before he backed up, looking around the apartment. She'd called Tavor, but . . . it wasn't *Tavor* Tavor, right? It was some pet or something that happened to have the same name, because she couldn't be calling for the

McMichael's missing universal genie.

But then orange light swirled in front of them, and Rajan's heart nearly jumped into his throat when Tavor appeared. Holy hell. She really was a genie thief.

"You're the one who stole the McMichael's universal genie?!" he exclaimed. And she knew Tavor's name. *Why* did she know his name?

"I did not!" she snapped. "A bird dropped him in my lap."

Rajan did a double-take, her words not processing at first. A bird? She got a universal genie by *accident*? He opened his mouth to ask . . . he didn't know what. There were lots of questions he wanted to ask, but none of them felt very coherent, so he shut his mouth and turned to Tavor. "And she knows your real name." *That* was probably the most important thing in this moment anyway. Genies did not give humans their humans.

Tavor slid between Rajan and Ali, his eyes cold. "It's been an interesting few weeks. Ali, why are you hurt?"

Rajan froze, his eyes widening in panic at the hidden threat in Tavor's words, barely letting Rajan's mind register that Tavor was angry over a human's welfare. Holding up his hands, Rajan shook his head. "Whoa, no, I didn't hurt her."

"She's burned." Tavor's eyes flashed dark orange, and Rajan immediately dropped his gaze.

"He didn't do this," Ali said.

"Then how did you get hurt? And where did he come from?"

Rajan couldn't move for fear of what Tavor might do next, but Ali had no such trouble and launched into a tirade.

"There was a stupid gem exhibit from the stupid McMichael family, and I didn't know it

was theirs. I touched the ruby because it was pretty and I'm an idiot, then we set off magic traps and there were laser gems—that's where the burn is from—and shadow fossils that tried to eat us and a shadow mummy that tried to bury me, and now I have two genies when I don't even want one—”

“Whoa, whoa.” Tavor lifted his hands in a stop motion. “Let's not start that again. You've had a long day and need rest. You can tell me more later. But before you go . . .”

Tavor took her hands, pouring healing magic into her. Rajan still stood frozen, kind of hoping Tavor might forget he was there. Tavor definitely didn't have to touch a human to heal them, but he'd chosen to anyway . . . Would he have done that even if Rajan wasn't there, or was he staking some kind of claim?

The thought brought a wave of dismay over Rajan. He didn't want to share his new, intriguing master with another genie, especially not a universal genie. How was he supposed to compete with that? But if a bird just dropped Tavor's imperial topaz on Ali's lap, maybe they didn't have the same relationship as her and Rajan. *They* hadn't worked together to escape magical traps, and they certainly hadn't taken on a mummy together. Those were good bonding experiences, right?

“You healed me,” Ali said after Tavor released her, pushing Rajan's sash tied around her arms down to look over her skin.

“Of course,” Tavor said. “But I need permission to use magic at the museum so I can erase the memory of anyone who saw you. We can't leave behind anything that might lead the McMichaels to you.”

She paused before asking, “Could you fix the museum? The traps caused a lot of damage—and we caused even more getting around them.”

Tavor shook his head. "I'm sorry, Ali. I know you love museums, but no. If the fire genie is gone and there is no evidence of tampering, the McMichaels will think a new player has entered the game, which is the last thing we want. If the fire genie is missing and the traps were clearly sprung, they'll blame existing factions."

"Like genie hunters?"

Tavor's eyebrows lifted in surprise, then he snorted, turning to Rajan. "Did you accuse Ali of being a genie hunter?"

Heat flooded Rajan's cheeks. "She was a human who knew about genies but clearly wasn't part of The Society. What was I supposed to think?" He glanced between Tavor and Ali. "I still don't know what's going on."

"I'll tell you later," Tavor brushed off. "Ali, I'll ensure the museum receives a generous donation so they can repair any damage. That's the best I can do."

After some hesitation, she asked, "Could you make the donation come from the McMichael family?" That was a clever thought. It was the McMichael's fault the museum got trashed since they put Rajan and the traps there, so why not make them pay for it?

Tavor's mouth curved into a smirk. "Yes."

"Okay, let's do that. I grant you permission to use magic at the Museum of Horton. Now, I'm going to bed. Good luck."

She started to walk away, and Rajan's heart nearly stopped. Maybe he and Ali had some good bonding experiences, but she still knew Tavor's name. Whether she realized it or not, that was huge. He didn't want Tavor to be more special to Ali than him. "Wait!" he held one hand out, as though to stop her.

She turned back to look at him. His eyes flickered to Tavor before he gathered his

resolve, straightening as he faced Ali. "If Tavor trusts you with his name, then I trust you with mine." Despite his best intentions, his gaze moved to the wall behind her. He couldn't meet her eyes as he rubbed the back of his neck and muttered, "It's Rajan." Hopefully, he was only imagining that a blush covered his cheeks.

A beat passed before she repeated his name. "Rajan." He felt her eyes on him, but still couldn't look at her, even when she added, "Thank you, Rajan." He was definitely blushing now.

Before she could leave, Tavor spoke up again, his voice full of amusement. "Wait, were you calling him Red?"

Rajan glanced between Tavor and Ali, confused, especially when her face turned red and she glared at Tavor.

"No. I called him Flame."

Tavor raised one eyebrow, his mouth twitching toward a smile. "Was Red too close to Orange, or did you like the name Flame better?"

She stuck her tongue out at him and went to her room, showing how close a relationship the two had. Rajan just hoped he and Ali would be even closer. And that that wouldn't piss off Tavor.

Chapter Ten

Rajan only waited for a few moments after Ali left before asking, “Who snatched you from the McMichaels? And how did you end up with Ali? And who is she?”

“She’s no one,” Tavor brushed off, barely looking at him. “Other than a young woman with terrible luck. As for who took me—I don’t know. Ali didn’t remember any markings on the bird, but that doesn’t mean it wasn’t a transformation genie.”

So Ali was just some girl who’d ended up with Tavor, and then stumbled upon Rajan? That *was* terrible luck. And also made everything she’d done in the museum way more impressive. Though now he felt a little bad that she probably had just gone there to relax. Well, he’d had a good time. Hopefully, she’d enjoyed herself at least a little too.

“You had a master,” Tavor suddenly said, eyeing him.

“Right!” Rajan exclaimed. Tavor said he didn’t know who stole him, but he’d been stolen between masters. Rajan was stolen *from* his master. But it couldn’t be the same people behind Tavor’s disappearance since Tavor said Ali was no one. Which did nothing to help explain how Rajan was here right now. “Tyler McMichael, one of Jeanine’s brood.”

He watched Tavor uncertainly. “Did you do something to make Ali my master? At first I thought she’d used ancient genie wizard magic to break my ties to my former master.” Maybe Tavor had some form of free rein, and that gave him extra abilities?

Tavor’s expression remained the same as he rose into the air, crisscrossing his legs and resting his palms on his knees. “Did anything odd happen during your transfer ceremony?”

Rajan shrugged, craning his neck to keep his eyes on Tavor. "It was the same as usual. We hadn't set up a contract yet, but he was my master." There was no doubt about that.

Tavor thought over Rajan's words before ordering, "Put it out of your mind. Ali is ignorant of our world and fiercely independent. She has no need of wishes."

"I noticed," Rajan said, his mouth turning up in a lopsided grin. He didn't know what life with her would look like, but he looked forward to finding out. Even if it included Tavor.

"Right," Tavor said slowly. "So, just think of this as a vacation for as long as we can go without notice."

That wiped the smile from Rajan's face. "Do the McMichaels have any idea where you are?" He didn't want this to be a vacation. He wanted to stay with Ali.

"According to the genie wizard I killed, no."

Rajan gaped, his eyes flaring with a deep red light. "You killed a genie wizard? How? I want to kill one." Why couldn't he have been around for that?

Tavor waved him off. "Don't worry about that for now. I need to go to the museum."

Rajan stopped the universal before he could leave. "One more thing." He tilted his head as he gazed at Ali's closed door. "Has she really not made any wishes?" Even with a universal at her disposal?

"Only one. And only because I made her."

Rajan's face scrunched in confusion. Tavor *made* her make a wish? How did that work out? Before he could ask anything more, Tavor waved his fingers and vanished, off to the museum. So Rajan sat down to wait, staring at Ali's door as he hoped he could learn more from Tavor about his relationship with Ali after he returned. Without directly asking about it, of course.