

# Garan's and Light's Perspective of Meeting Ali

*from The Perilous Gems Episode 4*

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## Chapter One

### *Garan*

Garan cupped the brilliant yellow and orange chrysanthemum in his hands as he murmured to it. "Someone takes good care of you and your siblings. You all look lovely and well-nourished." He wanted to give an extra boost to most plants he saw, but these were doing fine on their own. Well, not quite on their own. "Your gardeners must give you a lot of love. I would like to thank them for you, but you must give them a lot of love back since you look so beautiful. It's nice of you to be so generous."

The air rustled next to him, but he kept speaking to the flowers. Even though their gardeners took good care of them, they still liked to be admired. Chrysanthemums were showy flowers that preened for audiences. But that was okay. They deserved to be appreciated.

Then the air mumbled something to him. He blinked, furrowing his brow at the flower cupped in his hand. Air didn't normally talk to him. Maybe it talked to air genies, but not plant genies. Maybe it was talking to the chrysanthemum, and he'd overheard? He leaned back a little, not wanting to intrude on their conversation.

Bright orange caught in his vision where there shouldn't be any flowers, and he turned to see a human woman kneeling next to him. He blinked again. Was she a gardener? No, her dress was too fancy. Even if it matched the chrysanthemum. But maybe she was the one talking to the flowers, instead of the air doing the talking. Did that make more sense? She looked at him

expectantly, so he said, "What?" Maybe she wanted to know what the flowers had to say, and needed him to act as translator. He could do that.

"That flower you're holding." She spoke in a soft, gentle voice that flowers loved. It helped them grow to know they were treasured. "It looks like fire. I was hoping you could tell me what kind of flower it is."

He blinked back at the flower and shook his head. This woman had a nice flower voice, but she was very confused. Maybe her dress was meant to match flames instead of the chrysanthemums? The flowers would be very disappointed to find that out. That wasn't flattering at all. Really, it was insulting. "Fire hurts flowers. They should be kept away from flames." His hands tightened protectively around the petals. Fire was terrible, though not the worst since it helped plant growth sometimes. But he still didn't like it.

"Um . . . yes? Vegetation is rather flammable," the woman agreed. "I just meant that the color and shape reminded me of flames. They're beautiful."

His grip relaxed, and he felt a tiny smile curl his mouth. He was right. She was trying to match the flowers. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. She wasn't quite as pretty, but she did look nice. And the flowers were preening extra with her attention on them.

"Chrysanthemum."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Chrysanthemum," he repeated, turning his head slightly toward her. "The flower." Many flowers felt a little more special if their admirers knew what they were.

"Oh! Thank you!"

She was excited, so he kept talking. He liked talking to plant enthusiasts. They were the only humans worth speaking to. "You must talk to them gently. They grow better when they

know they're loved. Harsh sounds will stunt their growth, and with no sound, they'll wilt." She already had a nice voice, but he wanted to make sure she knew. If she was trying to match the flowers, she probably wanted to know how best to talk to them.

She settled next to him, smoothing her orange dress over her legs. It really did match the chrysanthemums nicely.

"My grandma talked to her garden. She called her plants her little friends."

Garan's smile grew. He knew this lady was worth talking to. The flowers did too. They were listening attentively to their conversation. "Plants are good companions." His eyes darkened, his smile falling at the thought that his master might pull him away from here any minute. She was still here somewhere. "Until masters take them away." Life wasn't worth living if it wasn't full of plants.

The buzzing words of a wizard filled the air, so Garan turned away, focusing on the flowers again. Flowers brought life, but wizards choked whatever life didn't suit them. Just like weeds did. Humans would need strong weed killer to get rid of wizards. But it couldn't be magic weed killer, because that didn't work on wizards.

Garan heard the soft voice of the human dressed like a flower say, "We were just discussing flowers." She sounded upset, but like she was trying to hide it. Of course she didn't like the stupid wizard ruining their conversation. She wanted to keep talking to the chrysanthemums. Interrupting conversations with flowers was the worst. They never got enough love and attention.

More buzzing words filled his ears, so he focused harder on the flowers. "I'm sorry," he whispered to them. "She didn't really want to leave, but she had to. You can't hide from me how happy you are that she dressed to match you."

But they were still disappointed she was leaving, so he leaned closer to add, "She came over just to see you. She must like you. Would you be happy if she visited again?"

#

Garan was tucked inside his gem when his master summoned him that same night. His eyes went dull as he waited for his master's next shrill wish. But when he reformed in front of his master, the world settled around him with abrupt clarity as he blinked at the flower lady from earlier. "You spoke to the chrysanthemums. They hope you'll visit again."

Was she his master now? He didn't want the flower loving human to be a genie master, but since she liked flowers . . . they could talk to gardens together. And take care of them together. That might be nice.

Then an ice genie stepped next to the flower lady, and Garan's face fell. "Oh. You have a genie. You want two?" He watched the ice genie uncertainly. He didn't want a greedy master, and he especially didn't want his precious plants near ice. "Plants don't like ice any more than fire."

"I do not believe in causing wanton harm with my ice," the ice genie said.

Garan shook his head. "Ice is no good. I dislike cold-weather plants." They weren't as pretty, and they weren't nearly as social. Or even worse, they just *pretended* like they weren't social. Their stuck-up attitude upset more generous and loving plants, and he wouldn't stand for it.

The ice genie frowned. "Our respective magic abilities are immaterial to our current objective."

A nearby wizard talked, but Garan didn't catch it. Their voices were always deep or husky, so he tuned out all noises like that. This small wizard didn't talk near as deep, but Garan

was used to it enough to ignore it just fine. He'd rather stew over his disappointment that the flower lady was greedy. But maybe he could still talk her into keeping the ice genie away from flowers?

Then a voice that Garan sometimes didn't ignore spoke up. "But the gathering isn't complete yet."

Garan blinked at the surprising sight of the universal genie Tavor. Were more McMichaels here then?

Tavor joined Garan's new master, his posture threatening in a way that had Garan blinking. Did Tavor not realize this small wizard was a wizard? He looked more human, but Tavor still couldn't do anything against him.

"One lone wizard," Tavor crooned in a threatening voice. So he did know the small wizard was a wizard. Tavor never showed when he was nervous, but why was he so confident? "What arrogance. The McMichaels have lost three genies, yet they thought *you* would be enough to keep little Mandy and her genie secure?"

"Oh." Garan tilted his head toward Tavor. Tavor had said the McMichaels lost *three* genies, so maybe Tavor wasn't with the McMichaels anymore either. "You're here? Are you the flower girl's genie too?" He blinked at her. "How many genies do you need?" Were all three genies hers? Tavor was better than an ice genie, but three genies was a lot.

"*None*," she declared, her eyes fierce like a flower able to withstand frost. "I need none. This isn't about me."

Then there was shrill shrieking. Garan's master—former master? Or her sister? He couldn't tell until he saw the yellow dress. Then he realized his former master *was* there, she was just covered in ice. Well. Maybe ice had *some* good uses. But only if it stayed far away from

trees and flowers.

Garan shook his head when the genie wizard went to attack Tavor. Tavor was too arrogant this time. It was always a problem with universal genies, even the clever ones. Except the flower lady tackled the wizard before he could do anything. Garan blinked down at her, laying on top of her victim. She was a very strong flower to tackle a wizard, even a small one. Was she protecting Tavor?

There was more shouting and arguing while Garan wondered how the flower was going to get away. She'd gotten the wizard down, but now she was stuck in his arms. He hated seeing flowers strangled by weeds, but genies couldn't help against wizards.

Then orange magic surrounded Garan *and* the flower, even though a wizard still held her, and Tavor appeared them away.

## Chapter Two

*The Light Genie*

“Mandy always goes off on her own with guys and leaves me,” Sandy complained, stalking forward with her hands clenched. The light genie walked beside her, a trail of wizards not far behind. “Today is supposed to be about representing the McMichael Conglomerate, so she can’t go off to have fun on her own and leave all the work for me.”

Sandy liked muttering to herself. She always claimed she was either muttering to her twin or her genie, but neither of those comments were directed at him. He suspected his master’s insistence at this came from her mother’s frequent declaration that only insane people talked to themselves. After which the twin’s mother often asked if Sandy needed therapy.

They turned a corner, and he jerked to a stop, his eyes wide as his master shrieked, “Mandy!”

His master’s twin and the man she’d run off with were encased in ice, but that was not nearly as interesting as the rest of the sight before him. In this hallway stood Illan and Tavor, plus a young human woman in an orange dress matching Tavor’s colors. Garan was also there, but he was expected. It was seeing two of the three missing McMichael genies that was so shocking.

The light genie looked around, searching for Rajan, but didn’t find the fire genie. Was he in his gem or somewhere else? With Illan and Tavor together, it seemed unlikely Rajan would be under a separate master.

At the sight of them, Tavor snarled, raising his hands—and so did the genie wizard

behind him.

“No!” the human woman cried, driving her shoulder into the genie wizard Ren.

The light genie blinked at the sight. A human attacking a wizard to protect her genie was definitely a new one for him. Unless she was really just protecting herself, but Tavor's anger at seeing Sandy made the light genie think the universal had a very strong hand in whatever was happening right now.

“Ms. Sandy!” the wizards behind them cried, finally reacting to her shriek. They rounded the corner, and stopped in stunned amazement, gaping at the strange sight before them.

“I have their master!” Ren cried. The woman may have toppled the wizard, but he now had his arms wrapped around her, stopping her from leaving “We'll sort out how to get the genies from her in a more secluded place . . . and someone should unfreeze Mandy.”

The wizards relaxed, but the light genie still stood tense, his eyes on Tavor. These wizards were incredibly foolish if they really thought they had just outdone a universal genie.

Sure enough, Tavor snorted, his eyes dark. “You *had* our *friend*.” Sparkling orange light surrounded the human, Tavor, Illan, and, surprisingly, Garan.

As they began appearing away, the human woman threw a panicked look at the light genie, her deep blue eyes wide and earnest. “We'll come back!” She spoke the words like a promise before vanishing.

Ren stared in disbelief at his empty arms, and the light genie blinked at the sight as well, needing time to process what had happened. Tavor called the human his friend and then, impossibly, stole her right out of the arms of a wizard with magic. Genie magic never should have worked that close to a wizard. But it had.

And they took Garan while promising to come back for the light genie. Was Tavor



leading a charge to steal *all* the McMichael genies? But who was the woman? And how were they doing this? He blinked again as he realized that if things went according to what Tavor's plan seemed to be, he would find out soon. Though he was quite sure by Tavor's snarl from a few moments ago that things were already not going according to plan.

Did the light genie dare trust in Tavor's ability to recover from a few mishaps? Or should he assume he would remain in the clutches of the McMichaels? Not that he knew if it would be any better to go with the earnest-eyed woman. Just because Tavor thought it was better didn't mean the light genie would. But her eyes . . . he wanted to understand why she sounded and looked like she felt they were saving him.

Sandy stomped her foot, bringing the light genie's attention back to the present.

"Someone unfreeze my sister! And where did the plant genie go? Why isn't he here?"

Despite her whiny tone, the light genie caught the edge of fear in her voice. She was as unnerved at the situation as the light genie was stunned. Good. Maybe the wizards would be afraid too.

"His master has changed," Ren said carefully, eyeing Sandy like she was a wild beast who might turn feral at any moment. Which was an appropriate fear.

But who cared about that when in the span of a few minutes, Garan's master had changed from Mandy to this mystery woman? If she could steal Garan so easily, she could steal the light genie.

"Changed?" Sandy echoed, her voice strangled. "He was under contract!"

Light rolled his eyes. Illan had also been under contract when he was taken, but that apparently didn't matter for this magic. Thank goodness—except, it was too early for him to have thoughts like that. He still didn't know if he wanted to be taken.

Mandy collapsed to the floor with a shaky gasp as a wizard freed her from Illan's ice.

"Give me your jacket!" Sandy snarled to a wizard before wrapping the suit coat around her sister.

Mandy raised accusing eyes to Ren as she shivered. "Y-you d-d-didn't p-protect m-m-me."

"While you were encased in ice, the hunter had no reason to further harm you," he said in a soothing tone. "The hunter has only harmed wizards to date, but she's growing bolder. We have no guarantee she won't escalate to harming masters. Leaving you frozen was the best way to protect you."

So the wizard was calling the mystery woman a genie hunter. The Society would see things that way. Though perhaps she was a genie hunter who Tavor had tricked into following his plans. But that explanation didn't match her promise before Tavor took her away.

"Give me that," Mandy demanded, scowling as she snatched the necklace holding Garan's green diamond from Ren's hand. The light genie hadn't noticed the gem dangling there, but if Garan truly belonged to this other woman now, possession of the gem would do Mandy no good. "I put the stupid genie back in his gem because you wizards told me to, and then he wasn't any help anyway."

*Help* was an interesting word to describe forcing a genie to do your bidding, and a genie could only be as helpful as their master was useful. Except, the light genie admitted, when it came to Garan. The plant genie had an impressive ability to mishear and misunderstand wishes. Perhaps that was what happened here earlier and Garan, either intentionally or unintentionally, helped himself be taken.

Ren cleared his throat, looking like he would rather be somewhere else. "The plant genie

is no longer yours, Miss Mandy.”

She stared up at him with uncomprehending eyes, but it was Sandy who shrieked, “Of course he’s still her genie! We’ll kill that stupid little girl and take him back! We’ll take back all our genies!” Greed burned in her eyes, and her mouth twisted in a manic expression. “Then the universal genie will be ours, because *we* got him back.”

“We don’t know if the hunter has a contract with the universal and ice genies,” one of the wizards pointed out. “We can’t kill her unless we can confirm she has no contracts.” He hesitated. “She may even form a contract with the plant genie before we see her again.” That would be the clever thing to do, unless that didn’t fit with Tavor’s plans.

Sandy screamed wordlessly at this news, while Mandy blinked, not seeming to comprehend that she no longer had a genie. But the twins were from Rand’s side of the family—the branch with the least amount of brains.

Ren pulled out his phone. “We need to report this immediately.”

He stared at his phone without moving for several moments before looking up to order, “Pull out your phones.” The other wizards bristled at the order. “My phone is six months old and was fully charged as of three hours ago. Now it’s dead. Pull out your phones. Unless you think the head of the family wouldn’t want this reported immediately?” He raised his eyebrows. “Or is the problem that none of you have Ethan’s number? You should at least be able to call Rand, if that’s the case.”

Light raised his eyebrows as well. Ren’s phone was dead? Had Tavor done it when he stole away his master? Again, *how*? Light withheld a smile as the rest of the wizards pulled out their phones and stared at them in disbelief. Scheming universal genies were not his favorite, but seeing wizards baffled and horrified like this was impossible not to enjoy.

“How did the hunter steal the plant genie?” a wizard asked, finally tearing his gaze away from his apparently useless phone.

Ren gave a helpless shrug. “She touched his gem. That’s all she did.” He gave Sandy a pointed look. “Keep your diamond within the protection of that light barrier, *no matter what.*”

She gripped the yellow diamond at her throat, her eyes wide. The light genie fought to keep his expression neutral. Even Tavor couldn’t break through his light barrier, which Sandy had wished to have placed around herself earlier that evening. Why couldn’t the half breed wizard have kept his mouth shut?

“Can’t you just fix the phones?” Mandy asked. “Use your magic to undo whatever the genie did.”

One of the wizards pointed out the obvious. “We can *stop* a genie’s magic, Miss Mandy. We can’t undo it. Our phones are broken, and none of us are technologically savvy enough to fix them. Assuming they can be fixed.”

Mandy pulled out her phone from a tiny purse and scowled at it. “So what now?”

A wizard with a beard gave the light genie a considering look. “The hunter said she’d be back for you. How do you know her?”

He cocked his head at the wizard. Did this fool actually expect him to somehow know some random woman when the McMichaels had controlled his every move for centuries? “You expect me to remember everyone from my extensive social life living trapped in my gem? I’d have to review my list of contacts to tell you—but it’s back in my diamond.”

The wizard growled, but the light genie continued, “We’re not conspiring with anyone. We don’t have that ability. You lost the plant genie because Harlot Number Two, despite knowing her family is under attack, decided she was cleverer than the rest of the inbred

McMichael stock, despite the fact that her brain is the body part least likely to influence her decisions.”

“How dare you!” The bearded wizard launched into an offensive spell that had the light genie stumbling against the wall, his body jerking as he gritted his teeth against the pain until he started choking for breath. His light barrier around his master stuttered.

“You stupid wizard!” Sandy smacked the wizard in an utterly ineffective attack. “Didn’t you hear Ren? We can’t let the barrier slip for a moment!”

“I need protection too!” Mandy cried. “Until we get my genie back, you have to protect me too, Sandy.”

Sandy looked reluctant for only a second before extending her protection wish to include her sister. The light genie shifted his magic. Splitting his power between protecting both Mandy and Sandy would weaken it slightly, but probably not enough to help Tavor. Genie magic against genie magic was not very effective.

“We’ll handle the situation,” a jowl-faced wizard promised. “Keep the light genie’s magic focused solely on the light barrier. Don’t allow him to split his focus or give him an opening to remove the barrier with another wish. Keep the diamond safe, and we’ll take care of the rest. When they return for the light genie, we’ll incapacitate their master, leaving the genies powerless without a conscious master to make wishes. If she can steal their gems, there must be a way to get them back. The shadow genie ought to be able to make her talk if she won’t give up her secrets willingly.”

He hated the thoroughness of some wizards. Though he’d heard rumors that one of the McMichael wizards was dead while another was missing, both related to instances of McMichael genies going missing. He hoped all of these wizards died by the end of the night.

### Chapter Three

#### *Garan*

The other genies and the flower lady talked after Tavor appeared them to a dark room, but the full moon outside was perfect tonight. It shone with a soft brightness that Garan wished he could see reflected off white lilies. Having a night garden would be so lovely.

His new master's raised voice pierced his thoughts as she said something—but he didn't catch what. He looked down to find her looking at him, so he told her, "The moon is beautiful tonight."

She blinked at him before looking out the window. "It is beautiful," she agreed after taking a look. Would she appreciate a night garden too? "Its ability to reflect the sun's light is poor, but it's still lovely . . . So, may I call you Plant? Instead of just Genie?"

Oh, she wanted a name for him? "Vine." That was much better than Genie. Genie was insulting. Flowers would never speak to him anymore if he just called them all *flower*.

"What?"

"I'd prefer Vine."

"Oh! Okay!" Her eyes lit up, so she must have also thought it was a good name.

He tilted his head, studying her. "And I'll call you Lady Flora." It was appropriate, since she was a flower lady.

"Uh . . ." She looked at Tavor for a moment. Did she think she needed his permission for a nickname? Most masters worked the other way around. Maybe this one was confused. "Okay. That works." Then she cleared her throat and straightened. "Vine, I grant you free rein."

His eyes widened, his gaze moving past her to Tavor to ask the universal a question with his eyes. True free rein? Free rein to summon all the flowers he wanted?

Tavor's eyes gentled. "Yes, it's true. You didn't hear her giving any wishes to me or Illan, did you?" Garan hadn't been paying enough attention to notice. Tavor should have known that.

Garan looked back at this new master, the generous, flower-loving human. No wonder the chrysanthemums liked her so much. Slowly, hesitantly, he raised his arm toward her ear. So many humans weren't kind to his flowers, but this one . . . she would be different. And since she gave him the gift of summoning his own flowers, he wanted to give the first one to her.

When he reached for his magic, it came in a welcoming rush he wanted to bask in. But he had something he had to do first, so he summoned a white chrysanthemum he then tucked behind Lady Flora's ear.

The tears in her eyes as she stared up at him said she understood what a gift this was. He knew she would be different. "Thank you," she whispered, gently brushing the petals with her fingers.

He nodded, his hand brushing her bare shoulders, which were nearly as silky as his favorite petals, before he stepped back. "You desire the light genie too?" He looked over at Tavor and the ice genie. Garan hadn't been paying attention, but he was pretty sure that was what she wanted.

She sighed. "No. But yes."

No? He was almost confused until he realized she meant *she* didn't want the light genie, but someone else did. He glanced at her before looking to Tavor. That cleared a lot of things up. "*He* wants the light genie."

Lady Flora gaped, though Garan kept his attention on the universal.

“Now, now,” Tavor said. “Ali agrees with me that with her is the best place for all of us. She doesn't want genies, but that makes her the perfect master. She's content to fulfill her desires on her own. Demands it, actually. We're just her roommates until we can figure out a more permanent solution.”

Garan looked at the moon again as he thought over Tavor's words. All of them together without a master separating them? And with a master who appreciated flowers? But that would mean fire *and* ice would be close to his precious plants. Why did it have to be both? “It would be nice to be together . . . But where did the ice genie come from?” The McMichaels only had six genies. Tavor was getting too greedy if he was taking from other families too. Though Garan still didn't know how he was doing that.

The ice genie sighed. “Perhaps that is a story saved for a later date. I believe our plant friend's magic may be able to circumvent the light barrier guarding the yellow diamond. Vegetation has a relationship with light, after all.”

“Vine, do you think you can do it?” Lady Flora asked.

“Oh, yes.” If he really didn't like Tavor's plan of getting everyone together, he wouldn't be talking to them. “I get along with other genies quite well. I won't have any trouble living with them.” His brow furrowed. “So long as they don't hurt my flowers. The fire genie isn't always very careful.”

Lady Flora released a slow breath. “Before we can get all the genies together, we need to obtain all the gems. The light genie's yellow diamond is protected by a light barrier that Illan thinks you might be able to get through. Do you think you can do it?” She glanced at Tavor. “Or could you do it?”



Tavor shook his head, crossing his arms over his chest and raising a few inches into the air. “Light genies and plant genies have complementary magic. Their magic interacts in a way that mine can’t mimic. I may be more powerful, but even I have limits.”

Garan frowned at him. Tavor shouldn’t talk about his magic that way. “Your flowers are very nice.” Tavor could do all kinds of things Garan couldn’t, like make sparkly foil flowers. Which weren’t nice all the time, but Garan occasionally liked to see them—and it had been a few centuries since he’d had a chance to appreciate them.

“The light barrier, Vine,” the ice genie said in a tone Garan thought was meant to be impatient. Or maybe it was accidentally impatient. But if it was accidental, that meant he had poor control, which made Garan worried for his plants being near the ice genie. “Can you get around it?”

“Plants love light.” Why would they need to get around it? If the ice genie didn’t know that, Garan was *really* worried about how living with him would go.

“That’s not an answer,” the ice genie bit out. “As Miss Ali said, if you wish for the light genie to join us, we must obtain his diamond. Can you help?”

Garan rocked on his heels. Right. They had to get the light genie’s yellow diamond. And they apparently wanted Garan’s help for that. When did they ask if he could help? Shouldn’t he be part of that plan? “The light genie is very strong.”

“So, what if we weakened the light?” Lady Flora asked. “Hot air has a different refraction index than cold air. When they meet, the light passing through the area is refracted in different directions. It might be enough to weaken the light barrier.”

The ice genie shook his head. “I’m not certain all those factors will perform the same with magic involved. My hypothesis regarding Vine breaking through the light barrier is based

around the idea that plant and light genies are complementary. It is an idea based around magic theory rather than science theory, if you will.”

“It worked at the museum,” Lady Flora argued. “Cold air meeting hot air affected the shadow genie’s magic.” Shadow genie? Was he here? Or were they going to get him later? But maybe he wouldn’t want to be gotten . . . Even though Lady Flora appreciated flowers, Garan didn’t think that would make the shadow genie very nice to her.

Lady Flora’s words got the ice genie excited. “Science principles remain the same even with magic involved? Fascinating. I’ve never had the opportunity to experiment with that before. That opens up worlds of possibilities.”

Tavor laughed, placing his hands on Lady Flora’s shoulders. He really did like her, if he was touching her. “Ali, you truly are a treasure. Your useless store of knowledge is useful after all. I’ll give your degree more respect from now on.”

She scowled, knocking his hands away. Maybe it was because he’d called her Ali instead of Lady Flora. She *was* dressed to match the chrysanthemums outside. “Science has *always* been useful. It helped at the museum—more than once—and it helped us take down Santiago. It also helped me escape from Brandon when he caught me.”

Tavor blinked, looking surprised. “I . . . don’t think I realized how big a role you played in those events. You’ve been holding back in your retellings, Ali.” He studied her after, like there was something about her he hadn’t realized before. Maybe he hadn’t realized how much she appreciated flowers. Tavor didn’t always notice things like that.

“Do we have enough of a plan to move forward?” the ice genie asked.

Tavor finally looked away from Lady Flora, his eyes briefly flashing with orange light. “Yes.”

Garan's eyes widened as he looked to Tavor. They had a plan? For what? He looked between the universal genie and his new master, hoping he didn't have an important role in this plan. But they would tell him if they wanted him to do something, right?

## Chapter Four

### *The Light Genie*

The wizards and twins retreated to a currently unused ballroom within the convention center. The twins huddled near the back of the room behind a line of wizards, waiting around for Tavor and his group, since the wizards were unable to track them.

A few had gone out sniffing for the scent of genie magic, but found nothing and shortly returned. So now they waited, believing they would return because of the woman's reckless promise to the light genie. Though perhaps they still would have believed the group would return for the light genie even without that.

They waited probably less than an hour before the group arrived, Garan, Tavor, and Illan with the young woman still in that orange dress. The light genie was surprised the fire genie still wasn't present. Was Rajan being held in reserve for some reason? Off on some other task? Or had something else happened to him?

"Get her!" Mandy screamed at the sight of the woman, though the wizards were too far back to attack. Their magic only worked on genies. For going after humans, they were reduced to using their physical might—which they had plenty of.

Tavor stepped forward, flicking flames at the wizards. The flames stopped short of them, stopped by their anti-magic spells, but they shouted about protecting the twins, never mind that fire could never get through the light genie's barrier. No light genie was weak enough for their barrier to fall to mere flames.

Suddenly, ice from behind the light genie and twins rushed around the barrier before

swallowing up several wizards. The light genie released a gasp that no one noticed. Having Tavor use his magic to take someone from a wizard's arms and to damage technology held in wizards' clothing was one thing. This was something else entirely. Their magic was working *directly* on wizards? Did that having anything to do with the secret of how they were stealing genies?

Three wizards avoided being frozen, though stared at their comrades in horror.

"Vine, now!" the woman with earnest eyes cried.

The light genie's gaze snapped to Garan. Whatever she hoped the plant genie would accomplish, the light genie very much hoped it was not a time sensitive activity. Garan's gaze was, unsurprisingly, caught on a decoration in the room shaped like flowers.

"Sorry," the plant murmured before waving his hands to summon vines that shot for the light barrier. But the wizards were no longer distracted.

"Heads up!" Ren called, weaving his arms in a defensive spell to cancel Garan's magic. The other two wizards joined him, and the vines withered away.

Garan made a wounded sound as he stared at the vines' remains while Tavor growled, his eyes sparking bright orange. This was the second time Tavor's plans seemed to have gone wrong for the night, though the light genie couldn't imagine what the universal was thinking, relying on Garan for a time-sensitive plan. They should have assigned one of them to keep Garan on task.

"We'll kill them," Illan suddenly threatened in a voice loud enough to be heard throughout the room. "Interfere with Vine's magic again, and we'll kill all the frozen wizards." He raised his hands, his fingers twitching. "My ice will slice their heads off before you can make a move. There's over a dozen wizards here—that will be a blow even for the McMichaels."

“Then we’ll just get more.” Sandy enunciated the words as she stepped through a gap in the frozen wizards, still protected by the light barrier. “All the wizards working for my family put together aren’t worth a single genie.” She gripped the diamond at her throat, raising her head. “So go ahead and kill them.”

Ren looked darkly amused at her words while the other two wizards stiffened, but remained in place. Of course the pitiful little servants would still do their masters’ bidding. Wizards were the most pathetic entities in the world, because they willfully enslaved themselves to beings who didn’t value their lives.

The human woman gave Illan a panicked look, as though she did not like the idea of killing all the wizards. Before she could voice any concerns, Garan said, “The more wizards that are dead, the better off we are. Why didn’t we kill them to begin with? I thought that was part of the plan. Did no one say that?”

Ren’s eyes went to the woman for some reason, though the light genie couldn’t read his expression from this angle.

“Let’s try this again,” Tavor said, before flames filled the room.

The unfrozen female wizard spun toward her comrades, seeming to finally realize that she could probably still unfreeze them, even though it was supposed to be impossible for them to be frozen in the first place. But the moment she raised her arms to try, the frozen wizards vanished.

The light genie smiled grimly. Another example of genie magic working on wizards. This *was* intriguing, but could Tavor really manage to steal him? And was becoming part of all this intrigue worth being stolen for? Going against The Society was dangerous. It could get all the genies involved tortured for who knew how long for having the audacity to stand against their

masters.

He thought this over as the wizards and genies tossed magic back and forth, neither side making progress. At least the other genies were pressing too hard with their magic for the wizards to switch to offensive spells. This would all end very quickly if the wizards managed to do that.

Suddenly—or perhaps not so suddenly if she'd been planning this for a while—the earnest-eyed woman made it the edge where the genies' magic reached before the wizards stopped it. Ren slid up to meet her.

“Your sneaking around is cute, little genie hunter,” he told her, “but I won't allow you to tarnish my sterling reputation. You already made me look bad, taking the plant genie. I don't like hitting women who aren't wizards, but I'll have to make an exception for you. Let's make knocking you out as gentle as we can, shall we?”

“You!” the female wizard yelled, her voice both annoyed and excited. “With your ice genie's attack—”

“Our ice genie!” Sandy interrupted.

The wizard continued, “I forgot that you're our real target. We'll bash your head in. Once you're out, your genies will be useless.”

“Cover me, Ren!” the woman ordered. The light genie twitched as the wizard lunged toward Tavor's master, her hands fisted together.

## Chapter Five

### *The Light Genie*

Shockingly, rather than covering the woman wizard from potential genie attacks, Ren shifted just enough between her and the human that he took the hit instead. It almost looked like he'd done it on purpose.

"Watch it!" Ren snapped, hissing in pain. His defensive spells faltered and Tavor's fire streaked toward the female wizard.

She cursed, throwing her hands into a rushed spell. "That was your fault! You got in my way!"

"Someone, just take care of the girl!" the last wizard, a man with a beard yelled.

Without warning, Tavor's master launched herself at Ren. The light genie stared, transfixed. What she was thinking, trying to take a wizard on? She tripped over her heels, and Ren moved forward to catch her. "Thanks for this idea," she told him, before hefting him high.

The light genie's eyes widened before he realized the obvious—Tavor must have gifted her with superior strength. Or she'd wished for it. One of the two, but with Tavor calling the woman his friend earlier, the light genie wasn't so sure it had been a wish.

The next moment, she threw Ren at the female wizard. As the two dropped, Garan's vines shot forward, attacking the light barrier. The light genie blinked in surprise. This was their plan? They thought Garan could get through his shield? *Could* Garan get through his shield? As the light of the barrier started pulsing, the light genie let a small smile leak out. Yes, Garan could. He was a master level genie, after all.



“No!” the bearded wizard snarled, but Illan and Tavor focused their magic on him, keeping him occupied.

Sandy fought to step back from the attacking vines, but they bound her in place. Finally, a tenacious vine slipped through the light barrier, snapping the necklace holding the light genie's yellow diamond. However, the breached barrier unleashed a wave of energy that launched the diamond high into the air.

“Catch it!” Sandy raised her arms. Mandy followed her, jumping up and down as she reached for the gem. But neither twin was very tall. The light genie easily reached above them, snatching his own gem out of the air.

The twins froze.

“Give it back,” Sandy whispered.

“Don't you dare,” the bearded wizard ground out.

Ignoring the words of everyone around him, the light genie stared at the orange-clad woman. She held his gaze, looking incredibly young now that he finally stood before her with no distractions. And she still looked earnest. Someone like that had no business being with Tavor. But that didn't mean she didn't intrigue the light genie. He held his hand out toward her. Slowly, she raised her own, cupping her hands under his closed fist.

His gaze still on hers, he dropped his diamond.

“I wish you would kill her this instant!” Sandy screamed. “I don't care if all the genies are under contract!”

Sandy's wish forced the light genie's magic to act immediately. But all she said was kill *her*. Rand's branch of the family really was the stupidest. The light genie's new master squeezed her eyes shut as his magic flashed brightly, killing Sandy's twin.

The room still seemed frozen, so he said, "Well, I killed her. But you forgot to specify *which* her."

His new master's eyes popped open, her gaze soon catching on Mandy's dead body. The light barrier still in place around Mandy and partially in place around Sandy flickered before dissolving, the wish no longer having power.

Sandy drew in a ragged breath, then screamed, throwing herself at her twin. "Fix this, fix this! Someone has to fix this!"

"How dare you!" the bearded wizard yelled. "Genie filth!" He rose his arms with a clear intent to throw an offensive spell at the light genie. He tensed, locking his teeth together so he wouldn't bite his tongue. Then his master lunged in front of him, taking the attack instead. It should have done nothing to her. She was just a human, after all.

Instead, her back arched, as though her muscles had just seized, like what happened to genies under that spell. She dropped to her hands and knees, making desperate choking sounds. The light genie stared down at her, too stunned to move. Though he couldn't have helped even if he'd thought of it. *He* didn't know how the others were harming wizards. But . . . had she known she would be hurt? And thrown herself in front of him anyway?

"That's not supposed to happen," Ren murmured. Then vines erupted from the ground, snatching the three wizards into the air and tying their arms to the side in a T shape, making them unable to perform magic.

Illan rushed to their master's side, kneeling beside her. "Miss Ali, are you okay?"

So they called her by name. Though that shouldn't be surprising with Tavor calling her a friend. And she apparently called the genies by other names, if her throwing around *Vine* was anything to go by. That couldn't refer to anyone other than Garan.

"Yeah," their master answered in a raspy voice before coughing. "Yeah, I think so."

Illan blew out a breath, his eyes closing for a moment. He looked . . . utterly relieved at this news. Whatever he felt for this woman, the ice genie clearly did not view her as a master. "Let's not have you do that again."

"Why not?" she countered, before shuddering and wincing in pain. "If I'm just standing around while you all fight, that's making more of a use of myself." So whether she'd known she would get hurt or not, she sounded willing to do it again. For the sake of the genies.

Illan shook his head. "*You* enabled us to stop the genie wizards. Again." Again? What had this woman and Tavor been doing the last few months?

She gave Illan a shaky smile. "I was just disrupting the equilibrium of forces you all had going on, same as last time."

Those words meant nothing to the light genie, but they made Illan smile.

"You killed her!" Sandy shrieked suddenly. It must have taken her a moment to get over her shock. Or this long to realize her sister was really dead and not coming back.

The light genie's eyes flashed in anger as he rounded on his master. His *former* master. "*I* killed her? You wished for death, as you have so many times. The little girl who ruined your million-dollar dress. The whistleblower with a pregnant wife who caught you embezzling. The woman your ex-boyfriend began dating, and then his mother when he didn't come crawling back to you. You brought this on yourself. You got exactly what you wished for. More death. *My* wish is that I could have included yours as well."

Sandy and the wizards all dying would be a satisfying end to the day, regardless of what came next. He turned to his master. "Is that part of the plan? Are we going to kill her?"

"And what about the wizards?" Garan moved next to their master to stare up at the

wizards. "We'll kill them too, right?" The woman and bearded wizards began struggling uselessly. Garan's vines were far too thick for them to escape. Ren seemed resigned to his fate, with his head hanging down, his hands twitching slightly.

"Please don't," their master whispered, looking horrified. But the light genie noted that she was asking, not demanding. Did that mean the others had the freedom to kill if they so chose?

Garan turned to their master, an inquisitive look on his face. "Isn't that naive, to leave them alive? I thought the universal was in charge. Is it you or him?"

"This is his plan," she confirmed.

The light genie's eyes widened, his gaze jumping between their master and Tavor. So he really was the one behind all this. Though how had he first encountered this young woman? Did she steal him when he was between masters?

Garan tilted his head. "Why are you following his plan? You're supposed to be the master." That was what the light genie wanted to know.

She shook her head. "I don't want to be anyone's master but my own. But I'm following his plan because . . ." She trailed off, staring at Garan before finally saying, "Because you talked about flowers with me."

Garan's eyes softened, but the light genie felt there were more pressing matters. "If we're not killing them, what are we doing?"

"Warping their memories." Tavor stepped forward "They'll think a nimble, snarky old man with a storm genie came and stole you two away. A storm genie could cause similar damage to what we've done."

"We'll all be together," Garan told the light genie cheerfully. "We're gathering everyone

up.” He looked concerned for a moment as he patted tiny white flowers threaded through his hair. “I hope the fire genie behaves himself.” So Rajan was around somewhere? Or was Garan confused?

“Why are we gathering everyone?” The light genie looked at their master only a moment before turning his gaze on Tavor. It appeared he was the one with the real answers.

“All in good time,” Tavor said, his attention on Sandy and the wizards. “Now isn’t the best moment to get into all that.”

The light genie settled back with a scowl, crossing his arms over his chest as he watched Tavor affect the wizards’ memories. Of course the universal would want to keep his plan to himself, even from other genies.

The light genie’s eyes once again caught on his master’s earnest gaze as he remembered his thought that someone like her didn’t belong with Tavor, but she was currently stuck with him—along with several other genies. Whatever Tavor’s plans and whoever this woman really was, the light genie hoped he wouldn’t regret joining them.