

# Illan's Perspective of Meeting Ali

*from The Glittering Gems Episode 3*

By Nicole Eatough

## Chapter One

### **Thursday, November 3**

Illan sat in a chair outside the professor's office, wearing his human guise as he waited for his master along with his brothers. Ryker McMichael liked to have Illan pose as his human assistant because he felt it made him look important, but didn't actually like the inconvenience of hauling a human assistant around.

Though if Ryker and his triplets had any brains—which they did not, even between the three of them—Illan would be present in their current meeting with their contracted worker. Professor Treen had been hired to improve the design of the machines used by the McMichaels in their arctic drilling. Illan could offer valuable feedback in whatever progress the professor had made, while the triplets would understand none of it.

Of course, Illan would offer no such help since *he* was behind the current drills' subpar performances due to Ryker's poorly worded wish. But the fact still stood that Illan would be far more useful in that meeting than any of the triplets.

His mind strayed from his minor annoyance when a young woman with long dark hair standing several inches shorter than his five foot seven approached Professor Treen's office. She raised a hand to knock on the door before appearing to hear voices inside. She lowered her hand

without knocking, her shoulders slumping. Given her age and the backpack hanging from her shoulders, she must attend the college.

“Sorry,” he apologized on behalf of the triplets, since they would never have the grace to. “Are you one of Professor Treen’s students?” If so, this woman had a far more valid reason to be here than the McMichaels. They had shown up unannounced and off the schedule they’d set up in their contract to demand Treen move up the timeline of his work.

The woman turned, revealing that she had dark blue eyes and an open, innocent face.

“Yes,” she sighed, slumping into a seat next to Illan. After a moment, she slowly raised out of her slump into a more proper sitting position, eyeing his own perfect posture. “I’m supposed to meet with him in ten minutes.”

“Sorry,” he apologized again. “Professor Treen works as a contractor for my employers. They arrived this morning for an impromptu meeting that may go long.” Because Treen likely wouldn’t take well to them demanding to change the terms of the contract simply because it suited what they wanted, and they would not back down from their demands. Several Society members resembled overgrown spoiled children used to having all their demands met.

The young woman’s face fell at his words, a disproportionate reaction to her being late to or missing a standard meeting with a professor.

“Is something wrong?” he asked. He probably could not provide true aid, but he could grant her a listening ear. It was the least he could do for her education being interrupted due to the selfishness of the McMichaels.

“It’s fine.” She played with the zippers of her backpack. “I’m just not looking forward to this conversation.”

He raised his eyebrows, some of his sympathy for the young woman evaporating. “Poor

class performance?"

Her back straightened immediately as she sat tall. "No." The word came out almost a command. "A disagreement about a grade."

"Mm." Though he had little exposure to the wider world, he'd detected a strong trend toward humans disavowing themselves of any personal responsibility. And he could not respect anyone unwilling to own up to their own mistakes or faults, such as performing poorly in class and believing that should be excused for one thin reason or another. It was a sign of poor moral character.

The young woman shifted toward him, clasping her hands in her lap. "Are you familiar with the principle of the equilibrium of forces?" she asked.

That was an intriguing start to a conversation. He nodded. "I have some familiarity with the concept. Equilibrium occurs if the forces acting on an object are exactly equal, therefore resulting in no net force acting on the object."

"Great. That was the topic of our assignment. More specifically, focusing on concurrent force systems, parallel force systems, and nonparallel, nonconcurrent force systems." The woman then launched into a discussion of equations along with applicable real-world examples.

He listened attentively, feeling chagrin at himself for his quick judgement of this woman as she thoroughly demonstrated she had a firm grasp of the topic. Eventually, his mouth curled into a small smile, her enthusiasm over the subject warming him.

"I owe you another apology," he said at the end of her small lecture. "It appears there may indeed be a misunderstanding regarding your assignment. I hope you resolve the matter satisfactorily." He knew nothing of Professor Treen, but hoped the man was smart enough to understand what a bright student he had in this young woman.

She glanced at her watch. "Thank you. I was hoping our meeting would be quick."

Illan sighed, glancing at the professor's door as he heard raised voices. "I fear you may need to reschedule. My employers are forceful about getting their way and don't believe in leaving until they've done so." He looked back at the woman. "I am sorry their selfishness has put you out, though I enjoy meeting someone who prioritizes her studies."

"Studying is why I'm here."

He almost smiled again. It was always enjoyable to meet a sensible human. "You'd think most students would attend college to study, yet many abandon that in the pursuit of other endeavors."

Her eyes lit up. "Right?"

She looked as though she wanted to continue the conversation, but flinched suddenly, clapping her hands over her ears, as though she'd just heard an unbearably loud noise. He reached for her to ask if she was all right when she leapt to her feet, knocking his hand away in the process. He froze as she stumbled back, looking down at him with wide, frightened eyes.

What had just happened? They'd been having a nice conversation when something suddenly changed for her. Perhaps she struggled with some form of mental instability? Maybe that was why she'd gotten a poor score on an assignment where she clearly understood the material. How unfortunate. Though he didn't want to make another assumption about her when he'd already made one and been incorrect.

"Miss? Are you all right?" he asked slowly, hoping to avoid upsetting her further.

"Sorry," she mumbled, shifting her head so her long hair covered her face as she grabbed her backpack. "I just remembered I have a test to study for. I can't wait around for Treen."

The excuse seemed thin, but he'd still had a pleasant time speaking with her. "It was nice

meeting you.”

She gave him a jerky nod, still avoiding his gaze. “Sorry,” she apologized again, spinning around just as Professor Treen’s office door opened.

## Chapter Two

Though the door had opened, the three idiot brothers were clearly displeased with how the meeting went. They crowded the doorway with matching glares across their identical faces.

“We’re not finished, Treen,” Ryker warned.

“Until I’ve met with my student and held my classes for the day, we are.” The professor stood behind the brothers, his arms wide as he attempted to usher them out the door. “You should have given me more than thirty minutes’ notice of your arrival.”

The young woman froze, her grip on her backpack straps tightening. “Actually, this sounds important. We can discuss my assignment later.” Her words didn’t match her attitude from earlier. She’d seemed terribly put out over delaying her meeting with her professor.

Ryder gestured to the young woman with a look clearly stating that Treen should listen to the one talking sense. Though Ryder only felt it was sense because it matched what he desired.

“I am a teacher first,” the professor declared, reaching around the triplets to grab the woman and pull her into his office. Illan would have thought more of the professor’s actions if he did not look as though he was using his student as a shield to push away the McMichaels. “And I believe in honoring my commitments.”

“What about your commitment to us?” Rylan asked. “We’re paying you to develop a better design for our drills.”

“Which I’m doing,” Professor Treen snapped, his grip tightening around the young woman’s arm in a way that made Illan frown. He was manhandling her. “Our contract lists the deadline as a year from now. I’d be happy to show you my progress *with* an appointment.” With

that, he slammed the door.

“We’re not leaving!” Rylan shouted at the closed door. “We will finish this discussion!”

The professor, of course, did not respond. The triplets gathered in the other chairs outside the office, grumbling under their breaths with the occasional threat thrown in. Their patience would not last long, and Illan doubted whether Professor Treen would indeed make it to all his classes that day. But . . . he frowned at the door, more immediately concerned for the young woman he’d been speaking to. Would she be okay with the professor?

#

Unsurprisingly, the triplets lasted less than half an hour before they began pacing in front of the door. They would burst into the room at any moment, but Illan wasn’t sure he minded in this case. Shouldn’t the girl’s assignment score be cleared up by now? Unless she did have mental impairments making the situation more difficult.

Disgust filled Illan when Ryker spun toward him with Illan’s aquamarine held in his hand. “Go inside your gem, Genie. Now.” Illan stared at his master for only a moment, then complied before Ryker forced him to. This was not a good sign. If the triplets wanted Illan with them, that meant they planned to use force to get the outcome they desired. Illan just hoped the young woman would not get caught in the crossfire.

With his gem on his master’s person, Illan heard what followed.

“You’ve had enough time with your student, Treen,” Ryder declared as they barged through the door. “It’s our turn.”

“What the hell happened?” Rylan asked.

Illan froze inside his gem. Why was one of the three idiot brothers asking that? Was the woman okay? Did her professor do something to her in his anger over the triplets’ sudden

intrusion into his day?

He breathed easier when he heard the woman's stuttered response. "I-I don't know. We were talking, and he collapsed. I was about to call nine-one-one."

Was it terrible of Illan that he felt no sympathy for the professor? Perhaps he was a good man, but that was difficult to believe of anyone who willingly dealt with the McMichael family. Better something happen to the professor than the studious young woman prioritizing her education.

"We heard yelling." Ryder threw the words like an accusation. Illan would have been baffled at the insinuation that a small young woman could possibly do anything against the tall, well-built professor if he was not intimately familiar with the stupidity of the triplets. He did not call them the three idiot brothers for nothing.

A hint of disbelief entered the woman's voice. "Because he collapsed. I yelled for help."

A few moments passed before the woman asked, "Is he okay?"

"I'm not a doctor," Rylan snapped. "But he's got a pulse." Meaning the youngest triplet had knelt beside the professor to check for one. Illan was marginally impressed he'd known how. Unless Rylan was just faking he knew what he was doing and made up an answer. That sounded more plausible.

"So, he just collapsed?" Ryder demanded.

"Yes," the woman answered slowly, clearly confused since their conversation had already covered this point. He pitied a bright woman like her having to deal with these three, but there was nothing he could do to help.

"A young, healthy guy like him?" Ryder pressured.

"Being in shape doesn't mean you're healthy if you have genetic conditions or eat



poorly,” the woman replied.

Illan closed his eyes in defeat as he felt Ryker pull out the aquamarine gem. Using his ice against the professor to force him to agree to the triplets' demands would have been one thing, but now they would force Illan to use his magic against this innocent woman simply because Professor Treen's body picked an inopportune moment to collapse.

“Come out, Genie,” Ryker ordered.

Illan heard the young woman speak as he left his gem in a swirl of ice flurries.

“What's going on?” she asked. “Why are you doing this?”

“We don't buy your story,” Ryder sneered. “Treen was fine ten minutes ago, and we need his help *today*.” His tone turned cruel. “So, we'll see if we can't get a different version of your story out of you.”

“He was talking about stress when I walked in.” The young woman sounded desperate now. “You probably set off a heart attack or something when you yelled at him. What could I do to someone his size?”

Illan finished forming the next moment. Since Ryker openly stated he was summoning a genie, Illan came out visible to the young woman. He found himself in an exceedingly crowded office. Ryker and Ryder stood in front of the closed door while Rylan blocked the room's only window. Professor Treen lay collapsed in front of his desk—which surprised Illan. Why wasn't the man behind it like he should have been? The young woman stood with a tense, nearly hunched posture to the side of the desk.

But the most shocking sight of all had Illan blinking to keep his expression neutral. Rajan, the McMichael's missing fire genie, stood in a corner of the room, his gaze nervously moving between the three triplets. Illan's mind rapidly replayed the woman's odd behavior from

earlier: clapping her hands over her ears as though to protect them from a loud sound, and then her sudden desire to leave. Both could be explained by Rajan realizing members of the McMichael family were present and yelling at her to remove herself from the situation as quickly as possible. If that was what happened, the fire genie had, unfortunately, spoken too late.

Regardless, Illan needed to focus on the situation around him rather than being confronted with this shocking mystery. Rajan had, impossibly, been stolen from a master who was very much still alive, and somehow he was now with this earnest woman? Illan never would have taken her for a genie master.

The woman in question stepped back at the sight of Illan, her eyes wide with shock. Clearly, she recognized him from their earlier interaction. Which mean she knew enough about genies to know they had human forms.

She shot the fire genie a subtle glare, something Illan only caught because he knew Rajan was there. Clearly, she hoped to keep her genie a secret from the McMichaels. A wise course of action, though Illan wasn't feeling nearly as partial to her now that he knew she was a genie master.

Rajan shrugged at her look. "I've never seen his human form before. I didn't recognize him at first and then wasn't totally sure it was him. Humans have doppelgangers, right? Genies do too."

"We're aware of Treen's pastime with his favorite students," Rylan said with a smirk, drawing Illan's attention away from Rajan. "Our contract with him unofficially includes making any lawsuits from unhappy female students disappear. He got handsy, and you . . . did something."

Illan briefly closed his eyes, horrified at this new level of depravity from the triplets. He

may not be nearly as fond of this woman as he was a few moments ago, but no woman deserved treatment like that. So he was still on her side against the McMichaels, but that didn't change the fact that there was very little he could do for her under their present circumstances. Though perhaps the professor's collapse wasn't quite so innocent if Rajan was behind it, but it sounded as though the professor deserved it.

"What?" she demanded, her voice challenging as she moved so she could see all three triplets. "You think I did what? Professor Treen is almost a foot taller than me and could still play football for the college team. I couldn't do anything to him! He collapsed."

"Why don't we see what Treen has to say about this?" Ryker declared with an air of superiority. "Genie, I wish for you to wake up Professor Treen."

Illan sighed. "I am an ice genie, Master. As I was the last time you made a non-ice-based wish. Medical aid is not my specialty."

"Actually, you might be able to help, in this case," Rajan muttered, confirming that he did have something to do with the professor's current state. Illan ignored his words. If Illan didn't know he could help, then the magic binding him to Ryker would not force him to act.

"Shut up!" Ryker growled, a blush infusing his face. "I wish for you to freeze the girl."

The woman glanced fearfully at Rajan. The fire genie's eyes widened in panic—as though he cared what happened to this woman—before hardening as he crossed his arms over his chest and turned away. "You wanted to prove you can handle things alone, right? Here's your chance."

That was an oddly cryptic statement. Had this woman not wanted Rajan's help with the professor earlier? But how could that be when Rajan could only act based on her wishes? Unless her wish had been too open-ended. Either way, Illan did not have nearly enough information to

feel any relish over harming this woman. He gave Rajan a hard look, wishing the fire genie was a little more invested in the situation. Then Illan told the woman, "My apologies," before fluttering his fingers at her.

Since Ryker's wish was hardly specific, Illan's magic merely covered her with frost. She shivered, wrapping her arms around herself, but did nothing more.

"What the hell was that, stupid?" Rylan shouted by the window. "We gotta tell you how much ice to coat her with? Give her frostbite! We wanna see limbs turning blue!"

Since Ryker had not given another wish and Rylan was not Illan's master, Illan did nothing.

The woman gave a small whine of fear as she backed up toward a wall, glancing at Rajan again, who was still turned away from her. But . . . she wasn't making a wish. She had a fire genie perfectly capable of defending her against ice magic right here, and she did nothing. Illan's reluctance to hurt her grew. Her relationship with the fire genie appeared complicated, but it also did not appear to include force.

"What are you looking at?" Ryker demanded, staring unseeing right at Rajan. "You think you can escape through a wall?" He smacked Ryker's chest. "Do the wish right."

"Shut up," Ryker snarled, shoving his brother. "Genie, freeze her for real. Make her limbs fall off."

Illan met the woman's fearful gaze with his own eyes full of regret. That wish was too specific for him to twist it to her benefit. Well, it would be once Ryker realized he needed to make it be a wish.

After several moments of Illan standing there, Ryker let out a string of curses. "Stupid genie. I *wish* you would freeze her limbs until they fall off!"

When Illan raised his hand the next time, the woman dove and rolled. His magic hit a metal filing cabinet instead, covering it in a thick layer of ice.

“Perhaps you might wish for help?” He suggested mildly. This was a small office, and she would not be able to avoid him for long.

“Oh, no, she doesn't believe in wishes,” Rajan grumbled. Illan blinked at that intriguing, though vague, revelation. What did Rajan mean by that?

“I can handle myself,” the woman snarled fiercely, which did nothing to clear up Illan's question.

“What the hell are you two talking about?” Ryder shifted a confused glance between Illan and the woman as she dodged another attack. “Genie, shut up.”

“Now is not the time for prideful displays,” he chastised her. No matter how capable she was, she would not last much longer. She needed Rajan's help. “Or for showing off acrobatics.” She had cartwheeled to avoid his latest attack, and though her dodging ability was impressive, the office was becoming increasingly frozen, leaving her fewer and fewer places to go.

“Pride isn't the issue.” Her eyes slide to Rajan. “This is about protecting more than myself.”

Illan's breath caught. She wasn't using Rajan's magic to help her not because she wanted to deal with Illan's attack on her own, but because she was protecting the fire genie, who still held himself tense, from being revealed to the McMichaels. Loyalty from a master toward a genie was exceedingly rare. Illan himself had not experienced it for several centuries.

His jaw tightened as he fought Ryker's wish. Inevitably, his arm still rose, trembling as he tried to push it back down. His fingers jerked, rather than fluttering like they normally did when he performed magic. Fighting wishes was painful, but for a master loyal to her genie, Illan

would fight this wish with everything he had.

“Hold still, girl!” Rylan snarled as the woman continued to successfully dodge the ice attacks. Illan fighting the wish gave her a few precious seconds to get away each time.

But it could only last for so long. A lamp on the table burst from the cold, shattering glass across the wood.

“Catch her, Genie!” Ryder yelled. “We’re blocking the exits and you’re still this pathetic? No wonder our ice drills are failing. We got a defective genie.”

“Hey!” the woman yelled, seemingly offended on Illan’s behalf. With that one word, Illan felt jealous over Rajan having her for a master. She appeared both loyal and protective—on top of being intelligent. What else was she like?

“I’ll hold her,” Rylan growled, pulling Illan from his thoughts as Rylan stomped toward the young woman.

She moved as if to dodge, but her foot caught on ice covering the floor, and she slipped. Rylan reached for her, perfectly positioning himself such that he was between Illan and her. Triumph filled Illan as he fluttered his magic, casting his ice with full force. Nearly instantaneously, ice inches thick covered the triplet’s arm.

Rylan pulled back with a howl of pain, his brothers’ shouts, both at each other and at Illan, filled the air. There may have been wishes mixed in with the yelling, but Illan could not make out their words well enough to tell, and if he could not hear a wish, there was no compulsion to fulfill it.

With the brothers in chaos, they’d left the window unguarded. Sadly, Ryker realized it the moment the young lady did. As she lunged for the latch, he yelled, “I wish that stupid girl couldn’t escape this room!”

She yanked herself away just in time as Illan's ice covered the window in a thick layer, a similar barrier covering the door as well.

"Genie, I wish you would remove the ice from Rylan's arm!" Clearly, Ryker's younger brother was a lower priority than allowing their captive to escape, but Illan complied with the wish, satisfied at the bright red covering Rylan's arm as he held it protectively against his chest.

With any luck, the triplet would suffer frostbite. And the McMichaels no longer had a universal genie to heal such injuries. At that thought, Illan's brain stuttered for a moment. Rajan went missing a mere two weeks after Tavor, and it was theorized that the thief who'd taken Tavor also took Rajan. Could this woman have both Rajan and Tavor?

Ryker's next words, spoken through gritted teeth, spilled all thoughts from Illan's mind. "Forget learning about Treen. Genie, I wish you'd put an icicle through her heart."

With the young woman trapped behind Treen's desk and surrounded by ice, Illan still had no choice but to summon an ice spear aimed directly at her heart.

## Chapter Three

The icicle flew through the air before abruptly melting into a harmless puddle that splashed the young woman's shirt as Rajan stepped in front of his master. Illan wasn't sure whether he or the young woman was more relieved by Rajan finally entering the fray. And Illan did not miss that Rajan had acted *without* a wish.

Rajan made himself visible to the other humans in the room as he declared, "Sorry, Girlie, but I can only stand your 'I'm so much better than magic' attitude for so long." He flexed his hands, summoning flames. Again, Illan did not miss Rajan calling her by a title that was not Master. Illan dearly wished for an opportunity to learn what their relationship was like.

The brothers gasped at the sudden appearance of their former fire genie.

"Ra—" the woman began before cutting herself off. Illan froze. Had she been about to say Rajan? Impossible. She couldn't know the fire genie's name. It must have been something else.

When she spoke again, she said, "You didn't have to show yourself, Flame." Her use of a nickname for the fire genie did not convince Illan that she hadn't been about to say Rajan's real name before stopping herself in time. Illan knew Rajan was impulsive, but was that really to the point where he would share his name with a human?

"I'm no coward." Rajan glared at his master over his shoulder, flames covering his clenched fists. But even from here, Illan made out a fine tremble shaking his arms. His master really had been seeking to protect Rajan by leaving him out of the fight

"That's Tyler's fire genie!" Ryder yelled, pointing at Rajan before glaring at the fire



genie's master. "Hand over our property."

"He's not property," she snapped.

"Wait." Rylan held up his hands, though couldn't quite withhold a wince at moving his injured arm. "I didn't hear her wish." A surprisingly intelligent assessment coming from one of the triplets.

Rajan smirked. "That's right. Didn't you hear the girl? I'm no one's property. I'm a free agent." He rolled his wrists, and the fire in his hands grew. "And I don't like your attitude." He flung his hands forward, and the fire sprang at the triplets.

Illan wasn't sure if there had been a day in his life more shocking than this one. Rajan had basically declared he had free rein. Illan knew such a thing was theoretically possible, but had never seen it. Maybe this woman did deserve Rajan's true name.

Sadly, before the flames reached the three idiot brothers, Ryker screamed, "I-wish-you'd-protect-us-from-the-flames!" The words were barely intelligible, but enough for Illan to throw up a thin frozen barrier in front of the triplets. It melted upon the flame's impact, dousing the brothers in warm water.

"She's the freak from the museum!" Rylan pointed a shaky finger at the girl. "I heard Santiago talking about it. She shouldn't have been able to steal Tyler's genie, but she did. She came here to steal our genie! She's got weird magic!"

"I didn't know you'd be here," she snapped. Her attitude from earlier attested to that. "Even Professor Treen didn't know you were coming. How could I have?"

Suddenly, Rajan perked up, turning toward his master. Before he could speak, Ryker yelled, "Genie, I wish you'd freeze the fire genie!"

Illan sighed, shaking his head. It was a futile wish, but at least it meant Illan could leave

the woman alone for now. This time, he didn't fight the wish, raising his hand on his own and fluttering his fingers to send frozen flurries to whirl around Rajan in a tornado. The fire genie flung his arms out, burning the flurries away—and nearly catching his master.

“Be careful!” she cried, backing up toward the frozen window.

Rajan seemed oblivious to her concern as he studied Illan. “Girlie? Speaking of weird magic gives me an idea. Try to take our cold friend's gem. Which is an aquamarine, by the way.”

“Why?” She glanced toward Ryker, though Illan studied the fire genie in return as though he'd lost his mind. What nonsense was this? As he wondered, he idly fluttered ice magic toward Rajan, which the fire genie easily deflected.

“Meh.” Rajan shrugged. “We'll see what happens.”

“Nothing, Flame. Nothing will happen,” the woman said. “He's with his master.”

Illan arched his brow at the master showing more sense than the genie. But with this particular combination, perhaps Illan should not be surprised.

Rajan shrugged one shoulder. “I had a master. I think someone else is at play behind the scenes.”

Illan's magic faltered at those words. Neither Rajan nor this woman knew how Rajan had been taken? How was that possible?

“Screw this.” Rylan shook Ryker's shoulder. “If we kill the girl, we get the fire genie!”

“Not if she has a contract, moron,” Ryder argued. “But maybe the fire genie can't use his magic if we knock the girl out.” He smacked Ryker's chest. “So, take care of it.”

Ryker growled under his breath, but still said, “I wish you'd knock the girl out.”

“Only if you can get through me,” Rajan snarled, getting more serious with his magic as he threw up a wall of crackling flames. So Rajan was as interested in protecting his master as she

was in protecting him.

After a few moments, the woman appeared from behind the fiery wall. Since Illan still had a wish to attack Rajan, he got to prioritize that wish over knocking the woman unconscious.

Only giving Rajan his partial attention, Illan watched the woman with curious concern as she lunged for Rylan. He winced as she eventually ended up in a scuffle with Ryder—who, like all the triplets, was much bigger than her. Illan held his breath when one of the brothers wrapped his arms around her waist and yanked her away, and she let out a shriek. But it wasn't quite a shriek of pain. It included at least a note of triumph.

## Chapter Four

Through some impressive maneuvering and heavy elbowing, the young woman ended up free of all entanglements with the triplets. She now stood with the desk and Rajan at her back, Illan's aquamarine in her hands.

She looked so pleased that pity filled Illan as he told her, "That won't work." He couldn't help stealing a glance at Rajan, since the fire genie had been stolen. But surely that wasn't from this woman simply grabbing his gem.

Ryker spoke up next in a cold voice. "Genie, I wish you'd kill the girl."

Illan stopped breathing as no compulsion to follow the wish filled him. He felt . . . nothing. Meaning that Ryker was no longer his master. The young woman was. A small rush of pleasure filled him that he would get to experience for himself what type of master she was, though a bigger part demanded to know *how* this had happened. Could it possibly be Tavor, if he was indeed with this young woman? Could a universal genie accomplish such a thing?

"Genie," Ryker repeated, an edge of hysteria entering his voice, "I wish for you to kill the girl."

Illan turned just his head to stare at his former master as Ryker repeated his wish a third time, screaming and swearing like a child unable to control himself. He kept screaming as Illan turned away, ignoring him.

Despite Ryker's words accomplishing nothing, this still didn't feel real. So raising his voice to be heard over Ryker, Illan asked, "Miss? Would you make a wish?"

She shook her head, her expression firm. "Oh, no, I don't do that."

“I told you, she doesn't believe in them,” Rajan said, his tone smug. “And I told *you*, Girlie, that this was worth a try.”

The woman seemed to relax at Rajan's words, before looking behind Illan and screaming, “Look out!”

Illan stepped aside as Ryker foolishly lunged forward, seemingly attempting to punch Illan in the face. Ryker tried to turn to match Illan's new position, but slipped on a patch of ice and tumbled to the floor. Rylan and Ryder stepped forward as though wanting to help their triplet, but stilled as they stared at Illan. They were not nearly so eager to yell and hurl insults at him now that they did not control his gem.

Then the woman spoke words that stole his breath away. “I grant you free rein. I won't make wishes, but I grant you free rein with your magic.”

He felt a moment of concern that she would trust him so easily. Granting free rein to genies could be dangerous—hence why he had never seen it done before. Though if she could grant it to a genie like Rajan and be fine, perhaps she had a reason for her confused confidence.

Abandoning their brother, Ryder and Rylan spun toward the door, clearly far less confident about their ability to survive Illan having free rein. But the door was still covered in a thick layer of ice.

“That was your wish,” he reminded them, giving them his full attention as blue flurries gathered at his fingertips. “To trap the young miss. One must be careful to avoid becoming caught in one's own trap. But you three aren't known for your caution.”

From behind him, his new master blurted out, “Please don't kill them.”

He turned to her, and Ryker lunged at her the same moment, dragging her to the floor before wrapping his hands around her throat. “You stole my genie!” he screamed. “Give him

back!”

Illan threw a barrage of icicles at his former master's back, though only covered his back in ice rather than piercing his skin with the barrage. That might be a little gruesome for this new master, since she had just asked him not to kill any of the three idiot brothers.

Ryker shrieked at the cold—and perhaps a bit of pain—as his hand went to his back, trying to pry off Illan's icicles.

His master scrambled backward, her eyes wide. Once she was safely out of the way, Illan manipulated the ice on Ryker's back to trap his arms in ice instead, incapacitating him before doing the same thing to his two brothers.

Illan gestured to Ryker. “You plead for the lives of men such as these? They are sycophants, surviving on their family name alone. Though I don't know your situation, you may be safer if these three die. As you humans say, dead men tell no tales. They've discovered you have the fire genie. You—or someone you're working with—have accomplished the impossible. And gained very powerful enemies in the process.” Her request that they live was either very naïve or very generous. Or perhaps it was a mixture of both.

She released a short, hysterical laugh. “If I put my own safety above everything else, I wouldn't have genies for roommates. I'm just trying to get a mechanical engineering degree. Aiding and abetting three murders wasn't really on my to-do list for the day.”

He tilted his head. “You stole a fire genie to aid you in gaining an engineering degree?” Even if she didn't believe in wishes, she still had Rajan in her possession.

She groaned at his words, dropping her face into her hands. “No, that wasn't—”

A deep, accented voice outside the room cut through her words. “Sirs? Are you in there?”

Illan winced, stunned he'd forgotten the triplets had brought along their genie wizard

Santiago. No matter how shocking the day had been, there was no excusing that. He should have insisted they leave the moment his new master got ahold of his gem—as well as insisting they kill the three brothers to keep his new master safe.

## Chapter Five

The thick layer of ice around the door vanished, no doubt as a result of Santiago's wizard spells. The next moment, he kicked down the door.

The triplets began clamoring the moment Santiago entered the room, each trying to tell the story of what had happened and demand that he fix it. It was impossible to tell how much Santiago understood of their babbling, but one of the first things he did was dissolve the ice imprisoning their arms. The next moment, the three of them scurried behind Santiago's impressive bulk.

This was not going to end well. Illan looked to Rajan, expecting to find the fire genie as anxious as himself. Instead, Rajan stepped around the desk, hatred making his eyes glow dark red. "I've been hoping to run into one of your kind." Fire snaked around his fingers as he spoke. "How perfect that you're the first. Let's see what my magic can really do against a wizard."

Then he unleashed his flames with an explosion that had Illan moving to stand protectively in front of his new master, his arms held out to block any heat from reaching her.

Santiago stood still until the fire nearly reached him, then he suddenly spun out of the way, shoving the triplets down as he moved. The fire smashed into the brick wall of the office before dissipating.

An intrigued sound escaped Illan. Why had Santiago avoided Rajan's attack when genie magic didn't affect wizards? His master answered that question the next moment, lifting onto her toes to whisper, "We've learned genie wizards are less resistant to genies performing magic with free rein than genies performing wishes. At least, that's the case for universal genies."



Her words were enough to distract him from the sensation of her breath brushing his ear, and he whipped his head around to stare at her with wide eyes. Universal genies. Did that mean she did have Tavor?

But Illan had more pressing issues than wondering where the missing universal was. Like seeing if his magic worked on this wizard. Turning his head back around, he stalked forward.

“What’s going on here?” Santiago asked, standing in front of the triplets. They sat huddled on the floor, seeming unsure of what to do next.

“We told you!” Ryder yelled. This girl stole—”

Santiago interrupted, his voice deep and harsh. “I was not speaking to you.” Ryker’s mouth hung open at the wizard’s tone, while Ryder snapped his mouth shut, his jaw tight.

Illan deigned to answer only because he enjoyed the wizard’s obvious discomfort over the situation. “As the three idiot brothers have said, I now belong to the young miss.”

Her voice came from behind him saying, “Oh no, thank you. I don’t really want you.” Illan, along with Rajan and Santiago, turned to give her stunned and confused looks. Didn’t want him? She stole his gem. Perhaps she hadn’t realized it would work, but . . . she’d still done it. “I’m sure you’re very nice. Actually, you seem quite nice. I think we’d get along. But I didn’t come here for another genie.”

“Then why did you come?” Santiago demanded, suspicion filling his eyes.

“You are so rude,” Rajan declared, hands on his hips. “Do you treat every genie you meet this way?” Every genie. How many genies had she met? Just Rajan, Tavor, and Illan? Or were there more?

“Yes, yes I do,” she declared without shame. It almost made Illan smile—if not for the fact that they were talking about him belonging to this young woman and her not wanting him.

They'd gotten along quite well when they spoke to each other earlier.

Santiago paused at Rajan's words, though kept one eye on the young woman. "You speak as though taking the ice genie was unintentional. And the fire genie insinuates he was also an unwanted acquisition." He narrowed his eyes. "You have stolen two genies from their masters, one who was engaged in a contract. Impossibilities do not happen by mistake or coincidence."

Illan's master responded in a wry voice. "You'd be surprised."

"Enough," Rajan growled before swirling his arms to loop fire around Santiago. This time, the wizard immediately launched into a counterattack, so Illan added his magic to Rajan's.

When Rylan made a dash for the door, Illan flung out a hand to blockade the doorway with ice again. He could not have the McMichaels running off to tell anyone about what happened here.

Suddenly, Santiago drew in a sharp breath, his eyes darting to Illan's master. "You've made no wishes." He blocked another attack from Illan. "What have you done, child?"

## Chapter Six

The fight continued with neither side making headway, even when Rajan launched a fire tornado while Illan attacked with icy spikes from above.

“Enough,” Santiago growled before he switched from the defensive spells dispersing their attacks to an offensive spell.

Illan stumbled against the desk as pain crawled through him, every muscle in his body twitching like it wanted to escape him. Air fought to make its way to his throat, making him cough as he glared his hatred at the wizard for causing them this pain.

“Flame!” Illan’s master yelled, running to Rajan’s side. She knelt beside him, but he brushed her off with an impatient jerk as he rose to his knees. There it was again. A sign that this woman sincerely cared for Rajan.

When Santiago next spoke, he used a gentle tone, though kept up his torture spell. “You are far out of your depth, young lady. You are an outsider who does not understand the danger you’ve encountered. Or the danger you may unleash.” He spread one hand in a peaceful gesture. “I ask that you listen to what I have to say.”

Still next to Rajan, she stared up at the wizard. “The last genie wizard wanted to talk too. Right up until he decided it was easier to kill me.”

“You are a pawn of the universal genie,” Santiago claimed, his voice still gentle. “Genies are incredible beings—with dark tendencies. You’ve no idea how manipulative they can be, or how far they’re willing to go to get what they want.”

Illan’s master slowly rose to her feet. “You mean like murdering innocent people? Lying,

cheating, stealing, kidnapping—all on the McMichaels' orders, of course.”

Through the haze of pain, Illan registered she was defending genies. How much did she know about their world? At least a bit, if she'd already encountered another wizard. Which, presumably, Tavor had dealt with since this woman had known universals with free rein could use their magic on wizards. Her perspective on Society masters wasn't wrong, but she was overestimating genies.

But it was still pleasing to see the burning judgement in her eyes as she condemned a wizard, whose kind went around pretending they were saints while preaching that genies were dangerous beasts. “How many people have died by the McMichaels' wishes? Brandon spoke as if genies are monsters I can't comprehend. But actions speak louder than words, and the only monsters I see are the masters you *choose* to serve. Or are you going to tell me everything the McMichaels have done is for the greater good and not their own greed?”

“What our family does with our property is our business, you stupid girl!” Ryker yelled. “It has nothing to do with you or anyone else. We *make* the rules of what's right and wrong. Not some stupid politician who doesn't even know what really exists in this world.” His words, more than anything, proved her point.

Slowly, Santiago turned his head to give Ryker a murderous glare before turning back to the young woman as she continued talking.

“I appreciate you not outright lying about the McMichaels' intentions, but it's hard to believe your claims of the dangers of genies when the only ill they seem to do is the result of their human masters' wishes.”

During her impressive tirade, Santiago stopped casting his spell. Illan took slow breaths, trying to regain control of his body without attracting attention. Rajan recovered first and

launched a fire attack that Santiago stopped. Illan threw ice at the wizard next. They needed to bombard him such that he couldn't do anything but defend.

Illan mentally cursed when he heard yelling and looked to find his master engaged in another scuffle with the triplets. This time to get their cell phone, which was a wise course of action, as it would be very, very bad if one of them managed to get a call out. But she was one young woman against three broad adults.

When she ended up—yet again—in a chokehold from one of the triplets, Illan aimed ice spears next to their heads. They jerked away from her with terrified yelps.

“No killing,” his master rasped, barely audible before she repeated louder, “No killing!” Santiago and Rajan both paused in their fighting.

“Is that a wish?” Illan asked. Clearly, it hadn't been, but that didn't mean she hadn't meant for it to be.

“No.” She still lay on the floor from her recent tussle. “It's a request.”

Illan and Rajan couldn't focus on their fight as they needed if they also had to worry about their master. Turning a cold gaze on Santiago, Illan warned, “I'm going to restrain your charges. If you remove my magic again, I will maim them.”

This time, Santiago held still as Illan covered the brothers in ice, despite the triplets' screams and threats toward him.

Finally, Santiago snapped, “I am saving you. The ice genie follows his word. You're too stupid to sit still, so being encased in his ice will ultimately protect you.”

At least Santiago was wise enough to realize that. Illan kept his ice going until it covered their mouths, finally silencing them, though he left their noses clear.

Rajan broke their unspoken stalemate first, throwing fire Santiago's way. The wizard

cursed as he leapt aside.

“Ali,” Santiago said. Illan frowned at the name. Ali? Where did Santiago get that from? Then Illan realized Rajan must have said it, and Illan missed it due to the chaos going on. So her name was Ali. “You have a strong moral compass, but you are ill-informed of this world. Brandon was in the wrong attempting to kill you. But I ask you—was the universal genie in the right, murdering a young man who felt he was doing his duty?”

“Self-defense isn't murder,” she argued, confirming that Tavor was indeed in her possession. “The universal killed Brandon to save my life. And I wonder if you would still say Brandon was in the wrong if you held the superior position now. Because Brandon was all smiles and help right up until he tried to kill me. Kind of makes it hard to believe what you say.”

“Right,” Rajan snarled. “I'm sure you'd love to get her alone.”

Undoubtedly, Santiago would kill her the moment he had an opportunity, no matter what pretty words he spoke. But the wizard didn't give up easily.

“I merely wish to speak with you without the influence of genies.”

“But how could I trust you wouldn't attack me without them there?” Ali asked. Illan hoped she was just seeking to distract the wizard and was not seriously considering his proposal. She answered his unspoken question the next moment when she suddenly dove between Rajan and Illan, shoving her shoulder into Santiago's side.

The wizard let out a surprised “Oof!” before stumbling to land on one of the many bits of ice covering the ground. A foot slid out from under him, and Ali immediately pressed her advantage, shoving the wizard to the floor as she trapped one of his arms with the straps of her backpack and grasped for his other arm.

When he fought her, she called out, “Flame! Do your smoke inhalation thing!”

Rajan followed her words, crouching by Santiago's head. Gray smoke rose up before funneling into the wizard's nose and mouth. He grunted once, attempting to buck Ali off, before he fell limp.

Rajan and Ali's eyes met in a moment that felt too intimate for Illan to intrude on as Rajan quietly said, "We make a good team."

"Yeah," their master agreed. "We do."

Despite Illan's thoughts about not wanting to intrude, there were more pressing matters. Kneeling next to her, he gestured to Santiago's arms as he asked, "May I, Master?"

She released the wizard's arms, sitting back to give Illan room. "Please don't call me master. My name is fine, if you're okay with that."

"As you will," he agreed before binding Santiago's arms behind his back with ice.

"We'll hand him off to Tavor," Rajan said. So she knew the universal's name as well. That was even more shocking. But if Tavor had trusted her with his name, no wonder Rajan had.

"Right," Ali agreed after a moment's hesitation before her eyes went to the three idiot brothers. "What should we do about them?"

"I can freeze their memories to the day before they came to Horton," Illan offered as he stood. He couldn't help staring at them like they were worms he'd rather dispose of. But if his master preferred handling this peacefully, he would accept that. "They'll have no recollection of coming here or losing me."

"So you'll wipe their memories of the past few days?" Ali asked.

"No, it is not a memory wipe." Illan held his hands over Ryker's and Rylan's heads as he performed his magic. Their eyes rolled back in their heads before their eyelids slid shut. Ryder, the last triplet, made muffled noises against the ice covering his mouth, which did nothing to stop

Illan from performing the magic on him as well. Soon, his eyes drifted shut too.

“The memories are merely frozen, making them inaccessible,” Illan explained. “Another ice genie, a fire genie, or a universal genie could all recover frozen memories.” He smiled. “But the McMichaels have recently lost those three genies. They will know something occurred. They will be missing memories and a genie, but they’ll have no means to recover the memories.”

“With masters losing their genies, The Society might force other families to help the McMichaels find their genies,” Rajan warned, standing and holding a hand down to their master.

Their master accepted his help, rising with a stumble.

Illan shook his head at Rajan's words. “Losing a universal genie who is between masters is humiliating. Losing two genies *with* masters is dangerous. I do not know if anyone outside the McMichael family knows of your loss, but I doubt it. The McMichaels will try to resolve this internally. Otherwise, they’ll be called too incompetent to hold seven genies.” If this knowledge became public, it would endanger their status as an upper-echelon family within The Society.

Rajan smirked. “Since they’re now down to four, I’d say they are.”

“They’ve held six for centuries,” Illan pointed out dryly.

Their master looked confused. “Six?”

“I am a recent acquisition for the McMichaels,” Illan explained. “I came to them a few years ago.”

Illan smiled as he was finally allowed to turn his full attention to his new master.

“Though now that I no longer belong to the McMichaels, formal introductions are in order.”

Standing straight, he placed a hand over his heart. “I am Illan, an elemental ice genie, and I am pleased to come under such a wise and compassionate master.” If Tavor and Rajan trusted this human with their names, then he did too.



“Ali,” she gently corrected. “My name is Ali.” Her voice turned dry as she added, “And Rajan and Tavor are my roommates, not my genies.”

Illan eyes warmed. So this woman indeed had intriguing relationships with her genies. He could not wait to learn more. “Miss Ali, then.”

“There’s still the pervert professor to deal with, you know.” Rajan crossed his arms over his chest and scowled.

“Right!” Miss Ali exclaimed, turning to the professor who still lay in a heap. It was astounding that he hadn’t gotten hurt during the fight, though his office had not survived nearly as well. It was alternatively scorched, singed, frozen, and sopping wet.

“This place is a mess,” Miss Ali muttered, seeming to wonder how she could fix this situation. Illan didn’t see why it should be her responsibility. She had been the last person the professor saw before passing out, but Illan could easily fix that by freezing his memories. Before he could suggest that, she spoke up again.

“Don’t you think an unstable professor who trashes his office would be considered a danger to the school?”

That was a much better idea for how to handle this. If they could remove Professor Treen from his position where he could prey on young woman, that would be best for everyone. “Quite. Both to the school’s reputation and to the students.” He smiled at Miss Ali as he said, “You and I witnessed Professor Treen’s tantrum when the McMichaels terminated his contract for subpar performance. It was terrible to see a grown man so fiercely lose his composure.”

Pleasure filled his chest when Miss Ali beamed at him over his words, and he ignored Rajan grumbling under his breath that Illan was sucking up.

## Chapter Seven

Illan followed Miss Ali in his human form to the office of the engineering department head to find the man leaving.

“Excuse me, Professor.” Miss Ali twisted her hands together as she spoke. Illan couldn't quite tell if she felt she should look nervous or if she was genuinely nervous. But given the earnestness of her reactions to things so far, he suspected the latter. This was not a woman used to deceiving others, even for a good cause. “Can we speak to you for a moment?”

“I have a meeting.” The professor spoke in an abrupt, precise tone. “I will be available in ninety minutes.”

“I'm afraid this matter requires immediate attention,” Illan pressed. “I am Ian McClellan, an employee of the McMichael Conglomerate's drilling division.” He pulled out a business card showing his pretend human credentials.

The professor stared at the card without taking it. “I fail to see what the McMichael Conglomerate has to do with a college professor.”

Illan raised his eyebrows, filling his expression with a calculated mix of concern and skepticism. Unlike his new master, he had plenty of experience manipulating others. “Are you unaware that your employee, Jacob Treen, is a contractor for our company? Many businesses require their employees to disclose other work obligations, though perhaps colleges differ in that.”

The man glanced at his wristwatch. “I am aware of Treen's extraneous employment. If you have an issue with Professor Treen's performance, or feel there is a conflict of interest, that

is a matter to discuss with him, not his employer.”

“You misunderstand my concern,” Illan said.

Miss Ali held up her phone, displaying a picture of what Treen's office currently looked like. “The McMichaels fired Professor Treen for a breach of contract. I was supposed to meet with him around the same time. When he heard the news, he freaked out. This is what he did to his office.”

The professor finally showed some emotion, his eyes widening as he gave the picture a double-take.

Illan delved further into their lie. “My employers left to manage the legalities of officially terminating their contract. I felt it was my duty to inform the school of Treen's behavior, and this student offered to bring me to you.”

Hesitantly, Miss Ali added, “Professor Treen demanded I meet with him over a poor score, but I'm doing well in my other classes. I asked to see the assignment, and he refused to show it to me unless I met with him.”

Illan fought not to narrow his eyes at that news. He hadn't known the full situation around why Miss Ali had needed to meet with her professor. Thank goodness she'd had Rajan with her.

The professor seemed to have a similar reaction, his lips tightening and his eyes darkening. He hesitated before asking, “Was this the first time he coerced you into meeting with him?”

“It wasn't the first time he tried.”

Illan released a slow breath, briefly regretting their plan. While Professor Treen needed to be removed from his position giving him easy access to young women that also put him in a

position of authority over them, their plot to get him fired was far too kind compared to what the man deserved.

“Is he still in his office?” the department head asked.

“He was when we came to find you,” Miss Ali truthfully answered. They had left him unconscious. Rajan would not wake the professor until they arrived with the man before them now.

The department head gave a single nod before striding away with a curt order for them to follow him. Illan shared a look with his new master before they hurried along.

When they arrived at the office, the department head stopped abruptly, leaving Miss Ali to jerk to a halt. Momentum kept her teetering forward, and she waved her arms to stop herself from falling into her professor's back. Illan caught her shoulder with a gentle hand to steady her.

The resulting conversation sickened Illan, when it became clear the school was aware of accusations against Treen, but had done nothing due to the charges being cleared in court. No doubt because of the McMichaels and their money. However, the conversation went the way they'd hoped, and Illan was not surprised when the department head referred to Miss Ali as a star student. He looked forward to hearing more about her academic career.

After a short argument with Professor Treen, the department head gave Illan and Miss Ali a clear dismissal, and they gladly took their leave, Rajan trailing along behind, invisible to everyone but them.

#

Once they were around the corner from the professor offices, Miss Ali sighed. “I can't believe I missed a class. At least the professor did too.”

Rajan shook his head in disgust. “You are unbelievable. We faced down a pervert, the

McMichaels, and a genie wizard, and you're concerned about missing a class."

"Each class session has value," Illan argued. Of course a serious student would be upset about missing a class, regardless of the circumstances. "Proper students build upon their studies in each session, and to miss one is to miss a building block in one's knowledge."

Miss Ali gestured to Illan with a vindicated expression. "See? He gets it. He would have been interested at the museum." She paused as she thought something over, though Illan wondered what she meant about the museum. "Is Illan the genie you talked about that day? The one who likes logic?"

Rajan crossed his arms and scowled. The fire genie seemed upset about something, though Illan couldn't imagine what.

"Yes," Rajan finally admitted, glaring at Illan as though he'd done something offensive.

Miss Ali's eyes lit up as she turned back to Illan. "Would you want to know whether it was a mammoth or a mastodon about to skewer you?"

Illan looked between the pair, hoping for further explanation. He was clearly missing important background information around the significance of this conversation. Since Miss Ali appeared to be waiting for a response, he slowly said, "Yes, though I am aware of the differences between the two species."

Rajan laughed at his baffled look. "The story of how Ali and I met is way more interesting than how you two met." His lip curled into a sneer. "Though I suppose a college campus is fitting for the two of you."

Ah. The fire genie was jealous of Illan. With the apparent quality of this master, Illan did not blame Rajan for not wanting to share. But his sympathy for the genie didn't stop Illan from smiling at their shared master. "I look forward to hearing the story of your meeting—as well as

Tavor and Miss Ali's story.”

Mis Ali shook her head. “Oh, it isn't much of a story. Echoing Tavor's words, I just have rotten luck.”

While he did not doubt her belief that she had poor luck, he very much doubted that the story of how she came to gain a universal's trust enough to learn his name would be boring. “We shall see. Before that, I will return the triplets to their New York home.”

“By appearing them there?” she asked.

He shook his head. Clearly, she had a limited understanding of genie abilities, but Tavor and Rajan had not been missing for long, so perhaps she'd had only a limited exposure to their world. “Elementals are limited to appearing at their master's side and at their home. I will turn their molecules to ice and fly them to New York. It won't take long.”

Concern filled her eyes. “You won't have trouble finding us after?”

He gestured to her backpack. “So long as you have my aquamarine, I will find you. And so long as you are my—pardon the term—master, my gem will always return to you.”

He nodded to the two of them, wanting this task over with so he could begin his life with this new master. “I will retrieve the brothers and be off.” He reverted to his genie form before entering the closet where they'd stashed the three idiot brothers along with Santiago.

He stared at the trio for only a moment before working his magic. Though he would have much preferred to leave them with injuries, it was best to leave no traces of an attack. The longer it took them to realize Illan was gone, the better.

## Chapter Eight

When Illan arrived at his master's home, he somehow found himself in a cave of alternating brilliant colors of green, red, purple, and blue. The colors could not be real, which finally allowed him to realize that Miss Ali's home was probably not a cave, but instead eccentrically decorated. If Rajan had free rein, presumably Tavor did as well, so perhaps this was Tavor's style rather than their master's. Illan hoped that was the case.

On the ground lay the unconscious Santiago, his arms still frozen behind his back. Tavor, Rajan, and Ali stood around him.

Turning his attention to the universal, Illan caught him raising an eyebrow at their master. "Again, Ali? This is becoming a habit."

She studied Tavor before asking, "Did you do something to make this happen?"

That question made Illan stare at Tavor as well. He did not see how a universal could accomplish stealing genies . . . but nor could he fathom how else he and Rajan were here now.

Tavor's eyes went to Illan. "Were you under contract?"

He nodded. "Yes. I was to make the McMichaels' arctic drilling operations a success." He tilted his head. "And then the impossible happened, and I came under Miss Ali once she obtained my aquamarine."

Tavor put a hand to his mouth as he studied Illan. What was going through the universal's head? Illan dearly wanted to know, but knew better than to ask.

"Tavor." Miss Ali's voice held a hint of impatience. "Did you do something to me?"

Tavor turned back to her before spreading his hands helplessly. "This is uncharted

territory, Ali. I know impossible things have happened since you gave me free rein, but I couldn't have intended to accomplish what I believed inconceivable." He opened his mouth, then seemed to reconsider. "I've done nothing on purpose. I need more time to think before I can answer any questions." Illan wondered how true that was. What had Tavor been about to say?

Tavor's gaze strayed to Santiago's form, his orange eyes glinting coldly. "I will try to answer your questions, but we have more immediate concerns."

Miss Ali clutched her hands together, her eyes full of worry. "Do you plan to kill him?"

Her words reminded Illan that Tavor had apparently already killed one wizard. He could not imagine this one coming to a different end. Even if their magic worked on wizards with free rein, this was not a situation similar to Illan affecting his former master's and his brothers' memories. Who knew how well something like that would work on a wizard?

Tavor's cold eyes warmed as he looked at Miss Ali. "Only if I have to. This time, we have three genies and we're not in immediate danger. Perhaps between the three of us, we can figure out another solution."

She blew out a relieved breath, her eyes briefly closing. She was a gentle soul to want Santiago left alive when he would have killed her if given the chance.

"Although . . ." Tavor trailed off, frowning at something across the room. It took Illan a few moments to realize it was an oven clock, confirming that this bizarre room was the work of magic. "You have another class this afternoon, don't you? Do you plan to miss it?"

"No." She looked at her watch.

"We'll handle things here, Ali," Tavor said gently. "You have other responsibilities, and this shouldn't be your concern." Tavor was right. Wizards were only imposing on Miss Ali because there were genies in her life, and she clearly didn't have enough knowledge to know



how to deal with them.

Still, she hesitated, her eyes straying to the unconscious wizard on the floor.

“Go to class, Ali,” Tavor encouraged. “We’ll talk on Saturday.”

Rajan turned to Illan. “Weekends are for magic talk, because weekdays are for school.”

“Sensible.” Illan gave an approving nod. Magic and genies were doubtless quite a shock for Miss Ali. It was good that she was still prioritizing her studies.

“Okay,” Miss Ali finally agreed, giving them all one last look before she left.

The moment she was gone, Rajan asked, “So we’re not going to kill him?”

“What?” Tavor asked, seeming thrown by the question.

Rajan gestured to the genie wizard, his lip curled in disgust. “Him. We’re really not killing him?”

“Of course we’re killing him. What idiot would leave a genie wizard alive when there’s another option?”

“It would be foolhardy to allow him to go,” Illan agreed. “Any magic to bind his tongue or memories, or make him disappear from The Society’s clutches, may go awry. Though I appreciate our ma—Miss Ali’s attempt to resolve problems without violence.”

“Right,” Tavor said. “But first”—he placed a foot on the wizard’s shoulder and pushed him onto his back, pinning Santiago’s frozen arms beneath him—“we’ll have this fine fellow answer some questions.”

Tavor then used his magic to force the wizard awake. Santiago gasped, then choked, his eyes taking in his surroundings as he coughed. He stilled upon spotting the three genies surrounding him, but it was, unsurprisingly, the universal who captured his attention. Tavor gave him a dark smile, though Santiago only stared stoically back.

“Good morning,” Tavor sang, seeming quite cheerful at having a wizard at their mercy. Not that Illan blamed him. “Though I suppose ‘good afternoon’ is more appropriate.”

Santiago narrowed his eyes. “This . . . freedom of yours . . . is temporary, Universal. The McMichaels will never stop hunting you, and you will never be free. You’ll only lead to the death of an innocent girl.” He sneered. “Though I suppose your kind never feel remorse for manipulating the innocent. My words are wasted on a vile beast like you.”

“You wound me.” Tavor put a hand to his chest. “Every choice Ali has made, she made on her own. She values independence, both hers and ours. I would never disrespect her wishes—she leaves them as choices, not orders.”

Tavor crouched down, propping his arms on his bent legs. “But we’re not here to discuss our master. We’re here to discuss you and your friends. You can choose to tell the truth—or I can force it out of you.” He smiled. “The same way I did with your little apprentice. Brayden? Benjamin? Whoever he was. He fought hard to resist me—but a universal given free rein is just too much for the likes of you.”

Santiago’s eyes twitched before he growled, “Abomination.”

“Your apprentice said the same thing! I feel like I should give you a treat—though I suppose he should have gotten the treat, since he was the good little minion parroting his mentor.”

Santiago glared, and Tavor shrugged. “You know what? I take back my offer. I’m just going to force the truth from you after all.”

With a flick of Tavor’s fingers, orange streams of light spun in the air before dashing into the wizard’s eyes, nose, and mouth. Santiago slammed his eyes shut, holding his breath and locking his lips together. It seemed the magic was a struggle for Tavor, but he eventually got the

answers he wanted out of the wizard. When the conversation ended and the universal raised his hands to kill Santiago, Rajan stopped him, requesting to do it instead.

Before Rajan could strike, Santiago rushed to say, "This is not the end. Pride may have been mine and Brandon's downfall, but there are plenty more to take our place. You and the girl will fall by sheer numbers if nothing else."

Illan's heart fell at the wizard's words. As happy as he was to come under this master, the wizard was right. They could only hide from The Society for so long.

"Enough of this," Tavor declared, gesturing for Rajan to make his move.

"Don't worry." Rajan idly let fire twirl through his fingers, his eyes dark. "I'm not looking to torture you—your death will be way more merciful than what you did to me. A weak mortal like you would have died five times over if you experienced the same pain you put me through, but I'm not looking for revenge. I just want to be the one to end you." He threw his hands down and fire erupted around the wizard, the edges burning white.

Illan stepped back, shielding his face with his hands from the fiercely burning flames, though he was curious about the outcome. If Rajan could kill a wizard with free rein, then so could Illan. That was important information to know. Perhaps if they killed enough wizards sent their way, The Society might decide recovering the three of them was more trouble than it was worth.

Santiago screamed, but it cut off abruptly. True to his word, Rajan killed him quickly. The flames died down to reveal a blackened carcass, frozen in the position he'd died in.

All three stared at the deceased wizard, a solemn silence blanketing the room. A genie taking the life of a wizard was something Illan never thought he would see.

Raising his gaze to Tavor, Illan asked, "Is it truly because of the free rein Miss Ali gave

you that you're able to transfer genies to another master?"

Tavor raised his eyebrows. "Free rein is the only difference here, right? It must be. We're still learning the limits of our abilities when given free rein."

"Are you using the girl?" Though Tavor had given Miss Ali his name, he was still a universal. It was difficult not to believe that Tavor had some scheme and Miss Ali played a part in it.

Tavor narrowed his eyes as he studied Illan. After a few moments, he relaxed. "Not maliciously. I trusted Ali enough to give her my name, and she chose helping me over the riches and ease the McMichaels offered her. I won't allow her to be harmed."

"Just think of this like a vacation." Though Rajan's words were flippant, his tone carried dread, likely over the thought of how soon this might end and how messy that end might be. The fire genie's actions that day clearly showed how much he cared for their master.

"Is that all?" Illan looked between the two genies. Surely Tavor's only aspiration was not to stay away from the McMichaels for as long as they could manage.

"No," Tavor said. Rajan gave him a double take, seemingly stunned by the universal's response. "Now that I know we can gather genies under contract, that changes things."

Rajan crossed his arms over his chest and faced Tavor. "Changes things how? What are you planning?"

"I'll share when my plan is more fully formed," he brushed off. "I've only had a few minutes to process this." He waved his hand, sending Santiago's burned body away before he rose into the air, crossing his legs and making himself comfortable. "Now, tell me what happened this morning."