

Ocean's Perspective of Meeting Ali

from The Perilous Gems Episode 5

By Nicole Eatough

Chapter One

The water genie stood tall in front of his master as they waited in Alexander's favorite study behind a desk. His master had received word that the thief targeting the McMichaels had just stolen the light and plant genies. Since Alexander was a cautious man, he had roused all his genie wizards from sleep and prepared the water genie in case the thieves struck here next.

The water genie was as baffled as everyone else as to how genies with masters were being stolen and wizards were being outwitted, but the thefts ended here. He would not be taken.

The base of the office was a pleasant place to wait, with the dark wood flooring, austere bookcases, tasteful furniture with filigree patterns, and a gloriously old-fashioned writing desk far better than those found in modern businesses. The life-size statues filling the room were another matter, but it was not the water genie's place to judge his master's tastes.

They did not have to wait long until the motley crew appeared, a young human woman of short stature with long dark hair accompanied by the universal, fire, ice, light, and plant genies. The water genie sniffed at the disgraceful sight. What was one human doing with so many stolen genies? She would lead herself to ruin in mere days with her reckless and foolish actions.

"So, you have come," the water genie declared. His master had been wise to prepare so

quickly. The human woman jumped, her eyes going to the many statues before finally settling on him and Alexander.

“What deplorable behavior,” he continued, gazing at his former companions with disdain. None of them looked unhappy to be with this genie thief, as they should. He could have forgiven them if they showed remorse for their current predicament. Instead, they all looked like they were on a mission. Willingly. Except the plant genie, but he always looked vaguely unaware of his surroundings. “You’re no better than a ragtag group of vagabonds, running about abandoning your proper masters for some slip of a child.” His gaze settled on the thief—she did not deserve the title of master—his lip curling. “Genie hunters are disgraceful. Humans of such poor character, you ought to be locked in stockades for all others to mock and disparage. Stealing genies from their masters is an abhorrent disgrace.”

“This is what you meant by the water genie being *difficult*?” the woman demanded, rounding on her allies. “Because he won’t *want* to come?”

“Want to?” He sniffed. “No respectable genie would *choose* to associate with a genie hunter.” Tavor had the others had given her a very foolish view of genies if they’d led her to believe he would welcome her presence.

“Why are we here, then?” she asked, her voice pitched high. The water genie thought this was a fair—though confusing—question. If *she* was asking that, Tavor must be leading the charge on all these impossible thefts. The water genie should have known. This genie thief was a hapless human who’d stumbled under Tavor’s control.

“Some genies do hold this attitude,” the ice genie said calmly. “I’d heard the McMichaels’ water genie felt this way, but wondered if I could be wrong.”

The water genie glared. *All* genies should hold the same attitude as him. He and those like

him were the sane ones among the deceitful, volatile race known as genies. He had spent very little time near the ice genie, and was disappointed to discover he was as foolish as the rest of the McMichael genies.

“He’s confused.” Tavor spoke in a light tone, but stood tense. He was, of course, on alert for a trap since the water genie and his master had been lying in wait. “Genies who feel this way have basically been brainwashed. It’s a coping mechanism for their lot in life. Terribly sad to see, but I’m sure the water genie will overcome it in time.”

Overcome it in time? Meaning Tavor had some longer-lasting plan than a mad grab for all the McMichael genies followed up by some quick scheme to take down the McMichael family. The universal delighted in causing the downfall of Society families. The water genie had mistakenly assumed—just within the past few minutes when he realized Tavor was in charge of this operation—that was the point behind Tavor’s current actions.

Garan nodded at Tavor’s words as he looked at their thieving master. “I think he’ll be happier with us. Flowers flourish when they’re not choked. Water too. He’s all dammed up here instead of flowing freely. He just doesn’t understand that.”

The water genie spoke in a cold voice, doubly insulted at the empty-headed plant genie criticizing his beliefs. “I’m perfectly capable of understanding my position. It is all of you who don’t understand your proper place in this world.” He paused, then stared down his nose at Garan as he added, “And dammed waters serve a myriad of useful purposes.” They were a great blessing to humanity—as were genies who knew their place.

“Enough talk,” Alexander said in his nasally voice. He stepped partially out from behind the water genie to speak. “I know what you came for, but you’ll never get *my* genie. I’m not a complacent fool like the rest of my relatives.” Staring at the genie thief, Alexander lifted the

water genie's sapphire and dropped it into his mouth.

The water genie kept his face carefully blank at this disrespectful—no, clever—treatment of his gem. It was safe now. However Tavor was stealing genies, surely it involved the gems somehow. Now the thief could not get his sapphire.

His master laughed while the thief gaped at his actions. “You’ll never get my sapphire now, hunter. Nor will you leave here alive.” He laughed again as he stepped behind the water genie.

It was the signal for the wizards hiding in the room to make their move. The water genie looked down at the ridiculous group as he declared, “Each of you deserves what happens next.” If they’d sought to serve their masters properly and faithfully, they wouldn’t in in this situation.

Following his words, wizards stepped out from behind the plethora of statues, furniture, and bookcases filling the room, prepared to subdue their enemies.

Chapter Two

“Wizards!” Rajan snarled. He crouched down, flames enshrouding his fists. The water genie narrowed his eyes. The genie thief was clever enough to give her genies an open-ended wish before they arrived. Unless Tavor was the one who recommended it.

“There’s too many!” Tavor whirled toward the thief, yanking her close before they and the rest of the genies vanished from the room.

The water genie’s master sauntered toward the intercom in the office alongside a computer screen showing various camera feeds around the house. “You’re not getting away,” he sang into the system after checking the screen to verify their location and pushing a few buttons. “You’re in my lair now. By nightfall, all of you will be mine—the dead hunter I’ll turn into a stuffed trophy to show off to all my relatives how superior I am.”

Still speaking into the intercom, his master looked at him. “Genie, I wish you would keep all our guests inside the house.”

The water genie gave a single nod before raising his hands, summoning a torrent of magic water to cover all the inside walls of the large home. If Tavor and the others truly wanted to escape, this would not keep them here. And if they were set on their goal of stealing him, they would remain on their own, making his efforts doubly unnecessary. But he did not tell his master that.

After staring at the magic through the camera feeds with a satisfied expression, Alexander went back to the intercom. “If that wretched hunter can accomplish the impossible and steal genies, so can I. I’ll take back all our genies and rule over the family like I should,

rather than being relegated to the background for being the son of a mistress.”

The water genie fought a frown. Owning more than two genies was not legal within the Society. Its rules and laws kept a necessary order. But perhaps the water genie's master only intended to keep Tavor—because nearly all masters desired universal genies above any other—plus one other genie, while dispersing the rest back among his relatives.

“All I need to do to prove my superiority is torture one little girl to find out how to get the genies back.” Alexander cackled. “I'll try to make sure she's not too physically broken, so she still makes a nice trophy.”

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The water genie's master moved the two of them plus a wizard to what Alexander referred to as the interrogation room, a space with metal floor, walls, ceiling, cabinets, and table. The only non-metal material in the room was the wooden chairs. The metal, while gleaming in a way the water genie suspected his master appreciated, was there for easy cleanup.

His master rubbed his hands together. “Genie, I wish you would bring the genie thief here. The wizards should have separated her from *my* genies by now.”

Nodding, the water genie waved his hands, his magic seeking out the woman. He'd checked the camera feeds alongside his master earlier and knew approximately where she should be. He felt when his water located her and began the process of turning her into water molecules so he could bring her here.

He returned the thief to her normal form in a corner of the room, where she dropped to her hands and knees, shivering and gasping for breath. She looked even smaller in this position. That did not concern Alexander as he stalked past the water genie, stopping beside the thief before kicking her ribs.

She grunted, falling to her side and looking up into the face of the McMichael.

“Is this insignificant girl really the thief everyone’s so terrified of?” Alexander asked.

“Ethan said the thief was a young girl,” the wizard in the room said, blinking his good eye at the thief. His other eye was blind, though the water genie did not know what had caused the injury. Likely an altercation with a wizard since genies—normally—couldn’t harm wizards. Ethan had warned Alexander that these genies could, which was why Alexander’s wizards were taking all precautions with them.

“You have experience getting people to talk, yes?” the water genie’s master asked the wizard. “You used to be Rand’s enforcer.”

“Yes,” the wizard confirmed. “I helped Rand obtain information from stubborn people when he did not have a genie to help things along.” That news made the water genie wonder if perhaps a vengeful human was responsible for the wizard’s damaged eye. He did not feel as much sympathy as he perhaps should. Torturing humans was . . . weak and lazy. Information could be obtained in far more clever and reliable ways. Which was how genie’s clever minds should be put to use, rather than scheming against their masters as so many chose to.

“Good, good.” Alexander walked to the other end of the room, his attention focused on one of the cabinets as his wizard followed him.

The water genie kept his attention on the thief as she pushed herself onto her hands, looking around the room. She stared at the water genie before turning her attention to his master and the wizard, flinching as they pulled something out of a cabinet and spoke in quiet murmurs.

She looked so young. Was she even an adult by human standards yet? He banished those thoughts from his mind, especially when he realized she was trembling in fear.

“This is a direct result of your actions,” he told her in a haughty tone. If she was not

stealing genies, she would not be in this precarious position. She willingly made the choices that brought her here—even if Tavor's manipulations were involved. “Barreling into a home in the middle of the night to steal property that isn't yours. What shameful behavior.”

“Because torturing young women is a sign of sterling moral character?” she retorted, her eyes challenging.

His mouth tightened. “Genies are entrusted to masters, whom they are then obligated to serve. It is the natural order of things, our very purpose in life. It is a perversion of that natural order to steal a genie from their proper master.” She had to be stopped, he reminded himself. Or who knew how many genies she would steal and for what purpose. His eyes flashed to his master before he added, “And it is not a genie's place to question our master's actions. Our role is to obey.”

He added those words in a moment of weakness. But some part of him wanted this small, frightened young woman to know that it wasn't *his* decision to give her greater harm than her actions warranted. Because it was not his place to make those decisions.

“Okay,” she said quietly, then repeated it again. “Okay, serving faithfully is the life *you* want, but is it okay to force the other genies to serve if they don't want to?”

His eyes narrowed. She was talking about the other genies. Had Tavor convinced her they were on some righteous crusade? “They are children throwing tantrums. Irresponsible, juvenile, and capricious.” They would find so much more satisfaction in life if they just accepted that they were meant to serve.

She stared up at him with piercing blue eyes, looking surprisingly fierce for being on the floor and still shivering. “You think it's juvenile, irresponsible, and capricious to not want to murder children simply because it's your master's desire?”

He wished she was speaking of a hypothetical situation, but was painfully certain she wasn't. Just because it was a genie's duty to serve did not always mean it was a pleasant one. But all duties in this world came with positive and negative aspects. However, a young woman searching to help others was vastly different than the power-hungry genie hunter he'd had in mind, so he softened his voice to say, "A genie's only concern should be their master's wish, nothing beyond that."

"Do you approve of me being tortured simply because you disagree with me taking genies who wanted to be taken?"

He stared wordlessly into her eyes. It would be a betrayal of his master for him to honestly answer that question. Just because she was ignorant and the other genies were selfish did not make her guilty of a great crime.

"Stop talking to my prisoner," Alexander snapped as both he and the wizard turned toward them.

The water genie stood back as his master smiled widely and the young woman flinched.

"Why don't you have a seat?" Alexander suggested in a falsely polite voice as he patted a chair. "It'll be so much nicer than having my friend drag you over."

The water genie tensed before saying, "Information given under torture is highly suspect." There would be no value in torturing this woman—including for his master.

He ignored the woman looking at him with wide, stunned eyes as he continued. "Humans have a tendency to say whatever will stop the pain. It's not reliable, and we have no guarantee that this woman is the cause of all these impossibilities."

He looked down at her with an unimpressed stare to emphasize his words, which he fully believed were true. However genies were being stolen and wizards harmed, this woman was not

responsible. "As you said, she is but a slip of a girl. It seems unlikely that she has overturned millennia of collective knowledge of both The Society and genies in learning how to steal genies directly from their master. This woman may be just a pawn of the universal genie. He was taken first, yes? And everything else—the impossibly stolen genies and the attacked wizards—followed."

Pleasure filled Alexander's face as the water genie continued his justification for leaving the human alone, "Perhaps the universal genie has always known how to take genies from their masters and was biding his time until he found a pawn he felt he could sufficiently manipulate." It was believable.

"Fine, fine," Alexander agreed cheerfully. "We'll torture the universal instead."

"No!" The young woman leapt to her feet, horror on her face. The wizard stepped forward and she, thankfully, froze.

Alexander waved a hand toward her. "Tie her down and let her watch. I'll enjoy seeing her expression as I learn the secrets that will take all her stolen genies away."

Her face paled, though the water genie felt a brief moment of relief that she would remain unharmed for now. As well as a flare of jealousy that she was so concerned for the wellbeing of a genie under her.

Chapter Three

The wizard tied the young woman to a chair before leaving to retrieve Tavor. She sat silently, though Alexander chuckled under his breath occasionally in a rather juvenile fashion to keep his captive frightened.

“Sorry for all the waiting, hunter,” Alexander said. “I guess that makes me a poor host, not having everything ready for your arrival, but you were the poor guests first, not giving me much time to prepare. All I had time to plan was the ambush, which you so graciously jumped right in the middle of. I suppose I should thank you for that. Or maybe just thank my good luck.” He snickered, then fell back into silence.

Eventually, the door to the room opened. Two wizards entered, walking backward to keep their magic-blocking spells trained on Tavor, who entered next. Two more wizards walked in after, also keeping spells on Tavor. Good. They were taking the threat the universal presented seriously.

Then the water genie's eyes were drawn down at movement from the young woman. She craned her neck to look at Tavor, her eyes full of worry. She looked as though she wanted to ensure he wasn't hurt. Then, shockingly, Tavor's eyes sought hers and did the same, filling with relief when he saw she was okay. Tavor was concerned for the welfare of a human? More than that, of his master?

Alexander cackled at the universal's appearance. “My water genie thinks you have something to do with these miraculous happenings, Universal. You're going to give me that knowledge and then put it to work in my favor.”

The young woman wrenched herself against her restraints. "Leave him alone! You have no right to hurt him!"

"Quiet, girl!" Alexander snapped. "You're ruining the moment." His lips twisted cruelly. "If you want to waste your breath, why not try a wish? Go on, see if your wish is more powerful than my wizards' magic. You thought you were clever enough to steal my genie, so let's see what you can do."

Tavor smiled with dark eyes. "No need to take drastic measures, Alexander. I'll give you the information you want freely."

The water genie frowned at Tavor disrespectfully using Alexander's name, not believing for a moment that the universal meant those words.

Alexander threw a fit over the slight against him. "You dare use my name, you inferior being? Strike him!"

The wizards' spells changed abruptly, and Tavor's back arched, his teeth clenching as a strangled yell escaped his throat.

"Stop it!" Tavor's master screamed, straining against the ropes holding her to the chair.

She was in such anguish, the water genie told her, "This is better. You are the master, not the servant. It is proper for him to be tortured in your stead." Though there was no point to Tavor's current torture, since it was for pride instead of information, it was still better that it was Tavor rather than this young woman.

When Tavor dropped to his knees, the wizards switched their movements back to their magic-blocking spells. Tavor breathed through clenched teeth, sweat beading his forehead as his body shook. Yet some pathetic beings somehow looked at this sight and felt superior for it. The water genie cut that thought off. This woman's words were infecting his thoughts, making it

harder to properly control them.

Tavor stared at Alexander with defiance that no amount of torture would change, but Alexander smirked, as though he had won some type of battle. “How is the girl stealing genies with masters?”

Tavor's defiant look melted into a sardonic one, his eyebrows lowering. “It's a simple trick. Anyone with a universal genie could do it.” He smiled, tilting his head as Alexander, standing a safe distance away, leaned closer. “All the girl had to do was grant me free rein. Why don't you find a universal genie for yourself and try it? Then you can get as many genies as you want—if you don't die a gruesome death in the first ten seconds. So, I guess you need two tricks. One is granting free rein, but first you'll have to convince the genie not to kill you with that free rein.”

The water genie blinked. Was it that simple? Well, simple was a relative term here, but . . . that would explain why no one had discovered this before now. It was not proper—and was generally dangerous—to give genies free rein.

Alexander clenched his hands, shaking as his face turned red. “You're lying,” he hissed. The water genie frowned. Tavor's explanation was perfectly plausible. It explained everything—even why the universal wouldn't bother to lie. There was no danger of The Society taking this revelation and doing anything with it. They couldn't.

“Am I?” Tavor raised his eyebrows. “Then why has this never happened in the history of The Society?” He rose to his feet, his eyes on Alexander. “Because it *can't*. No master dares grant their genie free rein. Any free rein we're granted is within the bounds of a wish; free rein to decimate enemies, to topple rivals, but never true free rein, because no master would be that *stupid*.”

The color of Alexander's face shifted to purple. "Why is she special?" he screamed, stomping his foot. "Why did she get to grant free rein and not be killed?" He whirled toward Tavor's master. "You're not special! It's a lie, a lie!" He jabbed a finger at Tavor. "Make him tell the truth! Bury him in pain until he tells me how she really stole the genies!"

The wizards changed their pattern again, torturing Tavor as the universal's master fought against her bonds.

"You can't have them," Alexander declared. "The genies will be mine. All of them will be mine. There's nothing special about you that would let you get them if I can't have them." Alexander smacked the young woman, over and over as the water genie stared at the opposite wall, not watching, but unable to drown out the sound.

A low, rumbling sound filled the room. The water genie's eyes jumped to Tavor to find the universal *snarling* as he stared at his master being harmed. Despite his pain, despite the wizards' spells, his eyes glowed bright orange. A chill went down the water genie's back. This behavior went beyond concern for a master. This was—the water genie cut the thought off. But whatever Tavor felt for this young woman was utterly genuine. And Alexander would not fare well if Tavor escaped.

Alexander, rather than realizing the potential danger, became further enraged, rounding on the young woman again. "You're not special!" he screamed as he shoved her, causing her chair to topple backward.

Which was particularly foolish, because it broke the back rungs of the wooden chair. The woman rolled away from it, her arms still tied behind her back, but her legs now free. Still on the floor, she kicked at Alexander's knee as she yelled, "Stop hurting him!"

The water genie took a step forward, then stopped. He had no wish in place, and

physically interfering in a master's matter was beyond the duty of a genie. But he still winced when a crack rang out, signaling that the young woman had broken Alexander's leg.

She gasped, clearly surprised at what she'd managed. The wizards paused in their movements, swiveling toward Alexander to check on him—and disappeared the next moment, courtesy of Tavor. His teeth still clenched in pain, the universal unsteadily rose to his feet.

Alexander wailed with pain, turning toward where his wizards had been. The wailing cut off abruptly when he realized they were no longer there. His face turned white, and in a garbled voice he rushed to say, "Genie, I wish—" But Tavor and his master vanished in that moment, leaving Alexander to break his words off in a strangled choke.

Chapter Four

Alexander had himself and the water genie retreat to a library for Alexander to rest his leg while they waited for the wizards to handle the genies. The water genie was no longer certain the wizards could manage. Clearly, all Tavor needed was a split-second of inattention to strike. But Alexander gave the water genie a wish to protect him, so the genie was prepared, if not totally surprised, when Tavor and the others entered the library along with their master.

He sighed at their appearance, guilt churning in his chest. If he had not spoken up on behalf of the genie thief, his master might not be in this predicament right now. He would have to do his best to correct his moment of weakness.

Alexander's eyes widened to near impossible proportions at the sight of all the genies as he sat on a couch, his leg propped up on an ottoman. "Wh-where are my wizards?" He spun to face Ocean standing behind him, his face pale. "What happened?!"

"Stay back," Ocean ordered, his voice a command as he stepped in front of his master. He would not allow Alexander to be harmed, nor would he allow himself to be taken. He was done with mercy and compassion. Waving one hand, he summoned a wall of water that took up the entire length of the room, rushing toward the genies on the other side. He felt the ice genie freeze the wall, but pushed harder. The ice genie was not powerful enough to stop him. Soon, he felt the light genie add his magic as well, but kept pushing against the two major level genies.

Suddenly, Alexander wailed from behind the water genie, "Poison! I've been poisoned!"

The water genie spun around, filled with horror before he caught sight of Tavor and his

master standing by Alexander. They had snuck past the water genie without him realizing it. They'd tricked him. He aimed a swirling stream of water toward them, intending to crush them against a wall. Tavor diverted the water toward Alexander with a flick of his finger.

"No!" the water genie cried, pulling the water back.

Crackling flames erupted around the room the next moment, engulfing bookcases and framed paintings in twisting fire. "You can't fulfill wishes you can't hear!" Rajan shouted, satisfaction coating his voice.

"I don't need another wish," Ocean boomed in a deep, echoing voice to be heard above the flames. "I was already ordered to protect my master."

"A master who we're not hurting!" Rajan shot back. "You don't have to fight us to fulfill the wish! You're an idiot for going above and beyond for no reason at all!"

The water genie heard the thief yelling something—probably lies—but kept his attention on the fire genie as he berated him for attacking another genie's master with no good cause. The fire genie's master was the aggressor here, not Alexander.

Suddenly, the genie hunter darted in front of the water genie, grasping his buttoned black vest in her hands as she stared up at him. "Ocean, we didn't hurt him! It's a salt mixture, not poison!"

He barely heard her words over the cacophony around them and summoned a ball of water to circle around them, both muffling outside noise and trapping her.

She froze, and he gripped her hands, pulling her off of him as he demanded in a cold voice, "What did you say?"

She stumbled back until she reached the wall of the water bubble. "We didn't poison him. We gave him a salt mixture to make him throw up the sapphire. If we wanted him dead, Tavor

would have just killed him. *His* plan was to cut open Alexander's stomach to get the sapphire. *My* plan was to make him throw up from drinking too much salt and baking soda. High sodium concentrations induce vomiting in humans.”

He fought to still stare at her coldly, but was too baffled. He absolutely believed her about Tavor. Of course the universal would kill Alexander the moment he had an opening, meaning the water genie had no choice but to believe her, but he couldn't quite follow what she'd said. Not because he didn't understand the words, but because they were so different from what he'd expected to hear.

He'd just opened his mouth to ask her to explain her plan again when Tavor appeared, his eyes glowing and livid. Of course the universal felt *he* was justified in protecting his master, but the water genie was given no such courtesy. Tavor flung his hand, and Ocean flew out of the water bubble, smacking into a wall on the other side of the room. He let the bubble dissolve as he fell to the floor, not wanting to waste his energy on it.

“I'm okay!” he heard the genie hunter yell. “He didn't hurt me.” He looked up to see Tavor's eyes still glowing with rage as he looked at his master.

“I told you not to leave my side.”

“And I told you that I wanted to talk to him!” Meaning Tavor planned to burst in here, tear the sapphire from Alexander's stomach, then spirit the water genie away. But the genie hunter—the young woman—wanted to handle things more civilly. To start, at least.

“Why don't we all take a breath and calm down,” the ice genie suggested, standing in the middle of the room. He gestured to Alexander, who the water genie saw was now encased in a light barrier. Alexander pounded at the walls while still sitting on the couch, appearing unharmed. He was yelling as well, but the sound was muffled, making his words difficult to

make out.

“Your master is perfectly safe within my barrier,” the light genie said. “Might we pretend like we’re civilized beings for five minutes?”

The water genie glared as he stood. “Five minutes. And then I’m freeing my master.” He turned his glare on the young woman. “Why are you attempting to make my master vomit?”

“Because we’ve been taking the genies by me rubbing the genie’s gem.”

He froze at those words. “*You’re stealing the gems?*” He shook himself. This wretched night had left his mind frazzled. “No, of course not. The universal gave you this ability.” Tavor had already explained that.

“Right. So, Alexander will throw up your sapphire in the next . . .” she paused to think, “. . . twenty minutes or so. But if coming with us is *really* not what you want, I won’t touch your sapphire.” Those words allowed the water genie to relax a fraction, though the universal did not feel the same.

“Ali!” he exclaimed, clearly overly familiar with his master if he was using her name. “That’s not—” He cut himself off before speaking in a silkier tone. “We’ve gone through much today to get his gem. If we leave it, we’ve endangered ourselves for nothing.”

She looked at Tavor. “Us taking the McMichael genies is supposed to be about gaining the freedom to make your own choices. If we make the choice for Ocean, that defeats the purpose of us being here.”

“Free will isn’t for genies,” the water genie declared. This human truly was ignorant and confused. But not bad. “It is not our role to decide our fate. It is not the natural order of things.”

She studied him before saying, “I’m studying to be a scholar.” She placed a hand on her chest. “I’m studying mechanical engineering, though I’m fascinated by all things science. That’s

how I knew the baking-soda water would make Alexander throw up. What I don't know a lot about is genies. Tavor hasn't been very open, and I'm at fault too. I didn't want genies and got three by accident, so I kept my focus on school like always, pretending that if I ignored the situation, it would somehow resolve itself."

She clasped her hands together, her eyes on the water genie's. "Ocean, would you be willing to teach me about genies?"

There it was again, her calling him by some name. He'd missed it earlier, too distracted by his anger. But her words didn't fully explain the situation. "How did you get three genies by accident?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Tavor was stolen and dropped on my lap. I suppose I was a convenient way to hide the evidence. I gave him free rein and he—unintentionally—did something to me." The water genie rather doubted it was unintentional. Though perhaps even the universal hadn't known about the trick behind free rein, or he likely would have attempted to convince a master to give it to him before now. "I visited a museum *for* the museum but ended up touching Rajan's ruby, and his gem became mine. Then we ran into the McMichael triplets at school, and they attacked me because they wanted to talk with my professor and he was unconscious, so Rajan suggested I grab Illan's aquamarine, since touching Rajan's ruby had made the gem mine. After that, Tavor suggested we get the rest of the McMichael genies."

The water genie regarded her curiously. That . . . was quite a tale. But he believed her. "It almost sounds as though a higher power has decreed you are to receive all these genies, if Tavor was not intentionally involved with you becoming Rajan and Illan's master."

He considered her for a few more minutes before straightened to his full height. The woman—Ali—had not sought out this life, but if it was to be hers, she desperately needed

guidance and a voice of reason in her life. "If you are to have so many genies, you should be taught how to be a proper master, especially with this disorderly gang." He placed a hand over his heart and bowed. "I would be honored to serve you if you will listen to my schooling."

With so many genies under her control, surely it was his duty to help her retain some form of order with them. And if fate had brought her to them, who was he to deny fate?

"Thank you," she said before turning to Alexander. "I guess now we wait."

Alexander's nasally voice suddenly rose high enough for them to hear, "I refuse to die of poison!" Then he shoved his finger down his throat.

Chapter Five

The water genie's soon-to-be-master understandably turned away from the sight of Alexander forcing himself to throw up the saltwater concoction she and Tavor had fed him. The water genie wrinkled his nose as Alexander deposited the sapphire onto the floor covered in bile and other things. What a deplorable way to treat a genie's home.

With the sapphire safely removed from Alexander, the light genie adjusted his barrier to put the gem outside it with Alexander still inside. The McMichael finally seemed to realize that had been the intent all along, his mouth forming the word *no* before he lunged for the sapphire. His hands smashed into the barrier and he howled in pain as he grabbed his leg.

Ali knelt next to the sapphire, though turned her head away as she reluctantly lowered her hand to slide a finger along it. The water genie couldn't help feeling some embarrassment that this was his new master's first interaction with his sapphire.

Snatching her hand away, she asked, "Was that good enough?"

"I don't know. You must make a wish for us to find out."

"Oh, no, I don't do that. How about I give you free rein instead?"

He gave his master a horrified look at such a terrible suggestion before looking at all the genies around them. "Do they all have free rein?"

"Yes."

Rajan summoned fire he then started juggling, while Garan summoned blossoming tree branches from the wooden surfaces in the room.

The water genie pinched the bridge of his nose. "Master, you have been heeding Tavor

far too much. I see we have much to cover.” Thank goodness he had decided to join her. She sorely needed his guidance and wisdom.

“My name is Ali,” she said.

He glared at her. “And using your name would be entirely inappropriate, *Master*.” With him and the other genies all under the same master, he would finally be able to lead by example. But teaching her the proper order of things came first.

“Okay,” she agreed after a moment, “but is it okay if I call you Ocean? It’s silly to call genies ‘Genie.’”

Before he could respond, Alexander began beating his fists against the light barrier, crying out that Ocean was his.

Ocean regarded him coldly. Of course this juvenile man would take this poorly. “Switching masters is part of the natural order of genies. Masters should accept it with grace, as should genies.” Alexander’s face shriveled before his tantrum continued.

The water genie—Ocean—looked back to his master, trying his best to cover up any awkwardness he felt. Alexander had chosen a terrible time to interrupt. His master had given him a name. She was the first one to do so. And it was the name of something both powerful and gentle. Something that caused unparalleled destruction as well as supported untold life. It was an honor. But she did not need to ask his feelings on the matter.

“You are the master and may call me whatever you choose. My feelings are immaterial, but . . . I am not displeased with this name.” He cleared his throat before giving her a severe look. “Now, a wish, if you please.” They still needed to ensure his ownership had properly switched to her.

They stared at each other for several moments, almost as though she hoped he might

change his mind about free rein. He would not. Finally, she sighed, pointing to his gem. “Can you—I mean, I *wish* that you would pour water over this spot right here, if you can.”

Ocean felt relief as his magic responded, confirming she was now his master, and he poured a gentle stream of water over his sapphire to clear away the nasty coating on it.

“Thank you.” She picked up the sapphire between two fingers, holding it away from herself. Yes, this was quite an embarrassing interaction between her and his gem.

“Shall we go?” she asked, turning to Tavor.

He waved a hand at them. “You all run along home. I have a few things to clean up.”

She hesitated. “What things?”

“Memory alterations, of course. We can’t leave Alexander and his wizards with memories that contradict what we gave those at the technology convention. Someone there escaped who knew the truth, but we’ll handle that.”

“Okay.” She stepped toward Rajan, and the fire genie wrapped his arms around her to appear her home. “We’ll see you soon.”

Ocean had a difficult task ahead of him, properly schooling Ali and pulling the others into line, but he looked forward to the challenge. And to spending more time with his new master.