

# DASHED

GWYNN MARSSSEN



Love is an Open Road 2015

## Table of Contents

Love is an Open Road.....	3
Dashed – Information .....	6
Dedication.....	7
Acknowledgements.....	8
Dashed.....	9
Chapter 1 .....	10
Chapter 2.....	27
Chapter 3.....	45
Chapter 4.....	69
Chapter 5.....	80
Chapter 6.....	87
Chapter 7.....	96
Chapter 8.....	104
Chapter 9.....	119
Chapter 10.....	126
Chapter 11.....	139
Chapter 12.....	147
Epilogue .....	152
Author Bio .....	154

# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## DASHED

By Gwynn Marssen

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved worldwide.

This eBook may be distributed freely in its entirety courtesy of the Goodreads M/M Romance Group. This eBook may not be sold, manipulated or reproduced in any format without the express written permission of the author.

Dashed, Copyright © 2015 Gwynn Marssen

Cover Illustration by [Jeffrey Read](#)

Cover Design by Anna 'Tiferet' Sikorska

This ebook is published by the *M/M Romance Group* and is not directly endorsed by or affiliated with Goodreads Inc.

# DASHED

By Gwynn Marssen

## Photo Description

A photograph from the chest up of a stunning dark-haired man. He has his hands behind his head and he's looking into the camera with a look that is both devious and challenging. The smirk around his lips doesn't promise much good—or a lot of it—depending on your perspective.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I admit I don't drink a lot, so last night might not have been the best idea. Everyone knows that summoning demons and alcohol is a very bad not good combo, and that Dark Entities Are Not Personal Playthings or Party Favours.*

*So, long story short, I'm now stuck with that absurdly hot guy you can see in the picture. He owns my soul and the bastard won't even tell me what I sold it for...*

*I just hope that he's not as bad as that smirk would suggest and that my story will have a happy ending.*

*Thank you and good luck, both to you and to me, Dear Author!*

*Sincerely,*

*T*

## Story Info

**Genre:** paranormal

**Tags:** enemies to lovers, magic users, psychic ability, bickering men, humor, first time, highly aggressive reindeer

**Content Warnings:** minor character death, limited graphic violence

**Word Count:** 54,059

*Dedication*

Karen, even though life kept you busy this year, this one is still for you!

*Acknowledgements*

First and foremost, I'd like to thank Tiferet for the awesome prompt and mostly the prompt picture that finally had me decide I needed to do a story this year, even though I wasn't sure I had the time or the energy to do so.

Luckily—or not, considering it took pneumonia, which made me miss about a month of work but didn't keep me from sitting on my couch and writing—I found some time. I hope you have as much fun reading this as I had writing it!

I also have to thank Tiferet for turning the picture I found into an amazing cover, thus saving me hours of frustration trying to understand software I don't have the patience for.

Then there's Donna, who brainstormed endlessly with me in the beginning of the story, making me see that an outline isn't such a horrible thing to have—especially when you're trying to write characters who don't want to keep their mouth shut and do as they are told—and who didn't get mad when I decided I needed to write this story on my own after all.

I much appreciate the help from the betas who helped me out on a moment's notice, and of course the awesome event staff who never seemed to tire of answering my stupid questions.



**DASHED**  
**By Gwynn Marssen**

## Chapter 1

So this was a hangover. A headache ranking 9.5 on the Richter scale was further aggravated by the sun doing its best to blind me. My mouth tasted like something had died in it, and my belly acted squeamish, like that same thing had resurrected in my stomach. I grappled with one hand for the pillow to shield my poor eyes and the other to find the bottle of water. It turns out you can't drink while covering your face with a pillow. Interesting.

I tried again, this time carefully removing the pillow from my mouth as I drank. The tepid water did little to take the horrible taste away but felt great on my tongue, which was doing an impression of a dried-out sponge without the ability to seep up water. I took small sips, trying to reach an agreement with my stomach to keep the water down. When the bottle was empty, I slowly—very, very slowly—sat up to take care of the next pressing issue. I stumbled into the bathroom and emptied my bladder sitting down because my legs failed me after a second or two.

God, I wished I could keep sitting here forever...

I was shivering violently before I realized I had more comfortable places to feel miserable than my freezing bathroom.

My bed, for instance. Or my couch.

Also, I needed coffee.

Barefoot and only dressed in running shorts, I made my way to the living room, aiming for my couch as a pit stop before I would continue my quest to the kitchen and the Holy Grail—coffee.

Only my couch was taken.

Not all of it. Just one seat.

So technically I could sit down.

"Ehm," I said intelligently while my head was still processing all the beauty before me. Hair, blacker than black, thick and unruly. Eyes as dark and dangerous as the night. Thick, perfectly shaped eyebrows, one of which rose up in an amused arc. Nose straight and perfect, sexy even. And I can't say I've ever found a nose sexy before. Dark pink lips, one side turned up in a smirk so devious, so delicious, that only the thought of what he might be thinking about made my stomach tighten.

“Morning,” I managed to bring out. “You’re sitting on my couch.”

*Smooth, Ciaran. Very smooth.*

The man’s eyebrow moved up a bit higher, which I wouldn’t have believed possible if I hadn’t seen it for myself.

“Who are you?” I tried again. It was a valid question, although I belatedly realized it was a bit insulting. I doubted this dark-haired stranger was used to being forgotten.

“I’m your guardian angel,” the man said with another smirk that was so devastating I decided it should be made illegal.

“You’re what?”

“Your guardian angel. You know, the ‘swooping down to save you from acting insanely stupid’ kind of angel.”

“I have a guardian angel?” Nothing I ever saw or heard pointed toward the direction of the existence of guardian angels. Regular angels, yes, but none seemed to have any interest in pulling humans away from impending doom. They usually nagged so much they could cause the doom. I nearly got myself killed once because one kept distracting me. Served me right for summoning it. Its words, not mine.

The man leaned back on the couch and crossed his legs. His smirk widened into a grin. “No, Pumpkin. But you surely need one. At least, you could’ve used one last night.”

I rubbed my face and tried to fish in the murky waters of my hurting brain to figure out what the heck happened last night. I remembered the beer. I also remembered being out of beer and moving on to a bottle of questionable liquor my sister Paige had brought back for me on a trip from Prague years ago. I could, in fact, still taste it. It was the taste of dirty armpits and rubbing alcohol, masked by a sickly sweet orange flavor. Bile rose up in my throat. I forced myself to swallow it back down. I highly doubted it would taste better the second time around.

I remembered receiving the news that a no-talented sleazebag college rival had won an Academy Award for Animated Short Film for a movie that starred a red-haired man and an annoying angel. Simon landed himself a job at PIXAR with my ideas—or better said my life—while I sat in a cubicle trying to find new and improved ways to wish someone a Happy Easter. Like anyone would ever buy a “Happy Easter” greeting card.

I remembered being very, very angry at the multiverse in general and at Simon in particular, and feeling completely and utterly sorry for myself.

Apart from that... complete and utter blankness. I certainly didn't remember going clubbing. And besides, there's no way a man this hot would agree to come home with me. A pizza boy maybe? Or could I have been stupid enough to call a prostitute? How had I even figured out where to find one?

"I'm not a whore," the man growled at me. "And I most certainly don't deliver pizza." From his tone it wasn't clear which of the two he was more insulted by.

Huh? Had I been speaking out loud? Heat crept up my cheeks, and I added looking like a tomato to the list of things—it was bound to be huge considering how much I drank last night—I did to embarrass myself in front of the hottest man ever to set foot in my apartment. Most likely the hottest man I had ever laid eyes on. I got a grip on myself and padded towards the kitchen on my bare feet. Tiptoeing around the mess of sand and molten wax on the tile floor, I congratulated myself on being smart enough not to rent an apartment with carpet this time.

I reached the kitchen, managing not to step on anything, and I downed a glass of water. Then I downed another one, while surveying the mess that I had made of my living room, trying to connect the dots.

It was useless. I needed coffee.

"Cool, make me some too. It's been ages since I've had coffee."

"Who are you again?" I asked, staring at him, trying desperately for some kind of recognition. And well... maybe a little for the pleasure of it.

"I'm still waiting for you to connect the dots," he said. "I'm quite enjoying the process. Can you make me a caramel latte macchiato? I've heard great things about them."

*He'd heard great things about caramel lattes?* "Who do you think I am? Starbucks?" I replied. "I can do regular coffee." I opened my fridge. No food. No milk. No surprise, really. "Black." I tried the kitchen cabinets, located cereal and Oreos, which were apparently the only edible things I had in my apartment. Hadn't I planned on going grocery shopping last night? What happened? "No sugar either."

"You are a horrible host." I jumped as the man's low, gravelly voice sounded right next to my ear. Another thing about him that should be made

illegal. “But I have heard great things about these too. They’ll do. For now.” He grabbed the Oreos and disappeared back to the living room. Literally. Disappeared. One moment he was standing next to me, the next he was sitting on the couch, in exactly the same position as before, only now eating Oreos—my Oreos, breakfast of champions. Or something. I was even worse off than I thought, considering I’d just zoned out long enough to make it look like he teleported.

“Try again. You really don’t do this much, huh?”

“What? Having gorgeous strangers turn up uninvited in my living room ordering fancy drinks and eating my food? No!”

Unfortunately. For a guy this hot I might be changing all the rules, though he seemed to be an asshole. And I was done with assholes.

“You think I’m gorgeous? Well, thank you. I quite like this shape as well.”

*This shape?* “What the fuck are you?”

“Finally, a halfway intelligent question. But no, I’m still enjoying the guessing game.”

“It’s too early,” I said, tapping my fingers on the counter in order to make the coffee speed up.

When it was finally ready, I tucked the box of cereal under my arm, carried the two steaming mugs back to the living room, handed one to the stranger, and took one for myself. Forgoing the couch, I sat down in the uncomfortable armchair my grandma bought me that I couldn’t throw away because she’d never forgive me. Her being dead wouldn’t stop her from making her disappointment clear. Grandma would probably employ an army of poltergeists to haunt me until I put the chair back in this exact same spot. I didn’t mind it much. After all, it was Grandma’s favorite seat whenever she visited me, which was every Tuesday evening right after dinner.

I perched on the edge of the seat, drank my coffee and looked sadly into the box of cereal. I hated dry cereal. Hated it pretty much with milk as well. Only with chocolate milk was this shit edible. I only had it because Paige kept trying to make me eat healthier.

“Can I have an Oreo?” I finally asked, realizing my stomach needed something to soak up the combination of liquids brewing in my stomach.

“No,” the man said. “These are awesome.” He took another bite, showcasing perfect white teeth and a pink tongue licking away the crumbs. I

swallowed and looked back at my cereal. It wasn't fair. It was a family pack of Oreos. And it had been full when I pulled it from the cabinet.

"Please?" I tried.

The grin appeared again. It might've been more deadly than his smirk. "No."

*Jerk!* I took a handful of cereal and went for that instead. It was the horrible healthy stuff, with fiber instead of taste. While I chewed, I surveyed the room, trying to make sense of what had happened. Candles and candlesticks were scattered around the room. Dark blue and red wax stained the gray tiles here and there. Black glittery sand was everywhere, the lines of a pentagram only just visible. Even destroyed it was obvious how sloppy my work had been. The places where the lines were wavy or even completely missing—

*Fuck!* I must've summoned something last night. I had been stupid and drunk enough to summon something while intoxicated! It was why I never drank in the first place. It didn't take much for me to make contact and urge beings into our dimension, and everyone knew alcohol and dabbling in the occult was a very, very bad combination.

"I summoned you," I stated the obvious. "I ask for your name in return for mine, demon." It never hurt to be polite to a demon. Especially if you didn't know whether the one in front of you was strong enough to burn you to smithereens with a glare.

"I already know your name," the demon answered dryly. "I know a hell of a lot more about you than just your name. I doubt you can offer me anymore than you have already given me."

"Your name in return for the Oreos you're eating," I retorted, thinking on my feet.

"What about common hospitality? Do you mortals begrudge a guest his bread and wine these days?"

"No." Actually yes, but I wasn't in the mood to start a discussion about the degradation of manners and morals in the modern age. "I am only talking about the cookies you haven't eaten yet. The ones you have already eaten are part of the hospitality agreement."

"Fair enough. My name, Pumpkin, is Dash."

"Dash?" Didn't ring a bell. Had I accidentally summoned a demon I didn't know, or had I somehow found out about Dash and decided to call him? If I'd

come across a picture of him while feeling sorry for myself, I almost didn't blame myself. Almost. Because *everyone* knew Dark Entities were not personal playthings, nor were they party favors—a lesson my sister and I had learned the hard way on her sweet sixteen.

“Anything else you want to tell me?”

“Oreos are awesome. Coffee was far superior the last time around. Of course, that was Sumatra around 1780. You Americans obviously don't understand how to make coffee. It explains the need to add caramel and large amounts of milk.”

Strangely enough I'd had this conversation before with an angel, although it referenced Italian coffee instead. Belatedly, I realized his opinion of coffee was not the strangest thing about him. “You are not supposed to be able to eat.”

“Wrong.”

“Demons don't eat.” They didn't, myths of flesh-eating demons notwithstanding. The most they could do in this world was feed on the essence, the energy, of things. Same went for angels. The angel in question had merely complained about the essence of my cappuccino, not the actual taste of it. So that ruled out angel as well.

Dash pointedly took an Oreo apart. He first ate the top of the cookie, then licked the crème off the bottom one in a devilishly seductive manner. That tongue, that glimmer in his eyes, that fucking smirk while he played me like a fiddle.

“You are right.” He popped the second half of the cookie into his mouth, winking at me.

“But... you eat.” I stammered. Damn, where were my cool demon negotiating skills when I needed them? I bet Paige wouldn't have made such a fool of herself. Not even when hungover.

“Yes, I am eating... Now, are you getting anywhere close to figuring it out yet?”

I thought for a moment and came up blank. If I could've gotten my mind working, I might've been able to piece things together from the clues he was giving me.

Dash sighed his annoyance. “Stop thinking. You're boring me. Let me help you. Last night you got drunk. You were stupid, or maybe you are always stupid, I don't know. Right now I'm keeping my options open on that one. You

tried to summon something... I'm pretty sure you weren't going for me, because I doubt anyone can be that stupid."

*What? How?* It was impossible... you either summoned whatever you were going for, or didn't make contact at all.

Dash answered my unasked question, proving my suspicion that he was able to read minds. This situation just kept getting worse and worse. "Well, you could say Downstairs is reorganizing. There's been some trouble and some lay-offs. Administration is a mess, understaffed you know. And they fired half of the IT department last week—"

"Hell's got IT?"

"Yes, of course. Who do you think invented Candy Crush? Anyway, so things are chaotic down there right now. And your request might've been forwarded to the wrong desk and accidentally landed on mine. I've always had a thing for a drunken summons, so I took a shortcut and came straight away. Be glad, with the current situation, it could've been weeks before someone might have been able to come."

"Really?" Demons were notoriously closemouthed about their home dimension, more interested in leaching whatever energy they could from our plane and amusing themselves with humans before being sent back. I always assumed hell must be horribly boring, and I had heard and seen some pretty weird things in my twenty-seven years, but hell as a bureaucratic office building?

"No way. Man, you are dumb. You must've been so drunk you messed up the summons. I was simply minding my own business when a portal opened and I got sucked through. Imagine my surprise when I got here, and there were no safeties in place, no magical container to entrap me, just a drunken idiot trying to get a favor."

*Container? Entrap?* I swore my mind made the "ding" noise signaling the connection had finally been made. "You're Djinn?"

"Bingo!"

"Fuck!" Demons could be exorcized. Unless you were a Djinn's master, they were impossible to get rid of. They were also really freaking powerful. Hence the need to entrap them, or at least make sure your ritual was as airtight as your pentagram.



“Bingo!” Dash leaned back, put a booted foot on my coffee table and popped the last Oreo in his mouth. He chewed leisurely, followed it with a sip of coffee, cringed at the taste, and smiled at me. This smile was not sexy at all. It was simply deadly, reminding me just how dangerous a Djinn could be if he wanted to.

“I think this is the right time to inform you... you sold me your soul last night,” he said almost casually.

*Okay. Wait. WHAT?*

I opened my mouth, but he shushed me. “I heard. You practically screamed it at me. Let me repeat this very, very slowly. I. OWN. YOUR. SOUL.”

“Why?”

“Because you were stupid enough to sell it to me.”

“How? I mean why? I mean for what?” The least I should’ve asked for was a superpower, or to have all my student loans paid off. Contrary to popular belief, dabbling with demons was not a quick way to wealth.

Dash burst out in laughter. “You don’t remember? Well, this thing is just getting better and better. I’m going to let you keep guessing until you get it. And no. You are still swimming in debt, and you can’t fly. Could you really wish for a more boring superpower? You guys have helicopters and planes now. Everyone can fly.”

“I can’t afford a helicopter,” I said before catching myself. This really wasn’t the best time to explain to Dash about economics and the inconvenience of commercial flight, or to argue about the coolness of superpowers. Dash had stolen my soul!

“Not stolen. You sold it. Magical contract and all. Signed with your blood and overseen by a witness.”

“A witness? Who the fuck validated a contract I signed while drunk?”

“Arashael. You might’ve accidentally summoned it as well, or maybe it was the one you were going for. Can’t see why. It’s a bore. It took me ages to get rid of it.”

Arashael. The same angel which nearly killed me by letting me walk in front of a subway train. And the one that complained about the coffee. We didn’t really get along. I could see it agreeing to be witness to illegal contracts if pissed enough for being summoned. Angels were horribly righteous in their

anger. Not that it mattered. There was no such thing as occult court where I could sue to get the contract thrown out. Once signed, you were doomed. Though, I had no idea what this meant exactly. If Dash had been a demon, I'd have given him unlimited access to my life force. He would have leeches me dry, while having access to the Earth. Some demons took years doing so, others hours. It meant rapidly aging, being susceptible to disease and certain death. It was a deal rarely worth the rewards, and usually only made in sacrifice to others. Djinn had unlimited access to the energy of their own dimension. He didn't need my soul for food. He wasn't supposed to be interested in soul harvest at all.

I was doomed. The realization finally breached the barriers of hangover and hot male distraction and sunk in. I. Was. Doomed. Death, or a slave; I didn't know which was worse. I wanted to roll up into a ball and cry.

I wrung my hands and shook my head. "No. No. No. It can't be true. No." I stood up and paced through the room, angrily kicking at everything in my path.

Dash sighed with exaggeration and rolled his eyes. "Stop being such a drama queen."

"A drama queen?" I screeched. "You stole my soul! You stole my fucking soul. Why the fuck did you need to do it? What have I ever done to you?"

"Don't take it so personal, Pumpkin. All you did was provide me with an opportunity I couldn't resist. And stop being so melodramatic. You're not dying. At least, you won't if you stop making such a racket. You're annoying me."

My mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water. "I'm a useless slave," I started babbling. "Absolutely useless. I can't cook, or do my own laundry. I'm a horrible slob. I can't do anything really." By now I was sobbing. "I'll give you anything. Just say it. I'll do anything, if you will only give me my soul back. Please?"

Dash only rolled his eyes.

"I'm going to sleep," I said, suddenly sure this was all a horrifying dream. "I'm going to go back to sleep, and when I wake up again you will be gone." I immediately turned words into deed, not even allowing myself one last glance at my beautiful nightmare.

Before I could fall asleep, my sister called. I answered the phone with, "I'm having a nightmare. I'll call you when I wake up."

I hung up. Immediately, she called again, and again after I ignored that call. Then I simply turned the thing off. Real-life Paige would come storming in after that treatment, but since this was a nightmare...

I closed my eyes and tried to sleep.

\*\*\*\*

I woke up at the sound of someone dropping their keys on the tile floor. "Who are you?" my sister's voice asked in an almost deferential whisper. "You are way too hot for my brother!"

*Ehm... was I still dreaming?*

I couldn't hear an answer, only the clicking of my sister's heels coming closer. The bedroom door slammed open, and I cringed at the noise.

"What on earth are you doing in bed when you have a hottie waiting for you out there?" Paige scream-whispered. "He's eaten all your Oreos!"

"This is a nightmare," I answered, squinting at my sister, trying to find something about her that would prove this a dream. "I have sold my soul to a Djinn. I am trying to wake up."

"You have what?" Paige was now screaming in the ordinary way. It hurt my poor head. "How could you be so stupid?"

"I haven't," I explained again. "It's simply a nightmare. When I wake up everything will be fine."

"You're not dreaming, sweetie. Damn. I wish you were." Paige shook her head, looking utterly disappointed in me. Then she perked up. "I hope you at least did him?" Again the whisper that was louder than her speaking voice made sure the not-supposed-to-be-there Djinn heard every word.

"No, I didn't. Or at least, I don't think so."

"Then what have you been so stupid to sell your soul for?"

"You think I'm dumb enough to sell my soul to get laid?"

"Well... yes. He's that hot. So what was it then?"

I looked at my hands. "I don't know. He won't tell me. I might've been drunk."

"You don't drink," Paige said with narrowed eyes. "Why were you drunk?"

"Because you brought me booze from Prague. You should've brought me a snow globe, sis." The whole Simon thing was too childish to mention.

“I never expected you to drink it. That stuff is poison, Cia.”

“That doesn’t help.” I pouted.

Paige gave me a hug. “We’ll figure this out. So, what does it mean exactly? What is he going to do with your soul? And what will it do to you?”

I swallowed. “I don’t know. I’m not even sure he’s not fucking with me.”

*Could it be?* I didn’t feel different.

Apart from the hangover.

And feeling stupid as fuck.

And being really, really fucking scared.

A ton of things might happen. I could die after all. Get sick. Age a decade in a day. Turn into a merciless killer. Become Dash’s slave for eternity. Lose my mind. Lose my powers. Lose my ability to laugh or love and become a shell of a human being. He could pull my soul out of my body and lock it in a box, leaving my body in a zombie-like state ready for a demon to move in. Or something even worse.

“Well, let’s ask him,” Paige said, her face now a mask of determination. “We’ll fix this shit, little brother.”

I shrugged, not convinced at all, but obediently followed her into the living room. Once there I found Dash flipping channels.

“Master Djinn,” Paige tried to get his attention in a more polite voice that I’d ever heard from her before.

“I like your litter mate,” Dash said casually as he paused flipping channels on a rerun of *The Bold and the Beautiful*.

“Sister,” I corrected him. “We’re not cats.”

Dash sent me a look that obviously meant he didn’t give a damn about my opinion on the matter and Paige elbowed me in the ribs to stop me from speaking.

“So Master Djinn, Ciaran would like to know a few things.”

Dash smirked. “I’m sure he does. He could always use one of his wishes to get the answers.”

“I get the three wishes?” I blurted out.

“Yes. You summoned a Djinn. You might have been too stupid to do it safely, but you still get the reward for letting me cross over. It’s mandatory.”

To safely summon a Djinn you needed immensely difficult protective spells to trap the Djinn either in a powerful magical circle or more commonly in an enchanted object, thus forcing him to obey you. That part of the practice always made me a bit nauseated. Normally summoning was a tit-for-tat practice. You politely asked a being to come and then you negotiated over the price for whatever you needed from it. With Djinn, the Djinn had nothing to say about the summons, and even less to say about obeying. I thought it impolite, cruel and lacking in respect for beings so powerful, so I had stayed away from the Djinn entirely. I might like to have the upper hand in contact with the occult—only logical considering the power of some beings—but would never result to slavery.

Dash narrowed his eyes and cocked his head as he studied me. I looked right back, daring him to find any dishonesty.

“Ask,” he finally said. “No strings attached. No wishes taken. No guarantee on answers.”

“You said I sold you my soul. What does that mean?”

“To me? The ability to walk the Earth disguised as a human while keeping all my powers, immortal of course. Being free from slavery and capture. Revenge.”

“And to my brother?” Paige asked before I had truly processed his answer. An answer that really, really didn’t sound promising.

Dash shrugged. “Don’t know, don’t care.”

“Am I your slave?”

“Probably, but I have no interest in having a slave.” He scrunched his nose in disgust. Dash was obviously not used to having a face that showcased his emotions. Or, at his amused smirk at my thought, more likely he didn’t care.

“Am I going to die?” I swallowed after the question, not sure if I wanted the answer.

“You don’t have to,” Dash said calmly. “It doesn’t matter much to me. For now I have chosen to keep your soul contained in its original container and you will have full use of it as far as I am aware. I do not leech your energy, and have no need of anything from you except the connection the contract gives us.

Whether it will have negative consequences to you is something you will simply have to wait to find out. However, I am going to be very clear on this, and I don't have the patience to discuss this with you any further. Your soul is mine, and I have no intention of returning it. I don't plan on being captured again. Ever!"

Immortally bound to a vengeful, all-powerful Djinn. Dash hadn't just stolen my life; he'd also robbed me of my afterlife as a ghost, and the circle of reincarnation after that.

"This is bad," my sister whispered. "This is really, really bad."

I agreed. I just had no idea how bad exactly. "You mentioned revenge?" I said with a tremble in my voice.

Dash sighed, leaning back and put his hands behind his head. "Let me put it this way, Pumpkin—"

"Ciaran," I interrupted him. "Not Pumpkin."

"I disagree. All that pretty orange hair and those freckles. Pumpkin it is."

I scowled at him, and he winked at me in reply. "As I was trying to explain; how would you like to be trapped in a lamp for centuries? A lamp is a tiny thing. It gets lost all the time in shipwrecks, moist caverns, and dusty basements. When discovered, you would be forced to deal with all kinds of moronic requests by people not even smart enough to realize that wishing to have everything you touch turn into gold is immensely moronic."

"Did that really happen? It's so stupid... why didn't he ask for the *ability* to turn things into gold? It would've solved everything."

"Not the point, Pumpkin. The stupidity of that particular request isn't the point. The point is everyone is stupid. Don't try and act all superior on me. I bet you're already thinking about your wishes. Still thinking about wishing for the ability to fly, aren't you?"

I shrugged. "Maybe." *Probably*. "I'd have to think about it."

"Can you imagine in how many ways I could screw that wish up for you? I could simply give you the ability to fly a Boeing, but without you actually having a license, or the documented flying hours needed to actually be a pilot."

"You could turn him into a balloon, or a pigeon," Paige added helpfully

Dash sent her a broad smile. "Smart girl. Or I could give you exactly what you wanted, but "forget" to alter your physiology to be able to deal with the

high speeds, the low oxygen amounts, and the cold. Nobody is smart enough to wear a spacesuit to go flying. Not to mention there were no spacesuits until recently. I could simply reverse gravity for you, and there you'd go, flying into space. Can you believe I had some moron ask me to go to the moon? I flicked my fingers, and there he was on the moon. Hope he'd enjoyed the view before he exploded."

"People don't explode in vacuum." Paige corrected Dash. "Their blood starts boiling, though."

Now Paige was victim to a glare vicious enough to kill.

"Again, not the point," Dash snarled at her. "The point is the guy is very dead, and probably still on the moon. You humans think making a few scientific discoveries means you are suddenly not stupid anymore. You are wrong! I can do things without even thinking that would take your scientists a thousand years to even explain, and would never be able to replicate. Magic is the real power, not science. Your minds are too small to comprehend the possibilities, and so the wishes asked for are always—without exception—either moronic or insultingly mundane."

He took a breath and waited for his rant to sink in to his audience, and when we didn't immediately find something wrong with his argument, he continued with a satisfied smile. "So, Pumpkin, would you enjoy being subjected to all that nonsense when you get your first fresh breath in fifty years? Would you like being a slave to a mad king forcing you to build stuff? Build things like a common mortal?"

Unlike my sister, who was probably trying to find a way to convince Dash of the significance of science, I was still stuck on the first part of his story. "But wait, are you saying you were the genie in the lamp?"

At my words his teeth bared, the cords on his neck stood out stark and his eyes shot venom at me. His tone became low and threatening as he moved like lightning toward me. He loomed over me radiating not only fury, but also incredible power. "I advise you to never, ever, use that word again. Please remember I don't need you to be alive to use your soul as an anchor, human!" He put his hand on my heart, very clearly signaling the message that he only needed to will it to stop my heart.

I jumped back from him like the distance between us would even make any difference. "I am sorry, really I am. I didn't know the word was an insult, really."

“Ignorance doesn’t excuse insult.”

I shrugged. “It kinda does. I didn’t mean to hurt you, and I apologized for it the moment I realized my mistake.”

“Let me guess, this time has a problem with ‘eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth?’”

“Yes. We have a legal system, with lawyers and stuff. No more trial by combat. Not to mention the fight would be unfair.”

“You could always try and summon a demon for the battle.”

“And get him to take on a Djinn, how? By selling my soul a second time?”

“Demons are stupid. Some might do it simply for the challenge.”

“Is there anyone you don’t think stupid?”

Dash had to think about that. “Most Djinn. I could think of a few demons. Maybe. Once I ran into a dark angel who had his head screwed on right. I’m holding out judgment on that one.” He made a gesture towards my sister. He appeared to have let most of his anger go, and shrunk a foot in height as he stepped back to sit down again. He looked into the Oreos package and shook it, scowling when he found it empty.

“I can run down to the store and get some more,” I offered, cowed and desperate to avoid an already annoyed Djinn dealing with other people.

“That won’t be necessary,” Dash said while snapping his fingers. A new pack of Oreos appeared next to what I supposed was a large caramel macchiato in a glass, a cappuccino, and a black coffee. Somehow he’d also guessed my sister’s taste in bagels, with an “everything bagel” with cream cheese. No food for me, as far as I could see. I pouted and Dash sighed, snapping his fingers once again. A hamburger materialized next to the other food.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Can’t have you throwing up your coffee,” Dash said gruffly while tearing open the pack of Oreos.

“Where did they come from?” Paige asked curiously. “You can’t simply will them into existence, right? That’s scientifically impossible.”

“Let’s just say there are some very confused mortals somewhere looking for their lunch.”

“That’s stealing,” I protested, even while taking a bite of my hamburger.



“I can send it back if your morals are troubling you?”

I thought. My stomach was troubling me more. I would simply give back by donating to the poor. This hamburger was good enough to have come from an expensive place. I was stealing from the rich, and I would give back to the poor. Very Robin Hood of me. I reached out for the cappuccino, but with a flick of Dash’s finger the black coffee took its place.

“You need to taste real coffee. This one is from Brazil. And you’re lactose intolerant. It’s causing the heartburn you’ve been experiencing. You will stop consuming dairy. Your whiney thoughts about it annoy me.”

*I... What? Really? You would think the doc would’ve come to that conclusion then...*

For a short while we simply ate and drank. I wasn’t even trying to think, only focusing on the explosions of taste in my mouth and the amazing feeling of my stomach settling down.

Paige broke the silence. “So, Master Djinn—”

“Dash,” Dash interrupted her with a smile, volunteering his name to my sister when I’d had to beg for it. I couldn’t really blame Dash for favoring her. Paige was prettier than I, smarter than I, and didn’t have the habit of having constant brain farts. Maybe not even the habit of thinking embarrassing things. I guessed that with a Djinn reading my thoughts even the tiny filter I had wouldn’t make a difference.

“Dash,” Paige continued. “You were explaining your need for revenge. As I understand you have been insulted greatly during your long existence. I understand your desire to avenge. What are you planning to do?”

See? If I would’ve tried to ask the same question, I would’ve framed it in a way he’d either continue on his rant, or insult him so badly he would go back on his promise of leaving my soul safely in my own body.

Dash smiled, and this time it was the kind of smile able to stop hearts out of fear and not out of desire to fall at his feet and beg for his attention. “Very simple. First I am going to free all the Djinn in captivity. Then I’m going to destroy everything I was ever forced to build. And after that I’m going to wipe out every soul who has ever wronged me or another Djinn.”

*What? Destroy what? Kill who? When had he even been on Earth last? Did he realize we had no knowledge of our past lives? Would he even care?*

I groaned and hid my face in my hands at his infuriating smirk that showed me he had no intention to answer any of my questions even if I bothered to ask them out loud.

Life had just become even more complicated.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 2

“Roses are red. Violets are blue. You—”

“Smell like banana bread so I’d like to eat you,” Dash finished the rhyme. He’d been standing behind me for ages, annoying me while I worked.

The worst thing was that Dash’s suggestion was better than anything I had managed to come up with on my own. Normally this came easily to me, so my days working at home meant sleeping late, working for a few hours and then taking the rest of the day off while still easily making my quota. When I had to work at the office I tried to procrastinate so much nobody ever noticed I could easily do double the work.

Today, not a single decent Valentine’s message bubbled up. I could always resort to a simple ‘I love you’ on a sugary sweet picture of two cuddly kittens, but I was better than that! I came up with smart little rhymes or poems, with drawings that cleverly complemented my words and showed a deeper meaning. I might have a shitty job with even shittier pay, but I was normally freaking good at said shitty job.

Plus, now I was craving banana bread.

“I could easily get you some,” Dash remarked in a suspiciously nice voice. “Just a little snap of my fingers.”

“No, thank you,” I said curtly. “I don’t need you to steal for me. Now, if you will excuse me, I’m trying to work.”

“‘Trying’ is the word here. Why do humans need to use the mail to tell each other something anyway? You’ve got phones and cars and helicopters. Why not say it in person?”

“Because sending a card is a nice gesture.”

“You mean the greeting card companies have conditioned everyone to think that taking the trouble of picking out a card with someone else’s words on it, is important etiquette?”

“Yes. And if you know how marketing works why ask?”

“Because it proves the stupidity of your entire species. You constantly invent stuff no one needed before it existed and then make sure nobody can live without it anymore.”

“Dash?”

“Yes?”

“If you’re not helping, please go do something else. Didn’t you have your revenge to plan?”

“I already planned it. I told you my plan. Free all the Djinn. Destroy everything I was ever forced to build. Kill everyone involved. It’s pretty simple, but I like simple plans. There’s less to go wrong.”

“Then go do it!” After twenty-four hours his company had grown beyond uncomfortable to grating. There was nothing as annoying as having an almost almighty being criticizing your taste in food, music, movies, and everything else he could find to have an opinion on. I didn’t have a clue why he was still here, and I wasn’t too interested in finding out. The less I knew the better. “Just try not to kill too many innocent bystanders.”

“How many are too many?” Dash asked, looking a bit bewildered.

“Any! And that includes reincarnated souls who have no memories of their past behavior and most likely no idea what a Djinn is outside of what Disney made it.”

“I hate that movie,” Dash said with feeling.

“You know Aladdin freed the G—Djinn in the end, right?” I said.

“Did he? Hmm... might have to scrap destroying Disney World from my list then.” Destroy Disney World? He was going too far. Though, if I could get him to destroy PIXAR instead, Simon would be out of a job...

“And you complain about my need for revenge? PIXAR never did anything wrong besides selling out to Disney.” The smirk on his face didn’t fit his fake insulted tone. He stared at me like he wanted me to ask him what he was smirking about. He could wait until eternity as far I was concerned. I’d spent too much of the past day bickering with Dash. I was done.

“Spoilsport,” Dash taunted me.

“Get out of my head!” I couldn’t help snapping at him.

“Impossible. You think too loudly. It’s hard to see when you are talking and when you’re thinking.”

“Talking is when I move my lips,” I said sarcastically. “It shouldn’t be so hard to understand for a creature as superior as you.”

“I don’t like your tone.”

“And I don’t like you invading my life. So I guess we are both screwed.”

I went back to trying to find inspiration by staring at the blank page in front of me and pointedly ignoring Dash’s sulking. Eventually he left me alone to sit on the couch and read the paper. The bastard snapped his fingers to get himself a delicious smelling banana bread—it had to be warm still to smell so good—and a caramel macchiato. Not that I noticed, since I was ignoring him. Dash was loudly commentating on the stupidity of a politician’s statements considering what he promised in the elections. Something he wasn’t supposed to know.

I couldn’t resist. I spun my desk chair in his direction and found him looking innocently back at me over the top of the paper. Innocent was a scary look on him.

“Just wondering; how do you know so much about this time? Have you been on Earth recently?”

Dash shrugged. “No, but I’ve been watching. This age offers lots of amusement. Mass media has really improved the allure of your dimension. Your entire planet has turned into one large real-life soap.”

“Can you go on watching please? The TV is right there. I think the Kardashians are on.”

“I find it disturbing that you know that.”

“I find it disturbing that a creature with godlike powers has seemingly wasted his time on watching the Real Housewives of LA. But to answer your question, they are always on somewhere. I have a hundred and twenty channels and for some reason the only thing that seems to be on all the time is the Kardashians. I don’t even know why I bother to pay for cable.”

“Maybe it’s a curse.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Or was it?

*Damn!* It sounded exactly like something Arashael would do. One day I’d skin that angel alive. Figuratively speaking of course. Angels weren’t exactly alive. Or had skin.

“I can do that for you.”

I studied Dash. He was using that nice voice again I didn’t trust.

“Are you sure you don’t want any banana bread? It might be one of the best things I have ever tasted.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Well, since you are offering—”

“I. Am. Not. Offering!”

“Sure sounded like it. Anyway. It seems my plan has a little glitch...”

“Poor you.” I went back to my work. “I will leave you to figure it out with your vastly superior mind.”

My chair swiveled around without my permission. When I tried to turn back I suddenly found myself sitting in Grandma’s chair with a piece of banana bread in my hand. I thought about being stubborn and throwing it at his head, but I didn’t want to be childish. Dash was being a big enough ass for both of us, so I took a bite. I groaned despite myself; Dash was right. It was the best thing ever. It even had dark chocolate chips in it to add that little bit of bitterness I loved.

Dash raised a perfect eyebrow at my groan. “Good to hear you are enjoying yourself. It makes me wonder what you were eating this morning in the shower.”

I choked on my food. I surely hoped he hadn’t listened to my thoughts when I was showering. They might give him the wrong ideas. Like ones that implied me thinking him attractive. I tried to stop myself from thinking before he heard me, but his smirk showed me he had. Well, it was an almost objective thing anyway. He was attractive—better said the body he had either borrowed or created was—and I dared anyone to prove otherwise.

“Please keep up,” Dash said. “If I can’t create a hamburger, how can I create a human body? So I think the word you are looking for is hijacked. Or maybe stolen, since I have no intention to give the body back. But I doubt he’ll mind it. He wasn’t using it anyway. I did some adjustments of course; the original form was highly unsuitable. It was horribly out of shape and not quite as easy on the eyes, too.”

“What?”

“You sure like that question, don’t you Pumpkin? Who, what, why? It’s all you seem to want to know. It wouldn’t be so bad if you were actually learning from the answers. Just be thankful I didn’t use your body instead.”

“Wh—” I stopped myself just in time.

He started laughing, and winked at me. “Good boy. I’m glad I didn’t take your body. This is the most fun I’ve had in centuries. While we are talking about living arrangements...”

“Are we?”

“Yes we are. Bodies... apartments... places to live in?”

I nodded. It was farfetched, but maybe not to someone used to being a force of energy without a corporal body.

“Exactly. Maybe you are less stupid than you seem. But I wonder, do you really want to live in a place as stuffy as this? Aren’t there better houses somewhere?”

“Not on my salary,” I said curtly, wondering why I was even responding. “Remind me to buy you *Economy for Dummies* or something. You seem to be missing the basic grasp of it.”

“I understand it. I just don’t see the need for it.”

“Of course you don’t, but you wanted something from me. Now tell me so I can get back to work.”

“If you insist,” Dash said. I sighed in response. “I need you to find the enslaved Djinn for me.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t, okay! There seems to be some sort of magical protection.”

“And why would that be?”

“Because you humans are deplorable creatures who support slavery!”

Again I had to resist hurling my banana bread at him. It would be a waste of the banana bread so I settled on sending him a dirty look. “I do not condone slavery!”

“Well, why won’t you help me?”

“I never said I wouldn’t help you!” I almost shouted back. Then I slammed my mouth shut. I should at least have waited for a “please” before giving in.

“Djinn don’t say please,” Dash said with narrowed eyes. “They shouldn’t need to. I could simply force you to do my bidding, remember?”

I narrowed my eyes right back. “Oh yes, I remember. Hard to forget you stole my soul”—I opened my arms wide in a challenge—“Come on, big bad Djinn. Force me!”

We locked eyes in a staring contest that made me a bit weak in the stomach. Eventually, Dash huffed and admitted, “I don’t want to coerce you. It would be hypocritical.”

“Then you better learn to pronounce the word ‘please.’”

Dash furrowed his eyebrows while still staring at me intensely. “I could offer to send that horrible angel into hell for you?”

I was almost tempted to take the offer. I had always wondered what would happen if angels and demons met on their own home turf. But no... “I have offered you my deal, Djinn! It stands.”

“Really? You are that easily bought, *human*?”

I simply leaned back in response and crossed my arms. The chair immediately caused muscles I didn’t even know I had to start hurting, but I didn’t budge.

“Okay. Please.”

“Please what?”

The glare in Dash’s eyes showed he might be close to turning me into a cockroach and find another way to solve his problem. Power radiated from him like in obvious threat. It would be stupid to aggravate him even more. But since I couldn’t be any more stupid than I had already been...

I held my ground, and after a very long and uncomfortable silence Dash finally sighed. “Would you please locate the enslaved Djinn for me?”

*Yes, finally! Ciaran one and Dash zero... Oops, I think he heard that...*

A look of disbelief came across Dash’s face, and as his eyes slowly narrowed, I knew that this could get really bad, really fast—

“I’ll be happy to help,” I answered quickly, hoping to cut Dash off before he could get started on a new tirade, or worse.

“I have to get some work done. I have to make a living, you know. This place won’t pay for itself. Why don’t you watch some TV and then we can get started when I finish up here?”



Now, that sounded like a plan. Of course, there was just one tiny little problem with my plan. I still didn't have an original idea in my head. As I sat there, once again staring at my blank computer screen, I could hear Dash flipping through the channels on the TV.

Couldn't he just find a show and watch it? Was it too much to ask for a little piece and quiet to get my work done? And what the hell was it I just heard about Simon Yverson on the TV?

Jumping up, I yelled, "Go back. Go back. What channel were you on when they mentioned the guy found in the desert?"

"Why?" Dash kept flipping channels.

"Never mind... just go back to the channel. I think it was HLN. I want to check and see if they said the name of a friend... well acquaintance of mine," I finished as I tried to grab the remote out of Dash's hand.

"Okay, okay... don't get your panties in a twist."

As Dash put the TV on HLN, I sat down on the couch to watch the story.

"I am here with rescue worker Donald Williams, who rescued Simon Yverson this morning when he was found wandering in Death Valley. No report yet on his condition. Officials are saying that he is incoherent and claiming to have been abducted by aliens. It is believed that he is suffering from shock, dehydration, and extreme heat exhaustion..."

I tuned out the rest of the report as I sat there in confusion.

What the hell?

"Well?" Dash asked me with a grin.

"What?"

"Ring any bells?"

"What?"

Dash wiggled his eyebrows, something that had no right to be that attractive, mostly considering he was obviously trying very hard not to burst out laughing. "I give you three guesses."

"Oh for the love of God, just fucking tell me!"

"You really don't have a sense of humor, do you? Or have any patience. Of all the humans I could have ended up with—" I glared at him and Dash burst out in laughter.

It took him quite some time to get his breath back and finally explain between bouts of laughter, “Okay... I quote—well loosely—it was a bit hard to follow because of all the drunk ranting, ‘I’d give anything to have Sleazy Simon getting lost in the desert.’ Then you rambled a lot about unfairness, angels, and subway trains. You stated Simon deserved to get abducted by aliens... ‘See how he likes that...’ followed by a lot more rambling about intellectual theft and the annoyance of angels. Although the last bit probably had more to do with Arashael trying to color code your underwear drawer. You told me several times you’d give anything for Simon to get what he deserved. So, I popped out a contract. You signed on the dotted line. And off Sleazy Simon went to a universe far, far away. I really expected them to keep him longer. You must have been right about how boring he was. You should’ve wished him to hell instead. Or maybe to heaven. Both are equally dull.” Dash finished with a very satisfied look on his face.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I told you. You sold me your soul.” Dash pulled his face in a mix of confusion and innocence. It should’ve looked ridiculous, but of course it only looked ridiculously hot.

“Are you trying to tell me that I sold my soul for that? Are you kidding me? How could that happen?”

“You were drunk,” Dash said helpfully. “You were really sure about the alien thing, and about the revenge thing. The desert is just a coincidence I think. Death Valley is close to Area 51. Be glad they didn’t drop him off on military terrain. He’d probably be blown up by the supersecret missiles they’re testing there.”

“You did that?” I asked, pointing at the TV. “You did that to an innocent man? Because I was drunk and jealous and angry and asked for something I didn’t mean?”

Dash shrugged. “Your wish is my command.”

“You jackass!”

“Exactly! Jackass Djinn to your service... with a large splash of literalism.”

Oh my God. Oh my fucking God! I’d sold my soul for nothing. I’d almost forgotten about Simon already. He was unimportant and would’ve lost his job anyway, the uncreative son of a bitch. I hadn’t even hated him. He wasn’t a bully; he wasn’t the kind of man who kicked puppies or tortured children. He

was simply someone whose presence irked me. He was also a thief, but the punishment didn't exactly fit the crime. I couldn't believe that I had asked for that to happen to him.

"Trust me. You asked for it. I would even go as far as to say you 'begged' for it," Dash said with an unholy grin.

"NO... You go back and you fix this. You make it go away." I was standing in front of Dash now, hands balled into fists, trying to resist the urge to strangle him. Behind the anger, the guilt loomed. Thanks to Dash I had become the criminal, and Simon the victim.

"Oh, quit being such a baby. It is done."

Dash was still smiling like this was one big joke. To him it was. Although he was responsible for both Simon and my lives being ruined, he wasn't the one having to live with the guilt, or with the consequences of his actions.

"Enough! You said that you would help me find the enslaved Djinn. That is my concern now. You will just have to worry about your petty morals later."

My head jerked back like Dash had hit me. "I don't... you can't... oh, fuck. Not now, you idiot!"

"Now!"

"No!" I stomped away and locked myself in my bedroom—like a locked door would keep a Djinn out—and sulked for two hours before I'd come to a solution. I would make things right.

Back in the living room, Dash was watching *The Biggest Loser* while eating a jumbo bag of cheese puffs. He was the picture of the all American male. Only hotter.

"I wish—"

"No," Dash interrupted me.

"But—"

"No. I can't undo the thing with Simon, or help with the consequences of it. You paid for it with your soul. It's a nonrefundable kind of deal."

I groaned. Of course. It would've been too simple. Karma stained easily, but it was dry clean only. "So what can you do?"

"I can send him a fruit basket."

"Do it!"

“You need to say the words. I wish...”

“Fuck you. I’m not wasting a wish on a fruit basket. One you’ll probably steal from another poor sick bastard. I’ll send one myself.”

I ignored Dash’s demands to stop wasting time and start finding Djinn until I had ordered Simon not only a fruit basket, but also the largest bouquet of flowers I could find, and a singing telegram. It effectively cleared out my bank account. Living on dry cereal until my next paycheck would do wonders for my karma.

“Why do you care?” Dash asked. “Even if you don’t really hate him, he is still of no concern to you. Why suffer for him? You know the karma thing is nonsense, right? You can’t really reincarnate as a bumblebee.”

I sighed and studied Dash. He wasn’t smiling, or smirking or acting superior for once. He seemed really, honestly puzzled.

So I answered his question. “It’s not about some supernatural being judging my sins. It is about me and how I try to live my life. I want to be a good person. I try to care about others, treat them like I’d want to be treated myself. When something or someone angers me I try to see what it says about me and my life and make some changes instead.”

“That’s not what you told me when you summoned me.”

“No! Because I was drunk, you idiot! People don’t mean the things they say when they have just poisoned their brains! I was angry and jealous, so I said things I never wanted to become reality.”

“Why not? Simon sounds horrible. He wronged you.”

“Yes. If I’d had a way to prove he stole my ideas, I might have sued him for copyright infringement. Maybe he deserved to be shown for the brainless twat he really is, but he didn’t deserve to be traumatized for life! Don’t you get that the punishment was a bit out of proportion?”

“Not really?” Dash replied, looking even more confused than when we started the conversation.

I groaned and gave up. I already felt sorry for promising to help Dash with his quest. That Djinn needed a guardian. Anyone but me. I sorely hoped he’d go on his merry way when he knew where to find the Djinn.

On my first try I altered a simple location spell normally used to find out what occult beings loomed nearby. It was a handy little spell if you suspected

people being haunted or even possessed. On a larger scale it would tell you whether that certain being refusing to answer your summons was already roaming the Earth. A few words changed, a few glyphs added to the pentagram and the location of all Djinn should light up on my globe.

It failed miserably. It shouldn't have surprised me. An already captured Djinn was insanely valuable, so it would make no sense for them to be easy to find, and thus easy to steal.

I sat on the couch and thought about it while munching the banana bread and cursing Dash for denying me a cappuccino. The coffee he had gotten me—this time Indian—was good, but I missed my milk dearly.

“Stop thinking about dairy and start thinking about the problem,” Dash snapped, stopping his pacing only long enough to make sure his deadly glare had the intended effect.

“I would if you stood still for a second. You're distracting. Not to mention annoying.”

He looked like he wanted to say something at that but thought better of it.

*Good!* He must've finally realized he would only waste more time with bickering.

I wasn't in the mood to spend the entire day figuring this out. I needed to work. No work done, meant no paycheck, meant no money to fill my empty cupboards, meant either having to live off food Dash stole for me—if he felt like it—or off the dry cereal I couldn't even have chocolate milk with.

So I had to make the location spell work.

Hmm... I had access to a Djinn. I would think most spell casters wouldn't have that advantage. I should be able to infuse the pentagram with Dash's energy and power the spell with a combination of our magic.

The plan was awesome and very simple. It should've only taken me ten minutes or so.

Three hours later I was tired and cranky, but we had finally succeeded. I'd had to use myself as a conductor for Dash's energy. It felt like being electrocuted and frozen at the same time. Not something I ever cared to repeat.

The globe showed only eight or so glowing dots, spread all over the world. It amazed me. Were there that few Djinn? Or did most simply avoid being caught?

“There are not many of us in this dimension,” Dash told me. “There are few humans powerful enough to summon us, and even less who know how to make a container that lasts longer than a single use. So yes, it is rare to get trapped on Earth.”

That was a relief. He wouldn't end up killing and destroying too much of our pretty planet.

Dash might've mumbled something that sounded like, “You've got no idea, Pumpkin,” but since he disappeared immediately after, I had no way to ask what he meant. Not even if I had wanted to know. I didn't. I really didn't. I hoped I'd never see Dash again. Even though I might have been a bit responsible for everything he did.

My apartment was so nice and quiet now that Dash was gone on his quest. For one little Djinn, he sure took up a lot of space.

Now back to finding a new way to tell someone you loved them.

Hmm... “True love is... never letting your love get drunk and sell his soul.”

For some reason Dash teleported in and immediately out again.

Better try again. “I Love You More Than Bacon.” On a background of heart-shaped bacon.

Bad. Very bad. Not to mention I was sure I'd stolen it from the Internet.

Again Dash appeared out of nowhere for a few seconds.

Maybe... a card shaped like a pizza box with “Will you be my Valentine?” and on the inside: “Or is this too cheesy?”

I groaned. This was bad. I never had so much trouble coming up with this. It might simply be because Dash left me in a less than loving mood. I should try birthday cards instead. The great thing about those was that for some reason you could be as insulting as you felt like. Let's think...

An hour later, during which Dash had appeared and disappeared about ten times, I threw my mouse against the wall, shattering it. The best I had come up with was “Haha, you're old!”

Better spare my energy to come up with a reason to explain to my boss why I had wasted my work-at-home day. Or better, fall back on the ever popular hearts, baby animals, and “I love you's.” I reached for my mouse to browse the company's image directory, not even in the mood to draw the pictures myself, and remembered I had just destroyed the thing.

I cursed and stood up to go and buy a new one just as Dash materialized into the living room again. If I was in a bad mood, Dash took that emotion to the extreme, radiating anger and resentment like I had never seen from anyone or anything before. And I'd seen some pissed off beings in my day. It was a good thing I saw his expression before I asked him to fix my mouse. I also refrained from asking him what was wrong. For starters, I didn't truly care, and secondly I didn't dare. Hey, that rhymed. Maybe it could be turned into a nice little Valentine's poem. *I don't dare not to care about your pretty looking hair.* Nope. It was obviously not happening today. I was blocked.

"You," Dash said with a menacing growl.

I took a step back. "I was just going out for some errands. You need something? More Oreos?"

"You," he growled again, making me wonder how he managed to growl a word without an "r" in it. "This is all your damn fault!"

"What are you talking—"

The next moment space folded around me and I was in forest, surrounded by a huge horde of raging reindeer with horrible sharp-looking antlers.

"Huh?" I said intelligently, while looking for a tree to climb.

"Don't be a coward," Dash scolded me while dragging me along into the thick of the reindeer. They made way for him without stopping their rampage, or seemingly even noticing him.

I stayed on his heels, not trusting my chances on my own. "What happened here?"

"Some idiot found a Djinn."

"How do you know the Djinn wasn't summoned?"

"People smart enough to know to summon a Djinn are usually smart enough not to ask for a million bucks. There's even a damn commercial about it now! The least they would ask for is a million American dollars. Not too hard to even mess that wish up of course, but this—" He waved around him, "—demonstrates why your species is not exactly the crown on evolution."

I nodded, finally understanding what was going on, though not what I had to do with anything. "Poor man found a literal G... Djinn?"

"Jackass Djinn," Dash said over his shoulder with a scary looking smirk. "You ever seen reindeer this pissed off? I like his style."

We had reached the midst of the herd. In a tree surrounded by bellowing reindeer sat a man dressed in cargo shorts and a Hawaiian T-shirt. He had flip-flops on. It was not an outfit I'd personally go hiking in. Underneath the tree lay a wooden box, about eight by five inches, unremarkable besides the laughter coming from it. I guess we found what we were looking for.

I expected Dash to pick up the box and leave the idiot sitting where he was, but instead he asked me to pick up the box and he called out to the man instead. "Hey there. Need any help?"

"Oh man, thank God. I thought I was dead for sure. Please help me."

"How?"

"Dash, don't," I said, but no words came from my lips. "*He's been punished enough,*" I thought at him instead.

"Please get me out of here," the man begged Dash. "I found this box hidden in a cave near the beach and when I cleaned it a Genie..."

*Oh no...*

"You might want to close your eyes for this," Dash told me right after the man fell out of the tree into the angry mob of reindeer.

I was too late, of course. And he hadn't warned to shield my ears as well.

There were sounds.

And images.

And screams.

Ending in a puddle of red and white, and flowery fabric, unrecognizable as a human body.

None of which I would ever be able to forget.

I retched while the deer around me disappeared, hopefully not to continue their newly found man-slaughtering ways.

Dash patiently waited for me to stop throwing up before teleporting us back to my apartment.

The moment we touched ground, I fled to my bedroom, locked the door behind me and hid under the blankets. Closing my eyes made things worse.

Of all the things I never wanted to see...



A lot of things that I never wanted to happen, were currently happening to me.

I threw the comforter off me and stalked back into the living room, right up to Dash. “Get the fuck out of my life!” I shouted while poking my finger at his chest. “Get the fuck away from me. You have what you wanted. You have my fucking soul and you know where the damn Djinn are! Now leave me alone!”

“No,” Dash said simply, looking down at my stabbing finger. He seemed genuinely surprised at my reaction. “You need to stop making such a big deal out of nothing.”

“Nothing? I just saw a man getting gutted and trampled! That’s not nothing! I had a nice life. Nothing special, but it was nice and peaceful and it was completely free of murderous reindeer. It was free of murderous anything! Why did you do that? Why the hell did you need to drag me into that?”

“I needed you to get the Djinn.”

“Couldn’t you have sent me away before you killed him? Or better yet, NOT HAVE KILLED HIM AT ALL?”

“Well... I did warn you...”

I punched him.

I pulled back my fist and hit him right in the jaw. I surprised him enough to hear a satisfying crack and see his head bounce back. A moment later pain tore through my hand, and I realized it was me making the cracking sound. I screamed and jumped back, cradling my hand to my chest, tears streaming over my face, but never once stopped glaring at him.

“You asshole, you fucking asshole!”

“You were the one hitting me!”

“Not the fucking point!” I screamed back. “It hurts. And now I have to go to the ER. I do not have time for this! I need to work!”

“Come here,” Dash said calmly, holding out his hands in a soothing gesture.

“What? So you can break me even more?”

“I can do that from the other side of the world. Stop being an idiot and come here so I can look at it.”

“Why?”

Dash grumbled something I didn't understand, and suddenly I was sitting on the couch with him kneeling at my feet and my hand held loosely between his. "Because it hurts less when I do it like this."

My hand grew hot and started hurting a whole lot more despite his promise. I yelped but found I couldn't move. "It'll only take a few minutes," he said in a soothing voice. "I can't undo injuries, but I can speed up the healing. But it hurts a bit more than the normal healing. At least it feels like it because all the pain is compressed in time as well." His voice wrapped around me like a hug. If I hadn't been in agony it would surely make me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. It might be the thing I hated most about Dash. The moment I stopped focusing on resenting him, I found myself all kinds of attracted to him.

I gritted my teeth to keep from screaming out in pain. Hot pins stabbed my flesh. Tears of pain streamed over my face. I much preferred the usual healing. "Can't you do anything about the pain?"

"Against the rules. I can only grant one wish at a time. I can't use my powers until this one is done."

"Then next time wish a stack of painkillers first! A nice shot of morphine would have done perfectly," I said with a whimper.

"I'll keep that in mind for the next time you are stupid enough to hit me." His smile was rather nice though, not the sarcastic smirk I was used to, and there was something like respect in his eyes even though he'd just called me stupid for the millionth time.

I enjoyed Dash's closeness as something comforting until the pain had ebbed away and I remembered he was the cause of my misery, not the solution.

"Ah, Pumpkin, don't be like that." This time Dash's smile was mocking again, and I had difficulty restraining myself from trying another punch. I only did because I highly doubted he'd fix another broken hand. I settled for throwing him the dirtiest look I could muster, and I decided to go for a walk. I still needed a new mouse, and I couldn't stand the idea of being in the same room with him.

But of course, Dash refused to let me go. My front door didn't open. I pulled and pushed and kicked it just to be able to kick something. And then I climbed through the window to take the fire escape. Hell, I would've jumped out of the window of my fourth floor apartment if it meant getting away from Dash. It seemed like I'd surprised him, because he let me get through the window and down two stairs before teleporting me back.

“Let me go!” I screamed while throwing a mug at him. I followed it with a lamp, three very thick books on demon summoning and a potted plant. By the time I was out of heavy objects and falling back on pens and candles—and right before marching to the kitchen to find knives and plates to hurl at him—he immobilized me.

“What is wrong with you?” he asked, sounding genuinely surprised. “I simply need your help for a minute. Then you can go wherever you want.”

“What’s wrong with me? What’s wrong with you? You’re keeping me prisoner. I want to go. Let me go now!”

“But...”

“But nothing. Let me go!” I was having difficulty breathing. I took big breaths, but none seemed to get me any oxygen. I was sweating and feeling dizzy and my chest hurt. “I’m having a heart attack. Let me go.”

The restraints fell away and I immediately grasped my chest, pushing my hand against the hurting spot in the middle of my chest. “I’m dying, help me!”

Dash simply studied me. “You are having a panic attack. No one is dying.”

“I think I know when I’m dying.”

“I have to disagree. You simply need to calm down. Drink some water. And try to breathe normally.”

I screamed and launched myself at him. He caught me with a surprised *oomph*, wrestling with me until he had me pinned against his body, arms restrained with nowhere to go and nothing to do besides noticing he had a very nice body, hard and hot against me. His breath flowed through my hair, tickling me a little, and a calm seeped through me.

“Are you manipulating me?”

Laughter shook his body. “Yes. Just taking away the extra adrenaline. And maybe speeding up the whole trauma processing thing.”

Oh.

“As long as you don’t expect a thank you.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t.”

“I still want to go.”

“Okay. But could you help me free the Djinn first?”

“No.”

“Please?”

“I’m going to need more this time.”

“So what do you want? Your wish is my command.”

“Nice try. But I already have my three wishes.” That I would never dare use as he very well knew.

“I could promise to explain what’s wrong in your wish before granting it.”

*Interesting.*

“We could agree you don’t grant a wish unless you know it’s exactly the way I want it. No jackassery.”

“I can do that.”

“I know you can. You can read minds. You know exactly what people want. I want it in contract. If you grant the words of the wish instead of the intention of the wish, I get my soul back.”

Dash pushed me away, throwing me a dirty look. “No way.”

“Then you either find someone else to help you, or you can turn me into a puppet. I should refuse to work with you entirely after what you’ve done to me. I should demand my soul back before even thinking about helping you.”

We glared at each other for a long time before I said, “I’m going for a walk now. You draw up the contract or you get the hell out of my life.” Without waiting for his answer, I turned on my heels and stalked out.

\*\*\*\*\*

### Chapter 3

This time Dash let me go, something I was very much wary of. I wandered around for a bit, letting the cool November breeze cool my emotions a little. Whatever Dash had done to me had helped as well. I could still see the horrible images, but the real terror was gone. It felt like it was years ago instead of less than an hour. I was glad Dash hadn't messed with the anger I felt towards him. He deserved every bad thing I thought about him, no matter how he tried to manipulate me into liking him. He was a cruel creature, not capable of empathy or regret. He was only nice to me because for some insane reason the nearly godlike being needed my puny human help. I was a tool to him. An animal. Inferior. And I would be smart to remember that. Because there was something about him...

I repeated all this and everything that happened to me today to my sister. My random path had brought me close to her work. As usual she was all too glad for an excuse to take a break and go out for coffee.

"When was the last time you got laid?" Paige asked after she had patiently listened to me rant for ten minutes.

"I... Well... What does that have to do with anything?"

"It might be harder for Dash to get you to dance to his beat when you are actually thinking with your brain."

"I am not thinking with my dick!"

"Have you found out what you sold your soul for yet? Or what it will do to you?"

"Yes. And I don't want to talk about it," I grumbled in reply to the first question. At her look, I shrugged. "Really. It's done. No need to discuss it. It's more important we find out the consequences. You'd think I'd know what losing my soul will do to me, right?"

"Well... anything different from a week ago?"

I thought for a moment. "Not much. I mean work is going awful. I'm a bit blocked, but it's not that strange considering how messed up my life is. Also sleep's been... well... horrible. All nightmares I can't quite remember. I only recall feeling terrified and completely desolate, and not being able to wake up. But again, considering everything going on..."

Paige sipped her coffee. “I’ve done some research, but this problem seems to be unprecedented. Normally only demons buy souls. They are the only creatures who can get something out of it. Or at least, that’s what all the literature says. Also, Djinn are supposed to be very rare. It’s incredibly hard to trap them, and even harder to handle them.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to get that,” I said. I took a sip of my latte and a bite of my cheesecake. No more milk my ass! I even refused the obvious solution: order soy milk or lactose free. I wouldn’t let Dash rule my life. Not even when he was right.

“Maybe you should ask the ancestors?”

“And admit to grandma I’ve been stupid enough to sell my soul?”

“Like she doesn’t know already. I’m surprised she isn’t here yet.”

I shrugged. “She went with Uncle Finn to Vegas. She’s probably helping him win a fortune playing poker. I hope to have solved everything by Tuesday night.”

“And how are you planning to do that?”

I scowled at her. “By focusing on the solution, not on the problem.”

“Wow, has someone been reading motivational posters again?”

“No! I’m solving this problem like I always solve everything.”

“By ignoring it until it goes away?”

She knew me too well. To be fair, it worked a lot of the time. “Yes. Or by waiting until inspiration strikes. Thinking about things only makes me worry. Or tired.”

“Well, you do that. In the meantime, I’ll go back to actually trying to do something about your little situation. I always find thinking very helpful. Just like research and asking people for help.”

Sometimes I hated my sister.

\*\*\*\*

Back in my apartment I found Dash sitting on my couch talking to the box holding the Djinn. Better said, he was talking with it. The voice in the box didn’t sound all too happy.

*Good, maybe I wasn’t the only one who got annoyed by Dash.*

“Ah, good Ciaran, you’re back. Now—”

“Now I’m going to have a shower, and maybe take a nap.”

“But—”

“Is the contract ready?”

“I still think—”

“Bye Dash,” I said while disappearing into my bathroom. I half expected to be teleported back into the living room soaked and butt naked, or the water to turn into ice or something, but nothing happened. Maybe I’d finally got through to the wretched Djinn, or maybe he’d decided I was too much trouble and moved on. With looks—and powers—like his it shouldn’t be too hard to find some poor unsuspecting human to do whatever he needed. I had a fourth cousin or something in New York who had questionable morals and would jump at the opportunity to become a supervillain’s minion. Maybe I should give Dash her address. Or maybe not. Someone should keep Dash under control. Someone with morals and common sense.

I sighed and turned off the shower. It seemed I was stuck with Dash, at least until I found a way to get him safely back in his own dimension. Once dry, I wrapped the towel around my waist and braved the living room where Dash was still arguing with the box. He looked up when I came in and raised an eyebrow at my near-naked state. His eyes were hot on me, undoubtedly judging my less than perfect physique. Screw him, for not understanding perfect abs didn’t come to everyone, especially not to people who liked to eat. I worked out like the best of them—or at least had the gym membership and the intention to start doing so tomorrow—but drew the line at starving myself. And I didn’t have the ability to simply choose a body...

“Well, actually, you can,” Dash said in what I supposed was meant a helpful manner. “You have the three wishes after all. I could give you any body you want, no problem.”

“And throw away my chance on wishing for world peace?” I threw back. “No, thank you. I like my body as it is.” I did. It might not be perfect, but it was mine and I liked it.

Dash smiled, but I wasn’t sure if it was in reply to my words or my thoughts. “You should know wishing for peace is a difficult thing. Can’t do it without serious repercussions. There are a million ways to get to it, but none will be especially pleasant. Most will have dictatorships, or mind control, or

diseases that clear out ninety-five percent of humanity. For some reason it's impossible to make all humans be nice to each other."

I blinked at him.

"Your condition, remember? I needed to tell you how your wish would backfire? Although, to be honest, in this case all Djinn will give the warning. In fact, all wishes that encompass the entire world are recommended against. The effects are hard to oversee."

"So keep it simple?"

"Yes."

The box made a lot of noise again, and Dash murmured something back in a language I didn't understand.

"I made the contract," Dash said. "You only need to sign it."

I read it. Then I read it a second time. Then I studied it for all known and unknown tricks, like invisible fine print or magic ink that would change after signing. Only after being completely sure he wasn't tricking me this time, I signed it.

Look, I am smart and sensible when not drunk. I normally don't even accept the terms of usage from a software product without reading.

After Dash signed it as well, the contract lit up as a beacon, the letters swirled around us and became part of us. Contracts like this were binding, impossible to worm your way out of, although possible to sidestep as long as you kept to the literal meaning of the words. Specific was the keyword, and I had made sure there was no way out for him. Now if I could only get him to give in to the temptation to screw me over...

Loud laughter sounded from the wooden box, followed by a muffled, "You'd also be dead, kitten. You're no match for a Djinn."

*What was it with Djinn and cutesy nicknames?*

Dash simply looked at me with a raised eyebrow and that infuriating smirk. "Now free him," he said, pointing at the box.

"How?"

"How did that idiot by Disney do it?"

"Why can't you simply wipe the box and wish your friend free yourself?"



“Not a friend,” the box protested loudly. “I can’t stand that asshole.”

“You wanna be free or not?” Dash bit back angrily. “I could hide you back in that forest waiting to be used as a slave by an even bigger idiot.”

“I was having fun and you ruined it! He still had another wish I could torment him with. I couldn’t wait to see what would happen! And you made me miss the grand finale.”

“I’m trying to do something nice here,” Dash said exacerbated, pulling his hair. “You are ruining my grand scheme, Barajas.”

“Well, boo hoo! Now let me out of this box. I’m getting sand everywhere!”

“Well, boo hoo!” Dash repeated maturely. “So now you want my help after all!”

“No, I want the kitten’s help. You’re a useless piece of shit.”

I was laughing so hard my stomach hurt. Poor little Dash not getting appreciated at all.

Of course I got a very dirty look for that, but it didn’t matter. It seemed my big, bad Djinn couldn’t do most parts of his grand scheme without me; he couldn’t find the Djinn, couldn’t pick up the magical containers, and couldn’t free his fellow Djinn. It might at least keep him from putting my soul into a watch.

“I don’t use watches,” Dash said with another scowl at me. “I’m Djinn. Time has no meaning for me.”

“Watches make terrible containers,” Barajas added helpfully. “They make a horrible noise, and there’s no place to be comfortable. And since we are talking uncomfortable, I’m currently trapped in a smelly, sandy, damp box. Anytime soon would do, kitten.”

“Ciaran,” I said automatically, while tentatively picking up the box. “How is it sandy? I thought you were in a forest.”

“The idiot who found me was lost on a beach. How to get lost on a beach is a mystery to me. I mean: there’s a huge stretch of water on one side. Anyway, he wished to know where he was. I teleported him to the middle of a forest in Siberia, with exact knowledge of his location. And still the moron’s next wish was for a million bucks, not for a helicopter.”

That was stupid. Insanely so. I thought at least I had more sense than that.

Dash grinned at me. “Don’t overestimate yourself.”

I ignored him. “So I should just wipe it?”

“Like you’re cleaning it.”

I locked eyes with Dash, suddenly afraid this was another trap. Dash’s nod and reassuring smile weren’t all that reassuring, but, well... *Here goes nothing.*

I wiped at the box, careful for splinters, and the mucky green stuff I hoped was just algae.

A pop.

A big flash of light.

A lot of smoke.

Within the smoke a shape appeared, twirling and turning like a martial artist. When the smoke cleared up, Barajas stood crouched on the coffee table, dressed in a loose green garment that would have fit perfectly in ancient Persia or a fifties movie, head wrapped in a white turban.

“Still a drama queen, I see,” Dash said dryly, while I was wondering where my phone was so I could take a picture.

Under the turban, Barajas narrowed his eyes at Dash. “And still a no-fun spoilsport, I see.” To me he said, “Go ahead. Take a picture. But be sure to post it on Facebook. I so appreciate getting likes.”

I blinked and went to grab my phone from my desk, quickly snapping some pictures. “So now I simply free you?” I said, also sneaking a picture in of Dash’s less than happy facial expression. And one of his scary, but still very hot glares, and a last one of his smirk.

“Your wish is my command, young master,” Barajas said with a flowery bow. “You have three wishes, kitten. You are free to use them as you please.”

“This human is mine,” Dash said with a threatening growl. “You will not harm him.”

“Who said anything about harming? We can just have fun. There must be things the kitten wants.”

Even before I opened my mouth to speak, Dash interrupted me. “He can’t do that. Your soul is mine and he can’t undo it. Barajas can also not harm me, or send me back to our own dimension without harming you. And he won’t care about the harm he does either.”

“Party pooper,” Barajas said, sounding a bit bored. “You’ve gotten worse. But that soul stealing thing is interesting. I will have to look into it. Now give me your wishes.”

“Can I make it so he can never buy a soul?” I asked Dash. One vengeful Djinn loose on Earth was worse enough.

“You can wish for him to be free under the condition he’ll never be able to access the Earth again.”

“What? You can’t be serious!” Barajas screamed at Dash. Dash started pulsing with power, something I expected Barajas to mirror. Great. My apartment getting trashed by two Djinn was just the thing I needed right now.

“He can’t do shit,” Dash said with a mean grin. “He’s bound to you right now.” It looked like Dash was enjoying this a bit too much. So much for all his morals concerning slavery.

“I should’ve made an exception for him,” Dash mumbled at me. “I hate him.”

“The feeling is quite mutual, dear.”

That much was obvious.

I gathered my thoughts, looked at Dash for confirmation and spoke the words. “I wish for you to be free under the condition you return to your own dimension and never come back to the human dimension again. This is my wish.”

After a last glower at Dash and with a choice of curse words, Barajas disappeared with a big bang.

\*\*\*\*

After the day I’d had, I was more than ready for an evening of relaxing. Unfortunately I had gotten no work done, so a good little office monkey would spend the night making up for it. I, however, would invent a stomach flu; a very contagious, highly vicious stomach flu to get me out of work for at least the rest of the week. I wasn’t even lying, because my stomach was really bothering me. Who cared if I’d brought it upon myself? Paid sick days were an amazing invention. Plus I could always use a wish to get an infinite amount of vacation days.

“It would be way easier to wish for money,” Dash once again interrupted my thoughts.

“No, thank you.” Though I didn’t know why. He couldn’t screw up my wish. He couldn’t give me false money, or drug money or laundered money. Or insurance money for being put into a coma. I could wish to win the next big lottery pot. Easy, simple, clean money.

“It’s too boring,” Dash finished my thought. “You, Pumpkin, might be stupid, but I highly doubt you’re boring. And that is why I will let you come on my next trip.”

“I don’t want to come. I want to sit here, watch a movie, and eat pizza.”

“Where did you ever get the idea I care about what you want? So dress warmly, it’s going to be a long, cold night.”

“What’s the hurry? You are immortal, remember?”

“Yes.”

“Then sit down, and pick the movie.”

“But—”

“If you don’t choose, I swear I’ll put on Aladdin,” I threatened. “Did you know the G—Djinn sings?” I sang a few lines of “Friends Like Me” to Dash’s increasingly thunderous face.

“I got things to do, you know. Important things!”

“Then go do them without me. I’m not moving tonight.”

To my surprise, Dash stayed. To be nice, I ordered enough pizza for the both of us—Paige had lent me some money—and even let him have olives though I despised them. In return, he got us a tiramisu that was ridiculously good, and, later, a big batch of popcorn. If I kept eating like this I definitely needed to get a start on working out soon.

We watched a movie that was mindless and funny and had just the right amount of explosions, leading to a discussion about the difference between violence in real life and in movies. By the end of it I thought Dash was starting to understand my point. I hoped.

“So,” he said, after a long silence. “You really feel bad about Simon and about the dumb guy the reindeer killed?”

“Yes!” Finally!

“Even though he was insanely stupid? Even though Simon stole your work and your job?”

All Simon did was steal an idea, but I highly doubted Dash would understand the difference. “Yes,” I said instead, “stupidity isn’t a reason to be killed.”

“It isn’t?” He still mimicked complete bewilderment, but it was obvious he was working hard to contain his laughter. “That’s good news for you, Pumpkin.”

I threw a pillow at his head. “Good night, Dash. I suggest you spend the night reading up on ethics.”

The next morning I woke up to Dash singing along with American Idol. He was slightly off key. It was good to hear he wasn’t completely perfect. Stumbling into the living room, still half asleep, I found him lying on the couch, dividing his attention between watching TV and reading *Ethics for Dummies*. It made me laugh.

“Can we go now?” Dash asked. “I don’t get why you are mad at me for not understanding morality when it turns out to be so complicated it needs a *For Dummies* book.”

I smiled at him while suppressing a yawn. “Give me some time to wake up, have some coffee, and get dressed first.”

“The ethical thing would be to respect your wishes, and wait patiently until you are ready.”

“Yes.”

“But I don’t want to. I am bored.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” I scratched my belly. “Do you want some coffee while you wait?”

Dash dragged his gaze down over my body. There was something like appreciation in his eyes, a slight smile around his lips. I cursed the blush that heated not only my cheeks but all the way down to my chest.

“No. I need you to hurry up. I’m Djinn. Djinn shouldn’t be kept waiting.”

“Didn’t you tell me you waited hundreds of years inside a tiny lamp?”

Dash scowled. “Yes.”

“Then it shouldn’t be so hard to wait thirty minutes in a perfectly comfortable apartment. Go take a walk.”

“Hmf. Ethics aren’t fun.”

“They are not supposed to be. But Dash... sometimes it’s not even about being ethical. Sometimes it’s simply about being nice.”

“Why?”

I sighed. It was too early for this. “To make people like you. To make friends.”

“Why? I’m all powerful.”

“Not much fun playing god if you have no one to play with,” I answered, not sure if he was screwing with me.

That shut him up long enough for me to be able to make it to the kitchen, put the coffee on, and escape to take a shower. When I came back there was both coffee and breakfast waiting for me. I thanked Dash profusely and added the toast and fruit to the mental tab I was keeping. When my next paycheck came I’d have to donate a big chunk of it to some nice charity.

\*\*\*\*

Dash had been right. It was cold. I pulled my woolen hat further over my ears and huddled deeper into my coat. Dash, however, was still wearing only a skintight black T-shirt and jeans, which showed off his long legs and delightful ass. It got him more than a few turned heads. One man even tried to give—or sell, I couldn’t be sure since they were speaking Russian—Dash his coat. Dash laughed and gestured for the man to put his coat back on, while starting a conversation in rapid Russian. It was a handy skill, the ability to understand all languages, and I made a mental note to remember it for a possible wish. Bored with the long conversation I couldn’t understand, I studied my surroundings. We were on a large plaza in front of an impressive colorful church. I surely hoped he wasn’t here to destroy the church, or any of the other beautiful old buildings. It would be a waste. Seeing the policemen surveying the crowd, I realized it would’ve been smart to bring my passport. I didn’t trust Dash not to abandon me.

“Come,” said Dash, grabbing me by the wrist and pulling me along. “I have a lot to do here.”

“Do I want to ask what?”

“I don’t know. Do you?”

I pulled a face and tried again. “Are we here to free a Djinn?” Why else would he need me here?

“Later. I need to destroy some things first.”

Oh no!

“What?” Dash growled. “Where is it?” He looked around him, the anger making him grow bigger. He was literally steaming in the freezing air. It was disconcerting, not to mention certain to attract unwanted attention. He stomped towards a hobo, spitting out a question in Russian. The hobo only shrugged.

“Don’t!” I shouted to Dash when I suspected he’d end the poor man’s life for failing to answer his question. Dash whipped around, glared at me, then nodded.

I smiled approvingly. He seemed to be learning. Why was a mystery, but I wasn’t complaining.

An elderly woman with long, tangled gray hair, dressed in the most ragged-looking fur coat I had ever seen, shambled towards Dash and his companion. Dash shouted his question at her, and the woman nodded, pointed to an empty spot in the middle of the square, and cackled. Dash cursed loudly. Two trees right behind me exploded. I jumped a foot in the air and screamed.

Before the two tramps could meet the same fate as the poor, innocent trees, I went to Dash and led him away.

“What’s wrong?”

“They destroyed it!” Dash muttered. “How could they! I’ll kill that damn Lenin—” A few more trees burst out in flames, and the policemen were starting to look worried. Sirens sounded in the distance.

“Lenin is dead,” I calmly told Dash. “Has been for ages. What did he destroy?”

“A statue Feodor III forced me to build.”

“When?”

“1681. Three wishes. Three statues, and all destroyed during the Russian Revolution. How dare they!”

“Just to be clear... you came to destroy the statues?”

“Yes.”

“Mission accomplished then.”

“But—” For the first time Dash seemed truly lost for words. “It’s blasphemy,” he muttered, blowing up a trash can for good measure.

“You’re no god. And even if you were, communists are atheists, so I doubt they would’ve cared. You didn’t get to destroy your work, but caused some mayhem instead. Happy?”

“No!” He was getting angrier again, growing in size and sizzling with power.

“Want to destroy a statue of Lenin instead?” I felt horrible for saying it. Destroying art was going against any principle ingrained in my bones. In my defense, I had to prevent Dash from doing worse than blowing up a sculpture.

“Yes!” he said enthusiastically. “Even better, I’ll destroy all statues of him!”

“How many are there?”

Dash thought for a moment. “A lot,” he finally answered. “Too many to do in person.” He grabbed me by the arm, and teleported us to another town square, equally cold and snowy, but much less pretty. We stood about fifty feet from a huge bronze head covered with snow. I assumed the head belonged to Lenin—or well, was a likeness of Lenin. While I was still processing how big the head was, it started glowing red, and soon after that its features started melting. It was quite spectacular, as was the slightly panicked, but more amazed reaction of the crowd taking photographs and videos of the—now dissolving—head. #MeltingHead would be trending on Twitter in about five minutes.

We watched until all that was left of the head was a puddle of bronze, already cooling. It was kind of pretty as well.

“Poor people,” I said to Dash as I slowly turned in a circle to check the rest of the sad-looking city square. “I think you just took away their main tourist attraction.”

“Why should I care?”

I shrugged. “Maybe because these people did nothing wrong?”

“A puddle that used to be Lenin’s head isn’t enough to attract tourists?”

“I highly doubt it.”

“Okay.”

“Okay what?”

“What is your favorite animal?”

“What?”



“I don’t know how to frame it differently. It is a very easy question.”

“Ehm... I like giraffes, and ostriches, and penguins, and—”

“I asked for one,” Dash muttered. “But I should’ve know you’d come up with a whole damn zoo.”

The bronze pool started boiling again and rose up to form a huge blob. I stared with big eyes while it slowly took the form of a gigantic penguin. It might’ve been the coolest thing I’ve ever seen. It was certainly much prettier than Lenin’s head. I just hoped the city officials thought the same and wouldn’t change it back into Lenin.

“They wouldn’t dare!” Dash told me with a certainty I most definitely didn’t feel before teleporting us out.

\*\*\*\*

He brought us to the ruins of what used to be a castle. It looked completely abandoned, and it was breathtaking. The castle was located on a rocky headland and gave a spectacular view of the raging sea deep below us on three sides and the snow-covered hills on the other side. I immediately started to snap pictures on my phone. I tried to imagine what it had looked like when the castle had been intact but found it difficult. If even my imagination was affected, I was blocked even more than I thought possible.

“Where are we?”

“Scotland,” Dash said briskly, already walking towards one of the ruined buildings. My fantasy burst into life now that I could add rugged looking Scots dressed in kilts and nothing else to the image. Good to know my sex drive was still intact.

Dash turned around to look at me. “You like men in skirts?”

I shrugged. “Just when they are Scottish. Big, bad warriors coming to sweep you off your feet? Must be my Celtic heritage. Although, I also like the thought of Vikings.”

“So you like big, bad, powerful, and out for destruction.” Dash smirked devilishly. “Please explain to me why you hate me so much?”

I blushed and ducked my head, trying not to realize he was right. There was something horrifyingly attractive about his power. If he could only be powerful without all the killing.

Dash chuckled. “Tell that to your Vikings, or your Scottish warriors. I’ve never met more bloodthirsty bastards. Only the Romans came close. They were much more organized though. Did I tell you about the time I spent as a strategic advisor to one of the Roman emperors? What was his name... Oh yes! Caligula. Almost got him to make his horse a consul. Fun times...”

I gaped at him, but he had already lost interest and was studying the ruins. “This should be quick.”

“Please tell me you aren’t going to destroy this castle.”

“Nope. We’re here to free a Djinn. By the looks of it she hasn’t got a master.”

Thank God. No killing today.

Another chuckle, this one positively evil. “The day has just begun, Pumpkin.”

Freeing the Djinn went without a glitch. The only difficulty was in finding the old whisky bottle Yniasha was captured in, and the discussion I had with Dash about using one of the three wishes she offered me to get myself some lunch and a new pair of gloves. In the end, Dash got me a sandwich, some new warm gloves, a new hat, and even a warmer winter coat, while Yniasha was laughing so hard she couldn’t talk. She called me Bunny, which annoyed me so much it made Dash roar with laughter in turn. In the end I just let them talk and joke until Yniasha was ready to leave.

Our next destination was once again freezing cold. Here it was raining, which made it infinitely less pretty and much more uncomfortable. Luckily my new coat was waterproof. We appeared in front of a row of colorful but cozy looking houses. There was a tree with a swing in the front yard, and a minivan parked in front of the garage. I immediately got a bad feeling about this. I grabbed Dash’s arm and turned him towards me.

“Please, no killing, no destruction. There’re children here. Innocent children. Don’t leave them homeless, or orphans. Please? I’ll make it a wish if I have to. Please?”

“What kind of monster do you think I am?” Dash asked coldly. “I am here to free a Djinn, not to cause mayhem and destruction just because I can.”

“But... if these people have the Djinn...”

“If they are the one who summoned him and are keeping him prisoner I am not making any promises. I can’t leave slavers alive.”

I wish I didn't understand his point. I might not agree with his methods, but I got his reasoning. There was no way to stop him from doing whatever he wanted anyway. I would simply have to make sure the children wouldn't be harmed or traumatized. I had no idea how, but I'd figure that out later. "And if they have found him instead? Or not even know they have him?"

"Does this mean so much to you? People you don't even know?"

"Yes."

"Even if they turn out to be evil slavers? What if they have taught their children? What if the children are the evil ones?"

"Just talk to me before you do anything. Please, Dash? I can't live with myself if—"

"Okay, okay... no killing innocents... no killing at all unless you agree it's necessary. I'll give you that one. Today. But only because today is ethics day. And because your idea of changing the blasphemer Lenin into animals made me laugh."

"Thank you." On impulse I gave him a hug, something that seemed to throw him off his game. It took him a few seconds, but he answered it. It was a real hug, not one of those half-hugs where you are careful only to touch shoulders and keep as short as possible. This hug had full contact, with Dash's arms squeezing me close to him and his head resting on mine for a long moment. It was the kind of hug that made me feel safe and comfortable. Dash seemed to like touching and being touched. Was it just a side effect of having a human body, or was Dash—as big, bad, and powerful as he was—desperate for some sort of real connection?

He didn't even laugh at my thought, just pulled away slowly, like he was reluctant to let go.

"Let's go in," Dash grumbled, grabbing me by the hand and teleporting us into the house. There seemed to be a whole lot of touching going on, indeed.

The attic was empty of people and neatly organized. One half was equipped as a play room, with another swing hanging from the heavy wooden beams, a bright pink doll house standing in the corner, and a table with a Lego city in the middle. From a purple princess tent in the shape of a castle sounded loud giggles and a stream of another language I didn't understand. I guessed it some kind of Nordic language. A male voice spoke up, also laughing hard and talking in a teasing, but loving tilt. Dash looked shocked at the second voice.

“You recognize him?” I whispered to Dash.

“Yes, the Djinn, Nathagias.”

“Nej, Nathi—” followed by a lot of words I couldn’t make sense of.

A low command from the man and the tent opened and a boy dressed in a Viking costume crawled out followed by a little girl all in glittering pink. The boy held his hand up and muttered something. The girl turned back, but not without showing a huge pout.

“Dash! What are you doing here?” the boy Djinn, I presumed Nathagias, asked.

Dash seemed lost for words, so I helped him. “He’s here to free you. Well, to be more precise, I’m here to free you, because he can’t. But it’s his plan, and he’s the one with the badass teleportation skills, so I’d better give him some credit before he decides to leave me here, stranded in wherever we are.”

“Esbjerg, Denmark,” the Djinn said, seemingly having some difficulty processing the information. “Free me? Why?”

Dash’s mouth fell open. “I... ehm... you... err...”

“I think Dash is trying to say that you are a slave, captured by that evil, tiny, glittering princess in the tent. He has a problem with slavery.”

“I’m not a slave. Addie freed me the moment she found the box I was captured in. It was her one and only wish. She doesn’t even want to use her other two wishes. She says she has all she wants now that she has a friend. Of course her parents worry about her having only an invisible friend. She used to be bullied horribly at school, poor girl. She has an active imagination, but is terribly shy and different from the other kids. I put an end to the bullying of course, but I can’t force the other kids to like her. She’s smart. She’d know I manipulated them into liking her.”

“You are a playmate to a five-year-old?” Dash asked incredulously. “Voluntarily?”

“She’s eight. And yes. I’ve never had so much fun in my life. Building huts with your own hands sure beats being forced to build castles or kill people on a battlefield or deal with morons who don’t even know how to formulate a basic wish. She’s smart and insightful and she’ll be awesome company for the next eighty years or so. Longer if I have anything to say about it.”

“Really?”

“Yes really. You should know, having a puppy of your own. Humans are fun.”

“I’m not a dog,” I corrected him. “I have a name.”

“Yes,” Dash said with a grin. “It’s Pumpkin.”

I ignored him. “It’s Ciaran. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, Puppy. I’m Nate.” He turned to Dash. “You’re in the flesh? How did you manage that? What’s that connection you have to the puppy?”

“I own his soul,” Dash said curtly. “It comes with a lot of perks, but as a side effect I’m stuck with him. Terribly inconvenient, I must say.”

“Hey!” I said. “I’m stuck too remember? But without the perks. And I thought we agreed not to have any more Djinn roaming the Earth.”

“That’s just Barajas. He’s an asshole.”

“Language!” Nate corrected Dash. “I don’t want Addie to get into trouble for using words she shouldn’t know.”

“But—”

“Yes, you’re right. Barajas is a cruel SOB. I wouldn’t want him near my Addie.” At that time the girl crawled out of the tent. Nate threw her a look full of affection. Dash seemed baffled by the bond between them. “You don’t have to worry, Puppy. I’ll never take Addie’s soul. There’s no perk in the world that will let me harm her. If there was another way to make myself human for her...”

“Can’t she wish you human?”

Dash shook his head at my question. “Wishes can’t change the nature of things. Your sister will most likely have all kind of scientific explanations for it. I can change a rock into gold, I can make it move, but I can’t make it alive. Like I have a human body, but I’m not human.”

*Good to know.*

“And can’t you give him a body?” I asked Dash. “Like you stole one for yourself? Maybe from some kid in a coma?”

“Not without a connection to a human soul,” Dash said, staring at me like I grew a second head. “Please explain this; you object to stealing a *hamburger*,

but think it's ethical to steal someone's body? I think I need to reread that book!"

I shrugged, a bit confused myself. "It's just... I'd like for the little girl to have a real friend." I got a glare from Nate. "I mean... someone others could also see. It'd be easier on her, I think..."

Dash was still shaking his head, and Nate looked thoughtful.

"No... won't do. It wouldn't be right to take someone's soul," Nate said, staring hard at Dash. "Humans have feelings you know."

Dash scowled, and changed the subject. "So you don't have to be freed? She doesn't have some sort of spell on you?"

"Nope."

"And what if someone summons you and captures you?"

"I'll let Addie send your puppy a message," Nate said with a grin. "Then you can come rescue me and send me back to her."

"If that's what you wish..."

"I do. Go now. We don't have much time to play. She still has to do her homework before dinner."

Once home, Dash still seemed extremely confused. I put him in his usual place on the couch and made him some tea. I also popped down to the store to buy him chocolate chip cookies. He looked like he needed some comfort. I turned on the TV for him so he could watch the "in depth analysis of the transformation of all the Lenin statues in the world into all kind of animals." He didn't even crack a smile.

"I don't get it," Dash muttered. "A child? He chooses being a playmate of a child over freedom?"

"He is free," I said, munching on a cookie and deciding that I'd start going to the gym today. Well, maybe tomorrow. Grandma was supposed to come by in a few hours, and my apartment was a mess. Dash had the annoying habit of letting everything fall out of his hands once he stopped having a use for it. Thanks to him the couch was doing an impression of a garbage dump.

"Aren't you supposed to be ill?" Dash asked, while adding crumbs and a teabag to the mess. "Wouldn't working out show your boss you're quite capable of working?"

Damn. Dash was right. Exercise would have to wait.

“I could teleport you to a gym far away?” Dash said helpfully. “Or I could give you an actual stomach bug. It’ll help you lose weight for sure. Not that I get why you want to.”

“Says the guy with the perfect body,” I grumbled, throwing a cookie at him. He caught it and stuck it into his mouth.

“Who says your body isn’t perfect as well?” he asked. “Seriously, tell me and I’ll kick his ass. You’re solid. Nice to hold on to.” I couldn’t read his tone or his expression as he studied me. “A nice guy with a nice face and a nice body.”

“Nice. Just the way a guy likes to be described,” I sputtered. “Nice doesn’t get you laid. It doesn’t get you a decent job, or a boyfriend.”

“That’s just stupid!”

“Yeah,” I agreed. I didn’t say that having a gorgeous Djinn living in my apartment and shadowing me everywhere I went wouldn’t do much for my chances in the boyfriend department.

He mumbled something I didn’t quite hear, and snapped his fingers to summon my laptop to him. He didn’t say anything else, and I was bored, so I started cleaning. While picking up the trash around his ass, I noticed he was looking at videos of playing children, and had some tabs open with articles about the human need for connection.

Interesting...

\*\*\*\*

“You stupid, stupid boy,” Grandma scolded me the moment she appeared right after dinner. “You summoned a Djinn? Didn’t I teach you better? You don’t enslave the occult! I’m so disappointed in you. As a child you even felt sorry for birds in a birdcage, and now you go and force a being as powerful as a Djinn to do your bidding? To get wishes? What would you need so bad to risk everything for? You’ve got a loving family, a decent job, a roof above your head, and food in your stomach! You stupid, stupid boy!”

Dash was grinning like an idiot, clearly taken with my grandma.

“It’s not like that, Grandma,” I sputtered. “I didn’t enslave anything!” I put the emphasis on *I*, something my grandma missed, but Dash surely didn’t.

He narrowed his eyes to me. “Don’t even start, Pumpkin,” he hissed. “Nobody is anyone’s slave here.”

This got Grandma’s attention. “What is going on here? Why is the Djinn wearing a human body? How?”

“Because I can.”

Grandma looked at him in a way that made Dash squirm, and I couldn’t suppress a smile. I knew exactly how he felt, having been subject to that same look a million times. “Try answering that again,” she said calmly, but with so much authority it was impossible to ignore, even for an ancient, almost all-powerful being.

Dash grimaced, then stood up with a flourish, made a bow and said, “Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Dash, the most powerful Djinn of the eleventh realm, and I was summoned here accidentally by your profoundly stupid grandson without any safeties in place...” He paused for dramatic effect and added with a smug smile, “And owner of your grandson’s soul.”

*Oh no!*

“You’re what?” It took a lot to make Grandma angry, but when she was, she was scary to behold. It was enough for Dash to take a step back.

“You did what?” this was aimed to me, and I looked at my hands, wishing I had something to hide behind.

“I was drunk,” I mumbled. “I didn’t mean to. It was an accident.”

“Mean to do what? Summon a Djinn? Sell your soul?”

“Both,” Dash said with a satisfied grin. “It was perfect. Pumpkin here handed me everything I needed for my master plan. I have a body I can use, complete invincibility, immortality, and the freedom I have wished for since the beginning of time. I will free the Djinn and extract my revenge on those who have wronged me and my kind. Mortals will cower and curse the day they ever discovered the way to enslave the Djinn!”

I had to admit, as a master plan it was awesome. If this were an Indiana Jones movie I would be glued to my seat to find out how our hero would find a way to slay the proverbial beast. As it was, there were no action heroes getting ready to save me and sweep me off my feet in the process. All I had was a very real, very powerful, very angry Djinn—who was greatly overestimating the amount of humans who even believed the Djinn existed—and an equally real,



maybe not as powerful, but at least as angry—and, worse, disappointed—dead grandmother.

“And what are you planning to do with my grandson?” Grandma snapped. “I will make your life miserable as hell if you even think of hurting Ciaran. I can promise you, you’d rather go back to the safety of your lamp than cross me or mine, Djinn!”

Dash seemed impressed, raising a curious eyebrow. “I’m almost intrigued enough to let you try it, Ghost! But to answer your question, I have all I need from Pumpkin here. As long as he doesn’t get in my way, I have no interest in either hurting him or enslaving him. Unlike you humans, Djinn have no need to enslave or force others to do their bidding. I needed his soul, and I have it.”

“Then why don’t you get the hell out of my apartment!” I yelled at him. “If you have what you need, why not just go on your merry way and do whatever you came here to do?”

“Patience, Pumpkin. I have time; I have eternity to be exact. Your couch is comfortable, your TV is adequate, and I need to see who wins *America’s Next Top Model*. I’ll go when I’m ready to leave.”

I groaned and decided—only for the millionth time or so—to start ignoring him. For a supposedly enlightened and all-powerful being, he was very mundane.

Dash laughed. “It is a good thing I’m pretty.”

That he was.

Grandma made a sound like she was clearing her throat. “I don’t like this.”

“Neither do I. But what can I do about it? I messed up, I know that, but Grandma, I don’t know how to fix this.”

There had been a lot of moments these past few years I wished my grandma was still alive for me to hug. I really needed the comfort of warm arms and the reassurance of her strength to tell me this was going to be all right. When I was younger I kind of took it for granted that I had my grandma to run to for failed tests and broken hearts and everything in between. She’d always had good advice, a warm word, and even better, the consolation that everything would work out okay. Even if it involved setting a poltergeist on the boy who bullied me, or years later when that same boy outed me during a school trip, and years after that, when he broke my heart. She didn’t tell me I should’ve known better—which I should have—but instead told me all things happened for a

reason, even though the reason might be three lifetimes removed. And she set a poltergeist on him again. Grandma surely loved her poltergeists.

I felt a hand patting my shoulder. “There, there,” Dash said, a smirk still adorning his face. “Poor boy. Everything happens for a reason. I’d give you a hug, but I’m scared you’ll hit me and you’ll break yourself again. So fragile, you poor mortals.” The last bit was said as he locked eyes with my grandma in obvious challenge.

She huffed. “Don’t try me, Djinn!”

“Don’t try me, Ghost! Ciaran is mine and it’ll take more than a dead woman with an army of poltergeists to take him away from me!”

“I need to speak with you alone,” Grandma ordered me.

“Don’t mind me,” Dash said. “*Doomsday Preppers* is on in five minutes.”

I followed Grandma to my bedroom, knowing it was useless anyway since Dash could pluck everything from my brain if he so wished, but I didn’t point it out to Grandma because I had disappointed her enough.

“Great choice, Pumpkin, lying to your poor grandmother!” Dash called merrily.

*Jerk!*

Grandma raised an eyebrow and I said, “Dash can read my mind. Yours too probably. Privacy is kinda futile.”

I quickly kicked some dirty underwear under my bed, even though Grandma seeing that I hadn’t cleaned my bedroom in weeks was the least of my troubles.

“How are you really?”

I shrugged. “I’m not sure. Scared. Stressed. Nightmares. He’s not forcing me to do anything, not really, but he took me to help him free some Djinn and destroy some statues. Most of the time he’s acting okay, a bit of an arrogant jackass mostly, but it’s not too bad. He can even be nice, if he wants to. He makes it hard to resent him sometimes. It’s like he’s trying, but at the same time he completely misses empathy. Two days ago he killed a man with merely a thought, right before my eyes.” I resisted the urge to retch when I talked about it, seeing again how the man was trampled and gutted by Santa’s Little Helpers. What Dash had done to me immediately after had helped, but not enough that thinking about it didn’t still make me sick.

“I have empathy,” Dash yelled at me. “I simply don’t care about what happens to idiots who insult me. You should be happy the moron will no longer father offspring. I’m just helping evolution.”

“That’s what Mengele said,” I shouted back.

“Who?”

“Google it!”

“My poor boy. I’m so sorry,” Grandma said, her voice the hug she couldn’t give me anymore.

“So no scolding me for being stupid enough to get drunk and try to summon something? Or for selling my soul?”

“Do you plan on doing it again?”

“God no!”

“Then telling you how stupid you’ve been wouldn’t do much good, would it? You know that. Now we have to figure out a solution. And please don’t anger that Djinn too much. He seems all right, better than some of the Djinn I’ve run into, but don’t let his human exterior blind you. He took that shape for a reason, knowing he’d have an easier way controlling you if he got you thinking with parts other than your brain.”

I grew hot all the way to my ears. “Grandma,” I groaned. “Please don’t.”

“What? You think being dead made me unable to judge how handsome a man is? Or that I won’t notice when my favorite grandson is attracted to someone despite knowing better?”

I resisted the urge to put my fingers in my ears and sing “I can’t hear you.”

“Everything happens for a reason, Ciaran.”

“For which one? Don’t drink and summon? Yeah, I’ve learned that lesson!”

“You’ll know when you’re supposed to. Whether it’s over an hour or five lifetimes removed, you’ll know.”

Chances were five lifetimes from now I’d still be owned by a vengeful Djinn, either still in a human body or trapped in a lamp, but I didn’t need to say that out loud.

“Just work with the Djinn, try to keep him from doing harm as much as possible, and be patient. We’ll find a solution. He might simply get bored and let you go. Maybe he’ll get distracted by being human and forgo his revenge.”

Yeah, and maybe he'd turn out to be really nice and was only looking for someone to love. Fat chance.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 4

“Are you sure you want to stay at home and be all boring? I was planning to go to Egypt.”

I perked up. *Egypt?* I had always wanted to go there and visit the Pyramids.

“Yeah, we’ll go there. We’ll certainly go there.” The way he smiled, the harshness in his eyes made me a bit uncomfortable. There was probably another Djinn there, or some old master he wanted revenge on. I should go with him and try to prevent him from causing too much damage.

“But I’m tired,” I pouted, plastering myself on the couch. I even had my phone close enough so I could call for pizza. By the time it got here, I might have the energy to stand up and get the door. “Tomorrow okay? I’m sure with the time difference it’s the middle of the night there now. The desert is dangerous at night.”

Dash raised an eyebrow at me.

“What? There are crocodiles, and hippos, and scorpions,” I said triumphantly, exhausting my full knowledge of Egyptian wildlife.

“The sky is pretty at night,” Dash enticed me. “Nothing like a desert sky to look at the stars.”

“Yes, I know. I live in Utah. I like camping. I’m used to stargazing in the middle of nowhere. Let’s make a deal. We’ll go tomorrow, do whatever you want to do, watch the sunset over the pyramids, and do some stargazing after.”

“It’s a date,” Dash said with a horrifyingly smug look on his face. “Now, what’s on TV?”

\*\*\*\*

“This is not Egypt,” I said intelligently. Rain gushed down on me, drenching me in seconds. I was wearing shorts and a T-shirt. Sunglasses finished my outfit, specifically picked out for a day in sunshine. The town around me was modern and almost as dreary as the weather. It was also distinctly foreign. Not in the exotic way though. The grayish row of townhouses looked like they were built from huge concrete Lego blocks. It was one big box fitting several front doors and windows all painted an equally dreary beige. The apartment building behind us was built in the same horrible style. I let go of my earlier assessment; there was nothing modern about this

town. I guessed Germany, probably somewhere in East Berlin before the wall fell.

“Just a little stop on the way, Pumpkin, and not Germany. I’ll take you there later if you want. I have some business there.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” I said sarcastically. “Is there anywhere you don’t have business?”

“Yes. Antarctica.”

“So you don’t have beef with some poor penguin?”

Dash laughed and stepped up to the closest door. Number fourteen.

“So where are we?”

“Does it matter?” he asked with a shrug.

I looked around and shook my head. “What are we doing here?”

He walked right through the door, leaving me on the outside. In the dripping wet. And cold. I waited for five minutes before deciding to try the door. It didn’t open. Five minutes later the downpour had changed to hail, and I decided to ring the bell. A moment later footsteps came closer, keys turned in the lock, and the door opened a crack. I was ready to bust it open and throw some insults at Dash’s head when I noticed the person opening the door was a head shorter than me. She was also female and looking mighty confused. I guess my summer outfit explained the bewilderment.

“*Kan ik u helpen?*” The woman spoke in a language I didn’t understand or recognize. It did sound slightly German, or maybe something Nordic. Not Danish though. Nate’s little girl’s speech had a completely different lilt to it. Maybe Swedish. She pushed her glasses up while still holding onto the door with her other hand.

“Ehm... Do you speak English?”

“Yes. Can I help you? Are you lost?” Her English was accented, but luckily understandable.

“Ehm... this is going to sound strange, but my friend just walked in here.”

The door closed in my face. I rang the bell again. It was no surprise the door didn’t open this time. I heard the woman talking and suspected she was calling the police.

“Dash,” I bellowed, wondering why I even tried.

On the roof a tiny window opened. “Why the hell are you making all that ruckus? Come here and help me free the Djinn!”

“I can’t walk through doors, you idiot! And the owner of the house is calling the cops.”

Even with him being eighteen feet above me, I knew he was rolling his eyes. A moment later I appeared in what must have be the messiest room I’d ever seen. It was like a garbage dump, only without the smell, and with what looked like quite a few antiques buried between old clothes, ancient magazines, toys, old electronics, and half disintegrating boxes.

“Rest of the house is almost as bad,” Dash said with a scowl. “I can sense the Djinn, but can’t find her. And I really don’t want to touch any of this.”

“And I do?” I said, trying to find a place to stand without crushing anything. “Do you know what the container looks like?”

“Could be anything,” Dash said with a groan. It had no right to come out so sexy. “Could be an old water bottle for all I know. I won’t know before I touch it, and only because I can’t touch it.”

“Well... that surely complicates things.”

“The easiest way would be to destroy the house,” Dash said matter-of-factly. “The only thing left intact will be the container.”

“*Wie zijn jullie, en wat doen jullie in mijn huis?*” A furious voice interrupted our conversation.

“English please?” I said.

The woman had a baseball bat clutched in a white knuckled hand, and in the other hand she had her phone. At about five foot eight and dressed in sweatpants and a bright pink fleece sweater, she shouldn’t have looked so threatening. “I have called the police. They are on their way,” the woman said in English. “Now get out of my house.”

Dash turned around and fixed her with a look. It was a new one to me, but it was very clear it didn’t mean good things for the woman. “Where do you keep the Djinn?”

“Who are you?”

“Your worst nightmare, human. Now tell me where you have enslaved the Djinn.”

The woman blinked and backed up. “You are crazy. Please don’t hurt me.”

“Nobody will get hurt,” I said soothingly even while Dash unleashed a flurry of power that pinned the poor woman against the wall. The baseball bat and the phone clattered from her hands. Luckily the phone landed on a pile of old magazines. In my experience iPhones don’t like being dropped.

“Dash,” I shouted out. “This is enough. She has no idea what you are talking about. Does she look like she has access to wishes? You’d think she’d at least have used one to clean this garbage up!”

“This is not garbage,” the woman said with an insulted look on her face. “Everything here is important.”

“I’m sure it is. What’s your name?”

“Petra,” the woman said in a trembling, almost inaudible voice.

“What are you doing?” Dash growled at me.

*Trying to solve this without bloodshed or blowing up the place, I thought at him. Let her down now!*

“Now where’s the fun in that?” he said with a wink at me. He let the woman slide down to the floor.

“So, Petra, we are looking for something. It’s probably very old. Maybe something you inherited, or picked up at an antique store, or a flea market. I don’t want to threaten you—”

“I do.”

“I know you do. Now shut up.”

“We also didn’t mean to scare you—” I glared at Dash before he could say anything “—but my friend here is a bit of a hothead with no respect for personal boundaries and he’s about to burn this place down to find what he needs—”

“I thought you didn’t want to scare her,” Dash said with a bit of respect in his eyes.

“I just want to give her a fair warning. I have no intention to repeat that scene from last week.”

“Hard to fit a reindeer in here, let alone a whole herd.”

“Who are you people?” Petra asked, watching us with a mixture of terror and amazement on her face. “Are you from TV? Am I being punked? I’m not one of those hoarder types. I only keep stuff that’s important.”



“Yes,” I said, gladly taking the out she gave us. “We are from a new show. It’s called *Treasure Hunt*. We need to find... well... unexpected treasure.”

“I knew I recognized him,” Petra said happily. “He’s from that show... I don’t remember what it’s called... and I also don’t remember his name... I’m so bad with names... and with faces... it’s horrible. And you... didn’t you once participate in the *Soundmix Show*?”

I had no idea what she was babbling about, but I nodded because it seemed to make her happy. It would also hopefully distract her from the missing cameras and the unexplained way we entered her home.

“I might have what you are looking for. I inherited it from my grandmother. She’s always told me to be careful with it and not to clean it because it was so frail and very valuable.”

Dash grinned and followed the woman as she burrowed through the mess on the stairs, the piles of boxes in the hallway, and into a room that was completely filled with stuffed animals. It looked like a cheerful animal cemetery.

“You sure you don’t want me to destroy the place after all? Might be doing her a favor.”

I only shook my head at Dash, knowing very well I wouldn’t be able to stop him if this thing the woman was talking about turned out to be a bust. A few stuffed animals were thrown my way as the woman unearthed whatever she was looking for. Opening a cabinet I hadn’t even noticed was there, she reverently took out a very flimsy looking cardboard box and handed it to me.

I blinked at Dash and put it down carefully. Frightened at what I would find, I opened the box and blinked again. In the box, protected by Styrofoam balls, I found a very fragile, very pretty miniature dollhouse. I peered through the glass in front and thought I saw movement.

“Is this it?” I asked.

“That thing sure beats living in a glass bottle,” Dash said with something like respect.

“My grandmother made these,” Petra said proudly. “She made good money from them. This is the only one she kept.”

“Do it?” I asked with a glance at Dash.

Dash nodded. I wiped the glass, careful not to break it.

At first nothing happened, so I tried again, and very slowly the room lit up brightly. It was a lot like a sunset, or what I imagined the Northern lights would look like. When the lights disappeared, an exceedingly beautiful female Djinn floated lazily in the air. Where her legs were supposed to be was just smoke, like she didn't think it worth the trouble of appearing completely. Her yawn seemed to confirm that.

"Excuse me, young master. I was sleeping. How can I be of service?"

"Hey Alannais," Dash said with a grin. "Long time no see."

"Dash," Alannais replied, looking up at him through her long, dark eyelashes. "A pleasure as always. A really unexpected one, however."

"I'm here to free you," Dash said too enthusiastically. It was sickening.

"That would be pleasant. I really like this box, but in the end even a pretty box is just a box." Even more annoying than Dash's puppylike behavior around the Djinn was the way she sensually waved through the air, all her attention focused on him. "But why would the human help us?"

She aimed all her charms at me. When I merely stared back at her, unimpressed, she blinked and laughed. "Well, I see why. He has you captured, hasn't he, poor boy?"

*She had no idea.*

"Now, do you wish for something, my dear boy? Maybe tidy this mess a little?"

She didn't even wait for an answer, just snapped her slender fingers and the room around us transformed. Suddenly there were rows of shelves holding the—now clean—stuffed animals. Dust had disappeared. The room even looked freshly painted. I peered into the hallway and saw that it was clear and tidy as well.

Petra screamed, then started crying.

"What's wrong with that one? She looks familiar. My former master also made a mess of things. She used all her wishes to clean."

"Not my house," I said to Alannais. "And I'm not sure Petra really minded the mess."

"Nonsense. All that clutter, it's not healthy. It messes with your head. Now tell me your wishes. What are they? Fortune? Fame? A new hairdo?"

“What’s wrong with my hair?” I asked, trying to remember when I last cut it.

“Nothing, Pumpkin,” Dash said while ruffling it. “You look adorable like this; a very cute drowned cat.” I swatted at his grinning face.

“Everlasting love, then? Everyone seems to like that one. I’d offer you a night with me, at least, it’s what I’ll have you believe. Personally I never understood the whole coupling thing. It appears terribly messy. Men seem to appreciate the illusion a lot, however. Wars have been fought over me. I can even let you believe I’m male if you prefer.”

“Mine,” Dash snarled at her.

Say that again?

Alannais’s laugh sounded like music and sunshine. “Everyone can see that, darling. The more important question is if you are his as well.”

Dash stomped away. He didn’t seem to like his fellow Djinn too much.

“None of us get along real well, my boy. There’s that thing about infinite power that makes it hard for us to play with others. We’re too used to getting our way. Now, I can’t make that one fall in love with you, but is there anything else you want?”

My mouth fell open. I had no idea what I said, did, or felt that made her think I wanted that, because I didn’t. Really, I didn’t. “Can you make him less murderous?”

Another tinkling laugh. “I am afraid not. Dash has never understood the joy of the finer arts of subtlety. He’s too passionate. Best you can hope for is to distract him. I will tell him not to kill the woman. She is clueless. I can’t promise he’ll listen though. Anything you wish?”

I thought. I was wet and uncomfortable and very, very cold. Wishing to get dry couldn’t get me in much trouble. I hoped. Alannais didn’t seem like the type to dirty her beautiful hands with murder.

“Fucking hell, Ciaran,” Dash grunted at me while stomping back in. “Stop whining about being wet. It’s giving me a headache. You should’ve worn your new coat.”

“You told me we were going to Egypt!”

Alannais giggled as I became dry and warm again. Dash gave her a glare. “Now free her so we can get going. I promise not to kill the human. It wouldn’t be worth the effort.”

“I wish you were free,” I said to Alannais, and even before I could see her disappear, we were gone as well.

We reappeared on top of a sand dune, the hot sun’s glare so bright I felt my skin start to burn within minutes. Dash looked at me for a moment, seemingly waiting for something, then snapped his fingers and a parasol appeared with two sun beds underneath. Between them was a cooler holding icy water and beer. Dash lay down on one of the beds with a satisfied sigh, took a sip of the iced coffee that had materialized in his hand, and closed his eyes.

I sat down next to him, wondered whether to ask for an iced coffee of my own, but decided it wouldn’t be worth the trouble without milk.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Dash said. “There’s soy milk, or coconut milk, or even lactose-free milk. All you have to do is ask nicely. I’ll even get it from some big corporation so you don’t have to feel guilty about stealing.”

I studied him, wondering what had made him so nice suddenly.

“You are mighty distrustful,” Dash snapped. “It’s getting annoying.”

I sighed. “I’m sorry, Dash.” Trying not to like him was starting to become hard work. If he wasn’t being destructive or murderous, he was actually kind of fun.

“Yes, I am. Now shut up and let me enjoy the sun.”

“Could you get me an iced coffee first? Please? I’d really appreciate it.”

“Don’t grovel. It doesn’t suit you. You don’t have a submissive bone in your body. You should be really thankful you were born in this age. In most other ages you’d have been killed in all sorts of unpleasant ways. Burned alive most likely. They didn’t look too kindly on people summoning demons.”

“Or showing them how annoying angels truly are.”

Dash chuckled and let my much coveted ice coffee appear. “Maybe we should summon some angels to a church service. It would be hilarious.”

“Been there, done that.” And yes, it had been worth the insane amount of trouble Paige and I had been in. The memory of Arashael lecturing the priest on the mistakes in the Bible and the untidiness of the church still made me chuckle fifteen years later. Dash looked at me with admiration on his face. It made me feel warm inside.

For a while I enjoyed the peace and quiet, closed my eyes and took a much-deserved nap. Hanging with the almighty was busy work.

I woke up from the feeling of being watched. I tried to let it go for as long as I could, until heavy breathing near my ear weirded me out so much I had to see what the hell was going on. I opened my eyes and screamed. Something large and hairy and with big yellow teeth was looming over me.

“Nuuuuurrrrrr,” the monster bellowed, letting me smell its foul breath. “Nuuuuurrrrrr.”

I scrabbled towards safety and promptly fell off my sun bed and landed nose first into the sand.

“Nuuuuurrrrrr,” the monster went again. It poked its huge nose in my direction, opening its mouth to bite.

I pushed myself up and launched myself as far away from the monster as I could. Doing so I landed right on top of Dash, who caught me with a surprised *oomph* when I dug my knee in his belly. He held me while I tried to flee further, pulling me on top of him. He shook with laughter as he prevented my attempts to make a run for it.

“Calm down, Pumpkin,” he muttered in my ear. “It’s just a stupid camel trying to make friends.”

I turned my face from where it was hiding in his hair—and definitely not sniffing him—into the direction of my attacker. The camel reached out his long neck towards me. I cringed, pushing closer to Dash. Dash was laughing so hard the sun bed trembled.

“I was bitten by a camel once,” I said haughtily. “I still have the scars to prove it.” I shoved my underarm in his face, showing off my petting zoo battle scars.

Dash mumbled something to the camel and touched its nose. With another “Nuuuuuuurrrr,” it turned around and sauntered off into the sunset.

“Poor beast. All he wanted was for you to like him,” Dash said. “I think I know now why you don’t have a boyfriend. You keep pushing everyone away.” He was still laughing hard.

“My camel phobia has nothing to do with my love life. It’s healthy to stay away from things that can eat you alive.”

This only made Dash laugh harder. “It is obvious you keep everyone at arm’s length. You have severe commitment issues. You send mixed messages. Look at you now, pretending to be scared of a camel just to get a hug.”

“Stop projecting Dr. Phil, you idiot!”

I pushed myself up with my hands on his chest. His muscled chest felt as solid as a brick wall, but warm, human, kinda perfect. He was still chuckling, seemingly too distracted to notice I was still on top of him. Dash had his hands on my hips, the fingers of one hand tickling my side where my T-shirt had crawled up.

I should get away from him, get some distance between us and armor myself before I made his jokes and possessiveness into something it wasn't. But it had been too damn long since I'd last spent any significant amount of time with someone I found remotely attractive. My treacherous body was ready to forget what Dash was exactly. All it did was whisper to me that Dash looked male and felt male. It wanted. I wanted.

A moment later Dash was finally done laughing at me, and he gave me a condescending pat on my ass. “The big, bad camel is gone. You can go lie on your own bed now.” He dumped me off him, but careful enough for me to avoid another face-plant into the sand.

\*\*\*\*

“Dash?” I asked much later, after the sun had fully set and the sky was showing its miracles. “What are we doing here?”

“You'll see,” he said, not very reassuringly. “In a minute.”

And sure, after another long silence, he stood up, stretched, and the sun beds, the parasol and the cooler disappeared. He didn't warn me to get up, so for the third time in a few hours I landed on the sand. I stood up, brushed the sand off my ass, and opened my mouth to complain. When I saw how he glowed with power, I thought better of it. Further in the desert the Sphinx and the Pyramids started glowing in an eerie blue light as well.

My mouth fell open. I had never seen anything like it.

“I built those,” Dash spoke after another endless silence. His tone was calm, but so cold it seeped the last of the desert's heat from me. Inadvertently I took a step back from him. “Long ago, longer than you can imagine, longer than your historians would think possible, long before the pharaohs, and right after Barajas sunk Atlantis, I was summoned and captured by a king with big ambitions and little sense. This king had an unexplained love for his cat and thought she was the true embodiment of God on Earth.”

“He would’ve loved the Internet,” I joked without thinking, and I got a glare so powerful it literally knocked me on my ass. I thought it was better to sit, stay, and listen quietly.

“This mad king loved his cat so much, he wanted to make a statue for her. But something ordinary wouldn’t do, so he found a sorcerer, who found a spell, and summoned me. He enslaved the most powerful of Djinn to immortalize what was nothing more than a dirty, flea-ridden ball of fluff! I will not tire you with the tale of how long it took, and how often the mad king had me redo it. It was never good enough, never done. He enslaved me for year after year, long after the damn beast died. With help of the sorcerer he shackled me to him long after he had gotten his three wishes from me. He managed to keep me locked in his ring even when I performed the tasks he forced me to do. For years and years I was a slave, locked in a spell so powerful I couldn’t even think of escape without risking indescribable pain. Can you imagine being imprisoned in absolute darkness, robbed of your voice and your thoughts, with your magic at the complete disposal of another?”

I shivered at the image he painted.

“This king used me to slay his enemies, to rain down horror on his subjects whenever he felt like it. He also forced me to build the pyramids as tombs for himself, his children, and their cats. He’d enslaved me long after his own death, making me an heirloom by a clever spell I spent centuries finding the counter to.”

Dash had blown up into huge proportions, smoke and fire and anger now as white-hot as molten steel. “I fled after I was finally free. The next time I came here, further insult was added when I found my masterpiece destroyed, defaced by some nameless pharaoh.”

He paused for dramatic effect. “So you understand why this country deserves to be destroyed.”

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 5

When Dash dropped us home I went straight to bed, pulled the covers over my head, and stayed there for over twenty-four hours, reliving every moment of Dash's fury. From the incredible power that set the desert ablaze, to the fighter jets and attack helicopters that came to check out the suspected terrorist attack, which Dash had made explode without even looking at them. The desert around us had turned into a boiling sea of lava as the ancient stone monuments burst into blue fire.

Still, I didn't know how I managed it. I had no clue why Dash had listened to me in the end and hadn't made all of Egypt—and the rest of the Middle East because he seemed to have some unsettled business there too—sink beneath the desert. In the end, he only melted the pyramids and the Sphinx, leaving behind a huge lava-filled pit.

I didn't even have sleep to fall back on as an escape route because I slept fitfully and had terrible nightmares, which left me even more exhausted than I'd been in the first place.

I had to leave my bed eventually, forced out by hunger, thirst, and other mundane issues, like the need to avoid my own stink. After taking a shower I found Dash in the living room, once again sprawled out on the couch watching TV. No real-life soaps this time, but in-depth coverage of the supposed terrorist attack on Egypt. I was ready to turn around and go back to the safe tent my bed made, then changed my mind and went to visit my sister.

I ran the near five miles to her house, hoping the exercise would clear my mind and burn off the excess adrenaline. It even helped, until I knocked on Paige's door and she practically dragged me in, tugging me down onto the couch where the news coverage was playing.

“Did you see this, Cia?”

“Yes.”

“It's just... nobody truly knows what happened. It's apparently some new kind of weapon. Scientists can't explain it.”

“I can,” I said flatly. “I will give you three guesses.”

Paige slowly turned towards me with eyes big and her mouth falling open in surprise. “You got to be kidding me!”



“I’m not. We have to stop him. He was this—” I held my thumb and forefinger a quarter of an inch from each other “—close to destroying Egypt completely. At one point I was certain he was going to flatten the entire continent.”

“Why didn’t he?”

“I made him see reason. I don’t know how, but he listened.”

“He’s not evil,” Paige said thoughtfully.

“He’s not evil? Look—” I pointed at the smoking pit of lava where the pyramids used to be “—he did that without any obvious effort because he was angry over something that happened over ten thousand years ago.”

“Why?”

“Long story. Something with an evil mad king and cats and being forced to build things. Like being able to create something that will continue to stand over ten thousand years isn’t magnificent. People dream of doing that shit!”

“You dream of doing that shit, little brother.”

“Yes! But what do I do? I find new and exciting ways to wish someone’s dog a Happy World Animals’ Day. Not only that, but I’m also to blame for bringing down the last standing miracles of the ancient world.”

“Maybe the one who is to blame are the ones who enslaved him.”

“Are you agreeing with what he’s doing?”

“Well... not exactly, but—”

“There are no buts!”

“There’s one. No one died—”

I started to interrupt, but she stopped me immediately by holding up her hand.

“Yeah... I know. The moron with the reindeer. That was sick. But technically that was the other Djinn. The one Dash helped banish, remember? Dash simply sped things along. Last night nobody died. There are reports of people one moment walking around the site and the next they were safely at home. The pilots of the fighter jets and the helicopter he blew up? Magically transported to their own beds. All the camels who were stabled near the pyramids? Happily grazing in an unexplained, never before heard of oasis in the middle of the desert. He’s not evil, Cia. He’s angry, but not evil, and I think

he respects you. Why else would he listen to you? Why would he not simply kill everyone standing in his way? He has no reason to like humans. No reason but you.”

I had no words. She was defending Dash. She was actually defending him. I didn't know what to think anymore. She'd gone crazy. The whole world had gone crazy. Although, if the whole pilot-and-camel-saving thing was true, that was mighty cool of him.

“I still need to stop him, Paige. I'm afraid next time someone pisses him off by doing something or saying something he'll kill a whole country just to make his point. We're just cattle to him. Disgusting cattle even, because he thinks we all support the enslavement of Djinn.”

“Then show him we're more.”

“Somehow I don't think he's going to be impressed by a showcase of heroes and people sacrificing everything for others. His morals are different, if he even has any.”

“Then show him how beautiful the world is. Show him how people enjoy the things he built or made. Show him how to have fun on Earth. He's going to have eternity here, right? He might as well enjoy himself instead of only being angry. What's he doing right now?”

“Watching TV. As always.”

“Can't blame him having a low regard for humans if all his experience comes from TV or his former masters. You need to up your game, little brother.”

“So you're saying I need to play tour guide to a vengeful Djinn?”

“Yeah. Might as well have some fun while you're in this shit. I have been doing research, and the only way to get your soul back is to sell it to another equally powerful being and hope they destroy each other while fighting for it. Or get him to give it back. So if you make him happy, make him see there's nothing to gain from his revenge, maybe he'll leave you in peace, go back to his own dimension, and it will all end in a perfect happily ever after.”

\*\*\*\*\*

On my way back home I realized that Paige had basically ordered me to date Dash. I didn't like dating. The pressure to be funny and cool and amazing was too much. It always felt like I was on a showcase, a test drive; spend a bit

of time with me to decide if you want to keep me. I preferred going from friends to sex to a relationship and cut out the dating part. Needless to say, that hadn't worked out for me thus far.

Dating Dash was a whole other kind of challenge. For starters, I didn't want to start liking him. It was bad enough he was so ridiculously attractive, and he'd started to get touchy-feely. My body already wanted all kinds of things from him. He owned my soul. I refused to let him break my heart as well. To make things even worse, I didn't just have to make him like me enough to let me have my soul back, he needed to start liking my entire species so much he'd stop his rampage. Talk about high pressure. It made speed dating sound like fun.

I took a deep breath before I opened my front door and found Dash still in the same place, still watching TV, now eating a huge slice of cheesecake.

"You're so lucky you can't get fat," I blurted out.

Dash looked up and smiled at me. It was a too broad smile, which made me feel all tingly and mushy inside. *Wrong, so wrong.*

"You're back! And you're talking to me again!" His gleeful tone was more than a bit sarcastic.

I took a deep breath to arm myself. "Tell me something, Dash. Paige said nobody died in Egypt. Even the pilots are okay. Why?"

"Because you told me not to kill any innocents, stupid!" Dash answered matter-of-factly. "Of course you could argue the fighter pilots were not exactly innocent, but I guessed you would disagree and start a whole thing about how they were acting under orders, and I was halfway to destroying something they would consider national property, and they couldn't hurt me anyway, so I thought I'd stay in the clear. You are mighty annoying when you get all tangled up in a moralistic rant. Now, are you hungry?"

"No, thank you. Paige fed me." Horrible healthy stuff, of course.

I took another deep breath. "Aren't you getting bored sitting here watching TV?"

Dash shrugged. "Not really. Time passes differently for me. Eternal life and such. And... Well... Never mind." He avoided my eyes, looking chagrined for a moment. "Long story. Not going to bore you with small details I'll figure out soon anyway."

Although that sounded mighty interesting and I would do good to pry anymore, I knew that if I didn't act now, I'd find a million excuses to wait and the world would've been destroyed before I got to do anything to prevent it. So I blurted my question out, bracing myself for rejection. Yeah, this was exactly like dating. "Would you like to do something fun today? I really need to go into work tomorrow, though. There's only so long I can pretend being sick. You might not mind spending all your time watching daytime TV, but I—"

"Yes," he said, the big, breath-stealing smile back on his face. Only now it seemed sort of genuine. "Yes!"

"Anything in particular you always wanted to do?"

"Miniature golf!" he said immediately.

After I managed to stop laughing, which took me about ten minutes, we spent some time researching the best miniature golf sites in the world. Dash even got me a new mouse, admittedly stolen, but from one of those huge, soulless companies who wouldn't miss it, and I'd donate the money I saved to a good cause, which absolved me of all blame. Dash shook his head at this and mumbled something about Robin Hood complexes and how confusing he found morality.

\*\*\*\*

It turned out Dash had had a point. Miniature golf was awesome. You simply needed to do it right. I'd never expected feeding alligators could be part of what I'd always considered an activity for little kids. There were also giant waterfalls and rocky summits, mysterious caves and tropical rain forests. Dash insisted we'd do a paddleboat ride, and though he kept commentating on how Africa didn't really look like this, he seemed to be having fun. Honestly, so was I.

He sucked at the miniature golf part. He argued it was because he didn't want to cheat, but I thought it was to see me crack up every time he missed an easy shot.

"You don't have to let me win, you know," I said after he had asked a four-year-old kid to take his shot for him, because I had just told him he couldn't screw things up more if he was a toddler. "I'm not competitive at all."

Dash looked at me with a huge grin. "I can either do this using my supernatural abilities and take all the fun out, or let my human body try to

figure it out and laugh my ass off. I prefer the second. I'd never *let* you win." He stuck out his tongue at that, cracking up the kid who was looking at Dash in fascination. I understood the feeling.

We talked and laughed and acted like fools, making it harder and harder to remember this wasn't a normal date with a normal guy I could afford to fall for. It seemed Dash was truly putting up an effort to make me like him. I couldn't fathom why, and it was probably only wishful thinking, but the feeling stayed.

Even better, the plan seemed to work. We played all eighteen holes, then spent ages watching the alligators go crazy over being fed and the little kids shrieking with laughter and fright while feeding them. We even did the exploration game meant for ages ten and under. Dash smiled the entire time, occasionally bursting out in laughter. For some reason Dash couldn't keep his eyes off the excited kids running around everywhere.

"You do a lot to make your offspring happy," he eventually told me when we were sitting down in the little outdoor cafe. He licked at the ice cream I had bought for him, moaning in pleasure. It wasn't meant to be suggestive, but oh man, it was hot. His smirk told me he noticed my reaction, but it immediately became another happy sigh as he nibbled on the chocolate-covered cone.

I shrugged. "They are small for a long time. But yes, I'm told most parents would do almost anything to make their kids happy."

We looked at a little Asian girl with her hair tugged into two braids who walked past with an ice cream that was almost as big as she was. She had ice cream all over her face and was looking so extremely happy it made me ache inside.

Dash cocked his head. "You want kids?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. I never really thought about it. Not now. Not by myself with a salary I can barely pay my rent from."

"I thought you didn't like women," Dash said matter-of-factly.

It took me a long time to understand what he was talking about. From anyone else it would be bigoted nonsense and would inspire a rant about how gay men were perfectly able to raise a happy child, and that straight couples didn't equal good parents. Dash simply did not understand. "I would adopt. Maybe surrogate, but I feel I should do something good, give a child a chance."

"Of course you do." It wasn't mocking. Just thoughtful.

Silence followed, the comfortable kind where I contemplated where I'd be in ten years' time. Would I have a family? Have found someone to love? Where would Dash be?

Dash simply studied me, not commenting on my thoughts even though I knew he was listening.

Later, when he'd teleported us to a beach where we were watching the sunset before going to grab dinner somewhere, I thought I heard him mumble, "I'm never letting you go again."

It should've frightened me. Instead, it was the longing I felt that made me so cold with fear I got goose bumps all over. The arm he wrapped around me to keep me warm didn't help at all.

I was *so* doomed.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 6

I had only been at work for five minutes and had just sat down in my cubicle. As usual I was mentally cursing the person who'd invented the cubicle, when Dash materialized next to me. He was butt naked and dripping wet, and I just got a good—well, amazing—eyeful of his truly wonderful body, when he was dressed again. A good thing too, because popping wood was not considered accepted workplace behavior.

“I could kill him for you, you know,” Dash said like his presence was completely acceptable. “You still have all your wishes.”

“I'm sure he's already dead,” I answered without thinking, already opening my browser to Google it. Then I realized what I was saying and snapped, “No killing, we discussed this. No one. Ever!”

“Not even someone who did something terrible? Like murder a ton of little children?”

I thought about it for a moment. “Maybe. But only if you're certain he did it and will kill again if you don't stop him.”

At that time Mr. Bernard, my boss, passed by. He peered at Dash with a frown. “Who are you? Are you the temp we hired? You're late!”

Dash started to open his mouth, and before he could insult my boss and cost me my job, I said, “He's my roommate. He popped by to bring me coffee. He's just leaving.”

“Hmm. Where's the coffee?”

I stared at Dash and a second later a carton cup appeared next to my computer, another one in Dash's hand.

Mr. Bernard blinked once, then shook his head and smiled. “Ah, I see. Now show your friend out and get to work ASAP.”

I stood up and grabbed Dash's hand to get away from Mr. Bernard as fast as possible.

“What are you doing here?” I whispered as soon as we were out of earshot. “I told you I really had to go into work today. And why the hell were you naked?”

Dash either ignored me, or was too busy studying the office to notice. “It’s mighty depressing here. How do you get anything done?”

He was right. The office wasn’t big. There were only eight of us when we were all here, and there was only room for six in the room. The walls were bare, as were the cubicles. Mr. Bernard thought the emptiness formed a blank canvas and helped creativity. He was also allergic to anything growing or blooming, so there wasn’t even some green to break the dreariness. The only window looked out on the parking lot and the production hall across from it.

“I don’t. That is why I work from home as much as I can. Now answer my question; what are you doing here?”

Dash pointedly ignored me until we were outside, then finally mumbled, “I don’t know.”

“What?”

“I don’t know okay? I was simply trying out that shower thing you seem to enjoy so much. At first I really didn’t know what you seem to like about it so much. I mean, it’s just water and soap. Then I tried that other thing you always do. You know? That thing where you massage your penis? Well, I started to get it then...”

“I-I’m sure you did,” I choked out, wondering whether to laugh, or to berate him for spying on me. I felt myself get red from chest to ears. “I don’t need any explanations. Really.”

“Hmm... I would think something that feels that amazing should be shared. Must be one of those weird human things I don’t understand.”

“Yeah... well... we do... in a sense. I’ll explain it to you someday.” *When hell froze over.* Though, as far as I knew, hell could be freezing cold.

“It’s not,” Dash said cheerfully. “It’s just really, really dreary. Nothing to do, nothing to see. Even the temperature is normal. It’s horrible. The worst dimension of all. It’s well... hell. This place reminds me a bit of it, honestly. Want me to brighten it a bit?”

“I really don’t want to waste a wish on work. It would make more sense to wish for a better job. Now what were you saying about suddenly teleporting here? You didn’t when I went to my sister yesterday.”

Dash pouted, making him seem unbelievable cute. My thought brought a huge grin on his face, before he pulled his face back into a frown. He still refused to answer my question though.



“Dash?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you take me to free the Djinn, and to Egypt?”

“Ehm... Well... I needed your help to free the Djinn, and Egypt—”

“Don’t say it was on the way. You asked me to come to Egypt before you decided to free Alannais on the same day.”

Still Dash didn’t answer. I couldn’t help it. I started to laugh. It seemed the poor, almighty Djinn wasn’t so almighty after all. He couldn’t be too far away from me.

*Damn!* He couldn’t be too far away from me! Which was, considering how close I lived to my work, not far at all.

Life had just become more difficult.

“Fuck!” Dash burst out. “That’s so unfair!”

He was the one talking about unfairness? Really?

Dash glowered at me, while I fished my phone out of my pocket. I opened the map app and checked it. My sister lived about a five mile drive or walk from my place, but I guessed it to be about four miles as the crow flies. My work was almost twice as far, so about seven miles. So we could not even be seven miles apart. That was bad.

I sighed and called Paige. She answered almost immediately and sounded part amused, part amazed and part horrified as I explained the problem. She promised to call me within an hour with a believable family crisis so I could ditch work. Again. She also didn’t mind Dash hanging around there until I managed to get out of work. If my guess was correct, Dash could be there without being dragged back to me.

My mouth fell open when I reentered the building. Gone were the cubicles. Gone were the ugly, industrial style desks. Gone were the desk chairs that almost fell apart, and the PCs that were so slow you could run five miles before they had started up.

In the five minutes I had been outside with Dash, the place had been transformed. The white, sterile-looking walls were now covered, floor to ceiling, with photographic wallpaper showing a beautiful underwater scene. The desks were glass and held brand new iMacs with huge screens. The desk

chairs were in blues and greens that complemented the wallpaper and looked like they wouldn't break your back from sitting on them. It was beautiful.

Somehow my coworkers didn't seem to notice the difference. They were simply working—or more likely pretending to be working—while Mr. Bernard sat on the comfortable looking couch now standing in a corner, not looking upset or confused at all. Weird, but good. Now I wouldn't feel like killing myself every time I had to go in to work. I might even like coming here. It was more beautiful than my apartment. Maybe I should let Dash redecorate my house as well.

I sat down behind the one empty desk, finding my computer already logged in, and amused myself with checking out all the features of my new computer and the joy of working on a digital drawing tablet. I even tried to get some work done.

Tried!

Because I still didn't have a single original idea, I started on a birthday card with a Djinn, saying, "May all your wishes come true." Something that also would work great for a holiday card. I could make a million different versions of it; make it an entire new line. I couldn't help giving the Djinn Dash's face, however, something that felt so wrong I erased the design before anyone would see it. I mindlessly flipped through the image gallery, until my phone rang, and Paige came through with the excuse I needed. Apparently my favorite uncle had had a car accident. The poor man was in mortal danger, and I needed to get to the University Hospital in Salt Lake City. It was brilliant. It was close enough to home to have an excuse whenever I ran into coworkers back home, and the car accident would be a cover story for as long an absence as I needed.

Thirty minutes later I reached Paige's office. I could've gotten there much sooner, but I'd stopped to get a caramel macchiato on the way. Not stealing things felt good. So did drinking the overly sweet beverage my health freak sister would scold me for. I found Dash sitting on my sister's desk, looking immensely bored, and my sister sitting on the floor peering at a map.

"Good to see you're bonding," I said as I sat down on Paige's desk chair and demonstratively took the last sip of my drink, before throwing it in the wastebasket with a perfect overhand throw.

"You had milk?" Dash scolded me at the same time my sister said, "You had sugar?" in exactly the same tone.

“Yes,” I said. “I will eat and drink whatever I damn well like. I’m a grown man who can make his own damn decisions.” It was soy milk, but I was not about to admit that... Out loud. Dash’s grin showed me he heard my thought, and his wink showed that he approved.

“Look where those decisions have brought you, little brother,” Paige said. “With your soul owned by a Djinn who you can’t even get a restraining order from. So sure, you should do whatever you think best.”

I pouted and sought Dash’s gaze for help, but he held up his hands in defeat. “Don’t look at me. The lady has a point. It worked out in my favor, but it was still incredibly stupid.”

I huffed and let my sister win this one.

“Thanks so much for the office makeover, Dash. I love it! Just... How is it you can do things like that in an instance, and still take years building something... err... big?” I thought it smart not to name-drop the pyramids.

“I could build a palace within a minute if I wanted. But that would mean I would have to influence the minds of hundreds, if not thousands, of people to make them believe it had been built the ordinary way. That causes all kind of misery. It’s easy to do on a small scale. All I have to do is change a memory or two.”

“So that’s why no one ever notices when you teleport somewhere!”

“No, that’s even simpler. Human brains have difficulty processing the supernatural. Your brain assumes its seen wrong and adjusts its perception to fit its beliefs. And it doesn’t matter if one or two people do perceive the truth. Someone noticing you appearing out of nothing doesn’t give the same kind of problems as huge monuments appearing out of thin air. Not that I care if people get a whiff of the supernatural, but few rulers wish to be accused of witchcraft. It would lead to all kinds of revolts and often a painful and unpleasant death. Most likely getting burned alive.”

That explained a lot. It also was another warning of the enormity of his powers. I really should stop pissing him off.

“Where’s the fun in that?” Dash said with a wink. Paige frowned, studying us both as we smiled at each other. I knew that expression. She got it when she had opinions about me—or more specifically my love life—that I didn’t want to hear.

I distracted her by asking what she had already figured out.

“Well... considering you can visit me both at home and at work without Dash being forced back to you, and the work-home distance seems to be too big, it means the maximum distance between you and him is between five and seven miles. I have a theory on the exact distance, but we need to do a little experiment. Dash, please teleport to this spot and wait for ten minutes.” Paige pointed at a spot on the map that seemed randomly close to the seven-mile radius she had drawn on the map. “If nothing happens, teleport to this place—” another seemingly random point, “—and again wait for ten minutes. If you’re still not dragged back, walk ten yards and wait again. You’ll take my phone with GPS track switched on, so we can see exactly where and when you are dragged back.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!” Dash protested, and he seemed to be growing in size, a certain sign he was getting angry. “I’m not going to random places and standing around like an idiot. Let him do it!”

“Don’t you want to—”

“NO! I don’t care about the exact distance. I care about a solution! I can’t live eternity with a damn human bound to my back!” He jumped off the desk and started to pace with furious steps.

“Hey!” I snapped. “It’s no picnic for me either! You’re a huge pain in the ass! Give me my soul back and the problem is solved. You go your way, and I go mine, and everyone is happy!”

“Not a chance,” Dash roared, the power in his voice enough to make the windows tremble. “You better fix the damn problem!”

“Or what?” I bellowed back, approaching him until we stood nose to nose. “You’ll kill me? Go ahead! Put me in a tiny, dark space to suffer for eternity! Let’s see how your conscience deals with that!”

“You little—”

“There is no solution,” Paige said, sounding astonishingly calm as if she squabbled with angry occult beings on a daily note. “At least that’s what I suspect. I’ve thought a lot about this, and did tons of research the past week.” She had? I should probably feel bad about doing exactly nothing to solve my problem. “You seem to be using Ciaran as an anchor. Without the bond you will go back to your usual state. You will lose your human body, and lose the protection you have because of it.”

*Shut up!* I mentally screamed at Paige, but of course only Dash heard it.

Dash smiled wryly. “How do we find out for sure?”

“I’m surprised you don’t feel it yourself. The connection is so strong I can almost see it without meditating. Ciaran will be able to feel it for sure when he meditates.”

Both Dash and Paige looked at me expectantly, and I grumbled. “Hard to concentrate like this.” I glared up at Dash who was too close, staring intensely down on me with those dark, hypnotic eyes, too attractive now that he let his rage go. Too warm. Too male. Too much. Yesterday I had started to forget why he was a bad thing, now I had remembered. Too late.

“Leave me alone for a while.” My voice quivered. I turned away to avoid Dash’s gaze that for a moment shone with embarrassment and regret. “Give me some space to think.”

Maybe it would be for the best. I would confirm Paige’s suspicions, Dash would put me in a more convenient package, and it would be all over.

Dash made a sound I couldn’t interpret and took a huge step back.

“I need to be alone now,” I said softly.

“We’ll do the stupid experiment,” Dash muttered with a strangled voice. “Like it matters if it’s five point seven or five point eight miles.” He disappeared immediately.

“He really likes you,” Paige said softly. I glowered at her and sat down on a comfortable place in the room so I could meditate.

I slowed my breathing, consciously relaxing and sinking into a meditative state. I hadn’t done this since Dash had burst into my life. I’d been too afraid of what I’d find. Too afraid I’d find some gaping hole where my soul used to be. Floating deeper and deeper into myself, I braced myself for the horror I would find when I reached my deepest self.

No holes. No darkness. Just the usual glow and lightness and the familiar power that helped me make a connection to other planes. Also the bond Paige had mentioned; an unbreakable tangle of my energy and an alien one. Almost like a portal.

I tried to follow it but was pushed back. The connection was one way then, considering Dash seemed to have unlimited access to my thoughts and feelings. I didn’t doubt he could completely take me over with ease. Wipe me out, and make me a slave. I still didn’t completely understand why he hadn’t.

I went back to my normal state and watched closely for the short time I could still see the Earth's energies before my vision returned to normal. The bright yellow and greens of Paige's aura, my own a yellow-green with blue and lavender tints, and the blazing cord of golden and white light disappearing through the wall in the direction I expected Dash to be. The cord was pulsing and seemed to be straining.

Suddenly Dash appeared right before me. He blazed with the same golden and white light of our bond, muddied and bloodied by the dark red of anger and vengeance. Purity and power darkened with rage. Not the blackness I had expected. Before I could study him more closely my vision faded and blinked out.

"Well?" Dash asked impatiently.

"Paige was right. We are connected somehow." I deliberately avoided the word bond, not liking its implications. "The link between us seems to pull you back. You might be able to break it, but I can't."

Dash growled. "I knew there was a connection. I can damn well see it as well as feel it. I suspected there was something you were doing to pull me back. Some kind of summons."

"So this whole experiment was a setup? What the fuck? You think I like you hogging my couch and invading my life? It's like being married without even having a first date. Worse! I can't even go to work to escape you. Why the hell would I pull you back?"

"To piss me off? To make me change my mind about keeping you?"

Hmm... it would have been a great strategy. If I had thought of it, and had the power to do so.

Dash sighed, rubbing his face. "Never mind."

"Ehm... boys?"

We both turned to look at Paige. "I don't mean to interrupt a perfectly nice moment, but I know the exact distance, and the time. Maybe this will convince you. No way it's anything but supernatural and a result of the contract." She paused for dramatic effect. "You can be no more than six point sixty-six miles apart for more than six hundred and sixty-six seconds."

It was so ridiculous I started laughing. Someone was seriously screwing with us. The Devil's number was not even a real thing.

“Don’t look at me,” Dash said with a snicker of his own. “I didn’t put that in the contract. I wanted freedom, not a permanent travel companion.”

Paige asked, “Who else had access to the contract?”

I cursed right when Dash muttered, “I’ll kill that damn angel.”

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 7

Inexplicably, for the following two weeks nothing out of the ordinary happened. Dash didn't try to free more Djinn, nor did he destroy any ancient artifacts or anything else. Mostly he sat on the couch masking his bad mood by watching endless TV. At least he exchanged his real-life soaps for series. He called it doing research. Since he was watching shows like *Prison Break* and *Dexter*, I wasn't reassured. The documentaries I put on for him were always switched off after five minutes. Dash found science boring, as well as useless. History made him rant about how inaccurate it was, and human interest could only entertain him until the commercials distracted him.

When he wasn't watching TV he was pacing through the room muttering what he would do to Arashael once he got his hands on it. In those moments his presence was almost impossible to handle. I did my best to distract him, a practice that had a very low success rate. There were a few cozy moments, curled on the couch together, watching a movie or something, or even simply chatting as we had *America's Got Talent* playing in the background.

Or the day when he found my sketchbook and demanded I make a drawing of him. It was the first time art came easy since Dash was here, and I completely lost myself in not just sketching him as he was posing for me, but also making a whole series of him as I imagined him in history, even daring to draw him sulking in a lamp. To my surprise he laughed when he got his hands on that picture, telling me I should frame it and hang it.

These were the few moments I liked having him here, in my apartment, acting like he was at home. It felt like he belonged, made things better instead of stifling me with his larger-than-life presence and his growing resentment.

The good moments became increasingly sparse as the days went by and we hadn't been able to summon Arashael, or find another solution. The bastard angel was probably in hiding. I would too if I was it. Dash wasn't in a forgiving mood on his best days, and these days he was stewing with anger, filling the room with a restless tension so bad it would have driven even the Dalai Lama into a frenzy.

When I couldn't take it anymore and threatened to go whether Dash would come or not, I managed to get him away from the couch for a few hours. I took him to visit some of the places in Utah I loved so much, tried tempting him to



go mountain biking or hiking with me. Most unfortunately, being in the middle of nowhere bored him, while I needed the space around me to think, and more importantly to de-stress. Since I couldn't sleep without terrible nightmares, couldn't draw anything that wasn't Dash, and couldn't leave Dash behind to go on a trip on my own, it sucked big time. I couldn't even take walks around my place, considering I was supposed to be in Salt Lake City taking care of my uncle.

The days went by, and we were both such terrible company that not only my sister stopped visiting and even calling, but my grandma also cut her visits short. Even the pizza boy told us to chill out, and advised relationship counseling. I could barely bring up the energy to stop Dash from turning him into a rat.

By the end of the second week, I was pacing through the room, too wound up to sit down, tired and cranky from not sleeping, a headache crawling over my skull, and so completely done with being locked up with the constant noise of the TV I felt like screaming.

Still, it was Dash who exploded first. "Stop that damn pacing and shut the fuck up! I can't hear the TV!"

"I'm not even talking," I muttered. "You can't tell me not to think."

"Yes, I can. Go to sleep, go take a walk, go do something!"

I sighed. "I can't."

"What?"

"All three."

"Want a sleeping pill? A knock on the head?"

"No!" Falling or staying asleep wasn't the problem. Being asleep was.

"Stop whining!"

"Stop watching TV! I get it. You're pissed off. So am I! That damn angel won't show up—" and Dash couldn't chase it down. He'd either get sucked back into this dimension, or he needed to take me along, something that would most likely kill me, and we didn't know the consequences for both my soul and Dash's freedom. "—but can we please go do something fun today? Something outside, and without serial killers, zombies, or criminals? Something healthy and outside, and fun!"

"Shut up! I want to watch this."

For the millionth time I had to resist throwing something at his head.

“Are you always this violent?” Dash asked with a smirk. He found it so funny when he got me worked up. Annoying bastard!

“No! That’s just you.” In fact, I never even felt the urge to hit someone before Dash waltzed into my life.

“I thought so.” His grin showed he enjoyed that immensely. “Now shut up for ten more minutes, and I promise you I’ll take you out. Go think of where you want to go.”

\*\*\*\*

When we appeared right on top of the Eiffel Tower I was afraid for a moment. What if Dash also built this and decided to destroy it right under our feet?

“This thing is human made,” Dash reassured me immediately. “Nothing in this city has been Djinn made, though a sixteenth century priest once used a Djinn to fake miracles.”

We were silent after that. Dash studied the structure and the people enjoying the view, listening to them chatter about well, whatever they were chattering about. I heard all kind of languages, and I only understood the few English-speaking tourists. I found myself a relatively quiet place and savored the sun on my face, the wind in my hair, and the freedom of being so high. Made me wish I could fly. Be free, float far above the Earth. Though, of course, having to stay close to Dash would severely limit that freedom. I’d be like a caged bird, unless he would agree to go flying with me. I had to blink some tears away and tried to get back to the happy feeling.

“I wish I could paint right now,” Dash’s husky voice sounded in my ear.

He was right behind me, almost pressing up to me. If either of us would move an inch, our entire bodies would be pressed together. I knew how it would feel. Solid muscle against my back, his chin over my shoulder, our cheeks pressing together. Like lovers. In the open air and freedom, any oppressing feelings were gone. Left was merely that exciting, tingling feeling of emerging butterflies.

“You looked so beautiful staring over Paris, thinking about freedom. I wish I could immortalize that image, that moment.”

I stopped resisting and leaned back. His cheek brushed mine, like I had imagined it. His arms circled around my waist and he pulled me closer.

*Maybe being free wasn't such an important thing after all.*

I tensed at my own thought right when Dash made a sound as if he wanted to say something. When I drew back from him, he just sighed and let me go without protest. I desperately wanted to look around and see his expression, but I didn't. I didn't trust myself. Not in a mood where I would take comfort from where I could find it. It couldn't be more. Dash wasn't even human. I would do good to remember that.

By the time I was ready to look at Dash again, he had wandered away and was chatting with a group of Japanese tourists. I went to him and couldn't resist bumping my hip against his. I wanted warmth between us. I needed it to make everything that had happened okay.

Dash smiled at me and grabbed my hand when we followed the Japanese group into the elevator. I wove our fingers together. We needed to stop being angry and accept we were bound more closely than I'd ever be to anyone else. There was something between us, some sexual tension I wasn't completely sure wasn't just my dick talking, and a budding friendship I also wasn't sure was more than wishful thinking. Call it Stockholm syndrome, call it stupidity, blame it on the link between us, but I was going with the flow right now. Conveniently, I ignored how I had no idea if Dash was even capable of love.

Only when we reached ground level did the reality sink in; I was in Paris. I had dreamed about this for years, had even started a savings account for a trip to Europe that I had to dip into so often for other things—it didn't even cover the airfare. Now I was here after all. Dash had taken me here the moment I mentioned I'd like to go to Paris.

I squealed and hugged him. He hesitated for a moment before hugging me back, but I didn't care. His broad, happy smile when I let him go again and smiled up to him before turning in a circle to take it all in, was worth it.

"Thank you! Thank you so much!" I said with another squeal of delight. "Now what do you want to do?"

"Your pick, Pumpkin. You seem to have given this some thought."

What to do, what to pick? I wished we had a week, and not—"Wait, how long can we stay?"

"As long as you want. We could pop back home when you need to sleep, or simply take a hotel room for the night."

"Take one, or occupy one?"

“Depends on how you feel about me fabricating a credit card to pay for it. Or do you want to pay?”

I thought about the current state of my bank account. “I could buy you lunch, maybe dinner, and nothing fancy or it’ll leave me broke. Just out of curiosity, who would pay for the credit card?”

“Disney,” Dash said with a smug grin. “I don’t care that Aladdin freed the Djinn in the end, it was still a terrible story glorifying slavery.”

Hmm... I wouldn’t mind having a credit card that was paid for by a company I hated. It was stealing, but, well... if I also gave away a lot to charity...

“Just say the words,” Dash said cheerfully. “I wish...”

“No, thank you. I still think there are more important things than money, and I don’t want to waste my wishes.”

“But you have no problems with me spending stolen money?”

“I’d rather have you pay honest businessmen with money stolen from a multibillion company, than stealing from those businessmen. So if you promise to give some money to beggars...”

“I don’t need a credit card for that, Pumpkin. If you wished I could make all the beggars in this city rich.”

“You could do that?”

“Not without serious consequences. I told you, big wishes have big aftereffects. Even smaller wishes can, especially if you wish for someone else. If I made that one beggar over there stinking rich—” he pointed at a man sitting under a tree with a little dog curled at his feet “—What would it do? What would he do with the money? Is he an addict? Would I only be enabling him? Did he choose this life? Would he get mugged and killed by his fellow beggars? Get arrested because no one understands where he got the money so everyone assumes he must have stolen it? Would he spend it all in a year and land back on the streets? Even when I don’t actively try to screw up a wish, bad things happen often. I can’t see into the future. You’re a smart guy, Ciaran, even though I like to call you an idiot. You would’ve wasted at least two of your wishes already if you weren’t. Other people don’t think about things the way you do. They don’t consider the consequences or the morality of things.”

“Yeah... remember when I accidentally summoned you and sold you my soul?”

“You were drunk, which happens how often?”

“Only that one time,” I admitted.

“And will you make that mistake again?”

“Never.”

“You see. Now where do you want to go? It’s been centuries since I’ve been here, but there’s always been a lot of artsy stuff here. I’d gathered you’d want to see some.”

He was right. I was dying to go to the Louvre, the Centre Pompidou and Musée d’Orsay, to stroll through Montmartre and The Marais, both for the art galleries and for the nightlife, and those were just the things at the top of my list.

It was even better to walk through Paris than I’d ever imagined it. I truly enjoyed being here with Dash, discovering the sights and listening to Dash telling stories about how it had looked in 516 AD or 1846, or taking in the tourists around us, all awed by the history, the sheer beauty of this city.

“Do you see?” I asked Dash softly as we walked into the Louvre—of course after skipping the lines. “Do you see how important the past is to us, to be able to witness what went before us, to see it before our eyes in stone or in paint?” I wanted to say more, but didn’t. Showing, not telling, was the key. He needed to understand, and starting a discussion wouldn’t help my case.

Dash stared hard at me, brow furrowed. I feared I went too far, and had ruined my quest almost before I had started, but in the end he nodded. He went back to watching people—which seemed to interest him much more than the beautiful art around us. More often than not that came back to watching me. His eyes were on me all the time—not on the paintings or the sculptures, not on the people whose conversations he was certainly listening to—but on me. The only exception was when we came across a little boy standing in front of the Mona Lisa. The boy said something in what I guessed was Swedish that made both his father and Dash laugh out loud. He kept watching the father as he talked to his son, and walked him back and forth to see the painting’s eyes follow him, pointing out the smile and explaining with enthusiastic gestures what else was special about the painting.

At least, that is what I suspected. I couldn’t follow a word of it, not that I would have even if they had spoken English, since my attention was completely captured by Dash. There was something about him when he looked at the boy,

something both wistful and amazed. I couldn't place it. I didn't even know if Djinn procreated. I shook it off before I could fall into fantasies of me having children with Dash. Without the pregnancy part of course. Though not without the sex. When he acted like this, instead of being the asshole he'd been most of the week, I most certainly wouldn't say no to the sex.

Of course, that was when he started paying attention to me again, and I prayed he hadn't heard me. His smile now mimicked the Mona Lisa's and gave nothing away.

We strolled through the Louvre until far after closing. Being in there all alone, illegally but perfectly safe from security guards or alarms, was magical in every sense of the word. I had no idea how to thank Dash.

"A hug would do," Dash said with another mysterious smile. "Or that dinner you promised to buy me."

I started with the hug, pulling him way too close for a friendly hug, and definitely holding on too long. Dash didn't seem to mind either.

"Stop overthinking everything, Pumpkin," he chuckled in my ear. "And start doing what you want. Your kids seem to be able to do that, why can't you?"

It would be nice, to trust like only a child could. To do and act and laugh and talk like your heart told you. Like you'd never been hurt, and couldn't ever get hurt.

His arms tightened around me, a moment before he let me go. Lacing his fingers through mine, he transported us to Montmartre, right across from the Sacré-Coeur church, a gorgeous white temple-like building I had to visit—after I filled my stomach.

We walked through the streets for a while, before finding a cute, little *crêperie* with prices I could afford. It felt like a date, like the best date ever—a thought that had Dash grinning like the maniac he was—and I decided to stop worrying and to start having fun.

By the time we were sipping our coffee, which Dash declared only slightly better than the American incarnation, I was happy and relaxed but for the ever-multiplying butterflies in my stomach. I had stopped agonizing about that as well. The only thing keeping me from enjoying myself completely was the question of why he had done a one-eighty and when he'd go back to being angry and rude.

“You’re not going to let it go, are you, Pumpkin?” Dash finally said with a tired, annoyed sigh. “Can’t you just accept that you might have been right? Wasting away watching TV was only giving that damned angel what it wanted. If I’m going to be stuck with you, we might as well have a good time. I didn’t bind myself to the flesh to sit in a stuffy apartment, even if the couch is amazingly comfortable, and television is an amazing distraction. I have until the end of the world. I’ll get Arashaël one way or another.”

I smiled at him, thankful for his honesty.

“By the way, you are much better company when I make you happy.” His words, combined with a smile that was for once shy and sweet, doubled the swarm of butterflies. The sudden rush of emotions made me shy.

I looked at my coffee, too embarrassed to look him in the eyes when I said, “I’m having a great time, too.”

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 8

Late that night we found ourselves at what was supposed to be the hippest gay club in town. At Dash's insistence I had a drink, just one, a cocktail so sweet I barely noticed the alcohol, while Dash was throwing back whiskey like it was nothing. To him it was. The one drink I had made me feel all giddy inside. Or the giddiness might've come from how every man in the club stared at Dash in his painted-on dark jeans and equally tight blue dress shirt, and he was only looking at me.

I knew I didn't look bad in the black slacks that hugged my ass in exactly the right way and the bottle-green dress shirt that was the color of my eyes and hid the fact I didn't have Dash's perfect body. There was a great advantage to shopping with a limitless credit card. But clothes, no matter how expensive, couldn't hide the fact Dash was so far out of my league, I barely blamed the men throwing themselves at Dash even when he kept a possessive arm around my waist.

He gave them no attention, except for the effort it took him to push them away from us. He looked, but it was in the same way he had observed the priceless artifacts in the Louvre. Exactly like those, he found the gorgeous men lacking. He refused every offer to dance, until he finally ordered me onto the dance floor with him. I'd been happy to simply sit at the bar and observe like I usually did.

"You need to let go more," Dash whispered in my ear, sounding rough. I shouldn't have been able to hear him over the music, but he made it so I did. "I'll get you drunk if I have to."

I shook my head at that suggestion and let him drag me along. I'd rather make a fool of myself once again before repeating that mistake.

"I'll keep you safe, Pumpkin," he told me while starting to move to the beat. "What's so bad about making a fool out of yourself anyway? Why care what others think? Let go. Have fun. Stop thinking." He let out a loud whoop, raised his hands above his head and made a ridiculous-looking pirouette.

I couldn't help myself. I laughed and followed his example. He led me through an absurd dance routine that wouldn't have looked out of place in an eighties movie, and certainly didn't fit the trendy techno pounding through the club. I laughed so hard my sides hurt, and even harder at Dash's pretend-



insulted glare. I started the robot, and a second later Dash burst out laughing as well.

Out of breath, I stopped jumping and chose a more sedate sway, and smiled up at Dash. From out of nowhere he crushed his lips on mine. One minute we were dancing, simply having fun and being idiots, and the next he was holding my head in a vise grip and rubbing his mouth hard over mine.

I pushed him away. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“I wanted to see what all the fuss was about.” He nodded into the direction of the men next to us locked in a passionate embrace. “But I really don’t get it.”

“That’s because you’re doing it wrong.”

“I am NOT doing it wrong.”

“No, because you could never do anything wrong, eh?” I studied him and had to grin at the look of stubborn determination on his face. “You really want to know, Dash?”

Dash shrugged but nodded. “Kind of.”

“Then, my mighty Djinn, allow me to show you,” I said while my stomach started swirling with butterflies.

“If it pleases you,” Dash said gracefully.

I put one hand on his cheek, caressing the smooth jaw, the other on his hip pulling him a little bit closer. There was only curiosity in his eyes, but I knew he could feel my tension, the tightening in my gut. I purposefully looked from his eyes to his lips and back, and now there was something in his eyes, some real interest, something that made this more than an experiment. I pulled his head down while stretching up and slowly brushed his lips with mine, making the contact soft and teasing. I did it over and over, placing little nibbling kisses on his lips until he sighed and relaxed. Moving my lips over his, I added some tongue, just a flick over his bottom lip. He opened for me, maybe in a reflex of his very much hot-blooded body, maybe in response to what he could read in my mind. My tongue moved in, meeting his, stroking and caressing until he was fully initiated in the dance.

It was a good kiss, technically, but I was overthinking it, and it seemed like he wasn’t feeling it. I was about to pull back, when he beat me to it. He looked down on me with annoyance. “Stop thinking. You’re distracting me.”

I was trying to think of a reply when he kissed me again, this time gently and with a lot more skill. I focused on the softness of his lips against mine, the slickness of tongues battling, his smell, and his body so close to mine.

Oh god, his body...

I pressed closer, biting back a groan when he pressed right back, all hard lines of perfect man. Losing the ability to think with him this close, I stroked down his back, only hesitating for a moment before grabbing a handful of gorgeous ass, pulling his groin against mine. I may have whimpered when I felt he was hard for me, a whimper that turned into a loud groan when he repositioned so his thigh was between my legs rubbing against my rock-hard cock.

He moaned into my mouth, grinding against my hip in return. His hands grasped at my clothing, trying to reach my skin, one dipping slightly into the back of my jeans, the other stroking circles over my back. His touch called up a storm of electricity, making me burn to feel his skin against mine. I reached up and had already undone the top button of his shirt when I realized where we were. I couldn't do this in public, no matter the appreciative stares we got from all around us. I pulled back and started refastening his shirt.

A man behind me boomed, and another told me he'd be glad to finish what I started. Dash blinked at me confusedly and took my hands. He placed one firmly back on his ass and the other between us on his cock.

"I was just starting to understand the point of this," he grumbled.

I snorted a laugh, squeezed his hard-on before once again putting some distance between us. "I can feel it. I'd like to take this someone more private. I have no—"

The world folded around me and I was horizontal, Dash lying on top of me. Before he moved in for a kiss, I had just enough time to notice we were on a very big bed in what most certainly was not my bedroom. He was a fast learner, kissing me hard and urgent, tongue sweeping in to take complete control of my mouth and with it my body. I clasped his back, trying to get rid of the annoying layers of clothing that were preventing me from feeling his skin against mine, and finally seeing him and feeling him in all his glory.

Suddenly I had my wish, and I was naked with his hot body sliding against mine. I gasped at the shock of the sudden contrast between cold air and my heated skin, and at the velvet stimulation of our cocks gliding together.

Dash stopped kissing me long enough to smirk at me. “I thought I’d do it the easy way. I quite like the things you think right now.”

“Shut up,” was all I could say, not having enough blood in my brain to think of a decent reply. I wasn’t complaining anyway. Another smirk, another deep, bruising kiss. He moved so he was now straddling me, allowing him to touch and lick and kiss all those extra sensitive places he seemed to pluck right out of my brain. I writhed under him, no sooner thinking something and he was doing it. Scraping his teeth on my hipbone, teasing, tickling fingers on my inner thighs slowly traveling up to my balls and finally my aching cock. I let my legs fall open, silently asking for... well... everything.

Dash looked up to me. “Really?” he said with a voice tight with lust. “It feels good to have someone... in you?”

I nodded, having to swallow away a lump. “I’ll show you. Next time I will... but now... please...” Not one for dirty talk I simply sent him the image I might have jerked off to once or twice; the image of his beautiful mouth around me. The way it made me feel when someone—

“Argh.” The sound I made when he slowly dragged an experimental tongue up my shaft was less than sexy, but Dash didn’t seem to mind. He grabbed my cock, carefully pumped it a few times, then licked me again, this time taking his time to drag his flattened tongue over and around the head.

Stars exploded before my eyes, and Dash jerked back in surprise.

“That good?”

I moaned and nodded furiously. With my hands now tangled in his hair, I all but forced his mouth back in the right direction, inwardly begging him to hurry up and suck me. Again he granted me my wish, opening his mouth and gradually taking my cock in. He didn’t hurry, but kept an achingly slow pace when he followed every unvoiced plea to tongue there, suck harder. Please. Please. Please. My hands carded through soft hair, stroked his neck, his shoulders, his face, the place where my cock disappeared into his mouth.

He was groaning around me, seemingly getting turned on by blowing me as well. Strong hands found their way under my ass and lifted me, encouraging me to thrust up into his mouth. I threw my head back, trying to keep from coming so I could enjoy this just a moment longer. Useless. I pulled him up, the urge to come rising up even more when I noticed the beauty of his swollen lips.

Whimpering at the loss of his hot mouth, I recounted multiplication tables to keep from exploding.

I laughed at the confusion on his face when he asked, “Can you explain why we are doing math right now?”

Kissing him hard, my taste on his tongue was nearly undoing all my mental hardship. “I don’t want to come yet.”

“I thought coming was the point of this.”

“Ah, baby. You have so much to learn. An orgasm is the grand finale. The way you get there is the most interesting part.”

“I kind of enjoyed the way we were going,” Dash said with a little pout.

I traced my lips over his strong jaw, scraping my teeth a little and making him shiver. Pressing a kiss on that sensitive place right beneath his ear, I murmured, “You ain’t seen nothing yet.” I flipped us around, rolling off him so I could study him and take in the perfection of his body. I let my hands and lips follow my gaze, exploring his body with taste and touch. His sounds started out as surprised little gasps, but soon evolved into breathy moans and loud growls of approval. He was looking at me like I was something amazing, eyes no longer mocking or curious but filled with all consuming, all overpowering lust. The thrill of me being the cause of that look was dizzying.

I needed him so, so badly. Tearing my eyes off him, I finally took in the splendid, overly luxurious room and the huge king-size bed we were occupying. “Where the fuck are we?” I asked.

“Get your priorities straight,” Dash grumbled back. “You were having interesting ideas. Geography can wait.”

He was right.

“Of course I am. Now why did you stop?” He pushed my head back to its destination, namely his beautiful, straining, engorged, uncut cock.

“Supplies,” I said, while pulling back his foreskin to fully expose the glans, tracing teasing fingers over the oh-so-sensitive skin there, making Dash jerk and hiss. “Lube and condoms.”

Dash lazily snapped his fingers, something I had noticed he only did when he was showing off, and the much-needed supplies appeared. “Don’t know why we need the condoms, Pumpkin. Unless I’m missing something here neither of us can get pregnant, and I can’t get diseases. Plus, you’re healthy anyway.”

“How do you know that?” I asked, for some reason feeling like my privacy had been invaded.

He just looked at me, and I sighed. Yeah... privacy had gone out the window the moment I'd been stupid enough to sell him my soul.

I took the lube, dripped a generous amount on my fingers, and reached back between my legs, quickly prepping myself under Dash's probing eyes. I had my other hand on his cock. When I bent down to tease his slit with the tip of my tongue, delighting in the bitter spurt of precum, he stroked a hand down over my spine. With soft, searching fingers he explored the puckered opening clenching down around my fingers. He took over once I pulled my own fingers out to add more lube, inserting his long, nimble fingers with a muffled sound of amazement. His eyes opened wide to meet mine when I bucked back on his fingers, seeking friction, wanting his fingers deep inside me, reaching the place—

“Oh, fuck... yes,” I moaned around his hard cock when he brushed seeking fingers against the tight bundle of nerves. There was something to be said for this mind reading thingy. He knew exactly when to pull out, when to slick himself generously and help me while I scrambled to kneel over him. He held on to my face and stared into my eyes as I slowly lowered myself on him, taking his long, hard cock inch by burning inch.

A flurry of emotions fluttered over Dash's face, as I panted through the initial intrusion, forcing myself to relax around him. The main among them was wonder, and a close second was doubt. “Are you sure you want this?” he asked, while pulling me close for a tender kiss. “I'm hurting you.”

“The pain is temporary, and when it goes...” I carefully moved up and down a few inches at a time, getting used to his girth, and when I did... My body stopped fighting him and welcomed him in instead, and now the nerves that had been protesting were now firing on completely different cylinders. I threw my head back and groaned loudly.

“Oh,” Dash said, eyes widening. I rolled my hips, chasing the sensation, looking for the right angle. Dash's long cock grazed my prostate, and his groan echoed mine.

“Oh,” he repeated.

“Do you feel everything I'm feeling?” I asked, even while increasing the pace.

His yes was drawn out and more of a moan than an actual word. “What I'm feeling is awesome as well.”

He stroked firm hands over my chest and abs to clench at my hips, helping me keep the rhythm as he moved with me, pushing up when I came down.

“Can you... can you make me feel you?”

Dash studied me for a moment, cocking his head curiously. He cupped my ass, tracing his blunt fingernails over my sensitive skin. It gave me goose bumps all over.

A quiet nod followed and a storm of emotions, so strong I nearly blacked out, engulfed me. It quieted immediately, like he'd turned down the volume. His emotions were not entirely human, but right now the very familiar physical sensations were overwhelming everything. I could feel the fire of his arousal racing over his skin, my heat clenching him tightly, and the deep connection between us. He hadn't shared his thoughts, but, fuck, I felt like I was right there in his body, right in his head.

“Wow,” I said stupidly, leaning forward to kiss him. It wasn't just sex now. It wasn't just a smoking hot experiment anymore. It was important. It changed everything.

“Turn me on my back and make me yours,” I whispered against his lips, knowing he wouldn't miss the meaning behind the words. Normally that would be terrifying, but now it was just a tiny leaf lost in the whirlwind that was Dash.

His kiss was passionate and possessive and spoke of a longing that encompassed centuries. He sat up and switched positions, making sure he never even left me. He was hesitant at first, going slow and careful until I wrapped my legs around his waist and begged him with both my body and my mind to go harder and faster and to really, really make me feel everything he had to give.

At long last, after care and consideration had grown into teasing, he gave me what I needed. Long, sure, almost harsh strokes plowed into me, wonderful once he found the right angle. Darts of pleasure set me on fire and I was close, so close I felt my balls draw up ready to shoot. Dash was still feeding me his emotions so I was witness to my walls clamping down on him and making the sensations almost unbearable for me. We were so intertwined I didn't know which one of us spiraled into release first. Maybe we went over together.

All I knew was that one moment I ached for release, and the next it devoured me. I pulled his head down and hid my face in his neck, pulsing hot jets of cum between us while he roared out his ecstasy.

Sated, Dash sunk down on me, sending me a last sense of absolute satisfaction and stupor before blocking me from his senses. I half expected him to get up and to morph back into the annoying SOB he was so much of the time, but he made no effort to move and he kissed my jaw and temple and nuzzled my hair.

When he got too heavy, he did roll off me, but only to immediately snuggle up to me. He used his powers to get us clean and under the covers the moment he felt I was shivering.

Normally I enjoyed cuddling a lot after good sex, loving how the echoes of pleasure made you heavier and heavier until sinking down into sleep. Now I was fighting sleep, too afraid of what would happen in my dreams. For the past few weeks I only slept when I couldn't help myself. Dash, of course, had no such problems. He was softly snoring, but still pulled me closer when I shifted nervously.

I wasn't sure how Dash's body worked. He could eat, sleep, and as it turned out, have sex like a normal human. But he didn't need to. He slept when he was bored, ate when he felt like eating something, which was usually the moment he thought about food, but never seemed to use the bathroom, didn't need showers to stay clean, and the most aggravating, he didn't need exercise to keep his perfect body.

"Stop thinking," Dash mumbled in my ear. "You are waking me up."

It didn't really merit an answer, but I needed to stay awake, so I gave one anyway. "Just stop listening to me."

"Impossible." He kissed my shoulder and trailed exploring fingers over my belly. "You're complaining about me."

I smiled and turned to face him. I traced his eyebrow. "Hard to complain after how you just made me feel. Just wondering, trying to figure you out."

"You can't," Dash said with a smirk. "Your tiny human mind can't understand all that complexity."

I swatted at him, but he caught my hand and put it back where he wanted it, caressing his face.

He pushed his body against mine, making a happy sound. "You know, I quite like this human body. It's capable of very interesting things."

"Do Djinn have... well... intercourse?"

Dash shook his head. “No point. In the beginning the Djinn were made and in the end the Djinn will still be there. Djinn don’t die and Djinn don’t procreate. It’s impossible to explain. We are pure spirit, pure magic if you want.”

“You feel so much,” I said, remembering the storm of his emotions that nearly broke me in two. I tried to find words that would touch the edges of what I felt but failed and didn’t even try. Anger, not the hot, boiling kind, but the one that was cold and had turned to hatred. It was so intense it scared me, and still his joy and curiosity, his will to try new experiences, his ability to laugh and live and simply be, were still able to overcome the hatred, though barely. And there was loneliness, a loneliness so deeply buried I had only felt the edge of it before he shielded me from his emotions and only let the passion through.

“I needed you to understand. I needed you to know why I need to do what I am doing. Why I can’t let it go.”

His eyes were intense as he looked at me, willing me to agree with him. I understood and still I didn’t agree.

“You’re only hurting yourself with your anger. I agree with freeing the Djinn. I also agree with making sure the knowledge to enslave your kind is wiped from the Earth, but it’s not healthy to hate the way you do. It’s consuming you, destroying everything good in you.”

“It’s your kind that did this to me,” Dash snapped, pulling away from me. “And they need to pay the price.”

After one last furious look, he disappeared, leaving me alone to feel horrible in God knew where. Luckily he would pop back in soon. I’d apologize then and find a better way to explain what I meant. This was the first time this distance-time constraint would work in my favor.

While I was waiting for Dash, I finally took the time to see where the hell he’d brought us, and my mouth fell open. *Holy fuck!* We must be in some royal palace. I’d never thought this kind of luxury existed. The room was decorated in rich shades of red, purple, and orange, with golden details everywhere. I didn’t doubt the mirror and the gold inlay in the four-poster bed was real gold. The sheets were so soft under my hands I wondered if they were silk, and the Arabian-style carpet was so thick I felt like I was floating when I walked over it.

Exploring the suite—because room didn’t begin to describe it—I discovered a huge bathroom, all done out in purple marble and gold—ugly as hell if you



ask me—with an incredible ocean view on one side and a familiar looking skyline I didn't recognize immediately. The Jacuzzi was something special, marble and huge, and I cursed Dash for getting angry over nothing so we couldn't enjoy it together. I turned the taps on, letting it fill for good measure. If he came back, I'd try to seduce him into taking a bath with me. Otherwise I'd simply take one by myself. I took the liberty to steal one of the bathrobes hanging ready for use, while I explored further and kept looking for my clothes.

Every room I entered was even more over the top than the last. I found a second bedroom, a second bathroom with a second Jacuzzi—this one in slightly less ugly dark blue marble—a bar, a huge living room, a library with books in every language possible, a cinema, and a twelve-seat dining room. And that was before I realized there was another level. I carefully took the stairs—with golden banisters—down to find more bedrooms, bathrooms, an office, and a second lounge. It was ridiculous. Beautiful, though—if you ignored the ridiculousness of using purple marble. Something I wished I could enjoy with someone. Maybe even with that ridiculous, stubborn, insufferable ass of a Djinn.

I didn't find my clothes though. Dash must have let them disappear instead of doing the smart thing and simply having them land a few feet away. I opened a few closets and some drawers and finally found an information brochure of Burj Al Arab hotel.

I was in fucking Dubai. In the only seven-star hotel in the world.

Naked. Without my passport. Or my wallet. Or any way to prove my identity, or to explain what I was doing in the Royal Suite.

*Fuck!*

I snooped around some more, hoping to find anything I could use to get out of here. There was a landline so I could call out, but to who? Maybe the American Embassy. Would they believe a story about being abducted and robbed and somehow being left in the most luxurious suite in the world? It was the truth, after all. I'd save that option for when Dash didn't come back at all.

Ten minutes later, still no Dash.

Neither was he back half an hour later.

Or three hours later.

By then I had taken a bath—not much fun on your own, had watched a movie on the cinema sized 3-D screen—also not much fun on your own, raided the room for something to eat—nothing to find but a room service menu and

the option to call for twenty-four hour in suite catering, and opened a bottle of wine that probably cost more than my monthly rent but that still tasted like wine. And I didn't like wine.

Outside, dawn had come in a glorious manner, one of the many things that would've been great to share with someone, and I was getting impatient. There was no saying when, or if, Dash would come back. I couldn't imagine him being mad enough to cut the bond between us and give me back my soul, but I wouldn't be surprised if he would wait for me to get into a whole lot of trouble before coming to my rescue.

*Screw him.*

I made another round through the rooms and finally found something useful. In one of the lesser—but still more extravagant than any place I'd ever set foot in—rooms, I found a dry cleaners bag holding a suit. It even fit me if I ignored the trousers being a bit long, and my current lack of shoes and underwear.

Next problem. Finding a way out. There was an elevator, but if I took that route I was never getting in again. If I didn't need a room key to operate the damn thing. After a whole lot of searching I found a door leading to a small kitchen and from that kitchen a door into a hallway.

The kitchen distracted me. It held food. They were clearly preparing for the arrival of a group of guests because there were huge amounts of food prepped in the refrigerator. Most of it wasn't done yet so I nicked some delicious-smelling cookies and a pear, and made my way to a door at the other side of the kitchen. I had to go now, before more personnel arrived to prepare all this delicious-looking food for the bastards rich enough to be able to afford this place. I listened closely. Nothing for now, but the moment I opened the door, voices speaking Arabic came closer.

*Oh shit.*

I fled back into the suite, praying they wouldn't come into the kitchen, or at least, wouldn't come into the room.

Of course they did. I raced towards the closest bedroom, hoping to be able to hide. Once there I ducked into the closet, feeling very stupid for lingering here so long. I should've taken my chances outside.

Footsteps sounded in the room. A surprised shout sounded, followed by more running footsteps and quick ramblings in Arabic. My traces were

discovered. I had to get the fuck out of here. I had mostly made a mess of the upstairs, so if I was lucky I could take the elevator down without detection. I snuck out of the closet, tiptoed to the door of the room and listened. Still angry-sounding Arabic, but luckily upstairs. More voices sounded from behind the door to the kitchen.

I ran to the elevator, pushed the button, and hid behind a huge golden, star-shaped ornament until it quietly opened. No ding noises to annoy the rich. I slipped into the elevator and pushed the button that I hoped would lead me to the lobby. The door slid closed as quietly as it had opened and moved down so smoothly I barely felt the progress. Before I knew it the elevator came to a stop, the door opened and I took a step into freedom.

It was the only step I would take. Before I could even get my bearings I ran into a wall of scary-looking security guards, all barking at me in Arabic.

“English please,” I said, holding up my hands even though no one was aiming a gun at me. “Please. I have done nothing wrong.”

Nobody listened to me. I was grabbed discreetly by the upper arms, a security guard on each side and dragged off to an office. There, after being patted down, the questions started, at least, that was what I presumed. Nobody seemed to want to speak English, until a very distinguished gentleman made his way into the office, waving the others away.

Again the Arabic started, but this time the man switched to a deeply accented but understandable English. “Who are you? Where are you from?”

“Ciaran Yates. I’m from the United States of America.” For good measures, I added, “I was robbed, and kidnapped.”

The last bit made the man think for a moment, raising an eyebrow. “Are you a guest in this hotel?”

“No,” I answered truthfully.

“How did you get into the suite?”

“I don’t know. I went out for a drink last night and the next thing I knew I was lying in your beautiful room.” Again, the complete truth, mostly because I had no idea what else to say.

“Well, Mr. Yates, I hope you understand I have to report this to the police.”

“Can you please call the American Embassy for me?”

The man shook his head. "I'm afraid not. It is in hands of the authorities now."

Things went from bad to worse.

An hour later I found myself in an interrogation room with two cops screaming at me trying to figure how I got into the country and where I planted the bombs.

I couldn't answer the first question and could only deny the second. It was useless. I asked again for the Embassy to be called, but was told I was under investigation for terrorist activity, and the USA had left things to the Dubai police for now. I didn't buy it, but had no way to demand a phone call.

After hours of this I was reduced to a mess of tears and shoved into a holding cell with eight other prisoners in it. I tried to ignore them and huddled into a corner, sitting as far away from the others as possible.

*Was Dash somewhere watching me and laughing his ass off? Was he unaware of what he left me to? Would he come? Would he allow me to be tortured or worse before he came to my rescue? Did he even care?*

I tried to find a connection with him, but it only worked one way unless he allowed it. I had no idea if he could read my mind from a distance, but in case he could, I focused all my thoughts on one single thing.

*"I wish you'd come and rescue me."*

I kept repeating this, whispering softly to myself, getting weird looks from my fellow prisoners who seemed to think I was praying and left me to it.

Hours went by, night fell inside the prison, and still I was alone. I was trying to figure another way out. If I could make a pentagram, I could summon a demon to help me escape. *Yeah, and if I had a flying carpet I could fly back home. Who the hell was I kidding?*

I was giving up, my eyes falling shut despite my best efforts, the nightmares already reaching out their ice-cold fingers to drag me into horror. I fought it, desperately calling out to Dash. Useless. A blanket of exhaustion tried to smother me.

"What the hell have you gotten yourself into now, Pumpkin?" A smooth voice sounded next to my ear. "I left you in a perfectly safe hotel room, and you landed yourself in jail? What did you do?"

I sat up, stared into dark eyes filled with amusement, and I punched him.

At least I tried.

He caught my hand right before it hit his nose.

“Stupidity is doing the same thing twice and expecting different results,” he said with a grin. “Now, what were you whining about?”

“Where the hell were you?” I asked between clenched teeth. “You left me naked in a hijacked hotel room, in a country I have no business being, and without money or a passport. They think I’m a terrorist, and *I* think they still torture people here.”

“I don’t think they do. It’s pretty civilized here. And I would’ve come if you were in pain.”

“Oh. Thank you so much. That is so incredibly nice of you. So where the hell were you when I was being arrested?”

“Walking on the beach. Having coffee. Thinking.”

This time when I launched myself at him, I surprised him enough to topple him. He quickly flipped us around, held me down with his body and hands pinning my wrists to the ground. Still laughing, like this was the most fun he ever had, he dipped down for a kiss. I turned my head around so his lips landed on my cheek and he kissed that instead.

“Hey, don’t be like that!”

“Are you crazy? This is an Islamic country. Homosexuality is illegal here.”

“Calm down, Pumpkin. Nobody can see us.”

“What?” I looked around me, where indeed nobody, including the bored-looking guard on his desk not five feet away, paid us any attention.

“I can’t do this anymore,” I sighed. “Please get me home, Dash. I wish you would get me home and let all this disappear.”

He opened his mouth to speak, but I interrupted him. “You know what I mean. Don’t make Dubai disappear. I’m sure it’s very nice if you’re here with an actual visa. Just make my presence here disappear. No paper trail. No warrant out for my arrest back home. No placing me on an international terrorists list. Just let me go home so we can pretend none of this happened.”

Emotion flashed in his eyes, hurt and anger and something I couldn’t read. He pulled back from me like I was burning him. A lump in my throat prevented me from saying I was wrong, I didn’t want to forget *everything*. But before I

could reach out to him, before I knew if he'd heard my unspoken thoughts, if he still cared enough to keep our deal, he snapped his fingers.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 9

There was something wrong. There was something very wrong. I wasn't sure what, but for some reason, when I opened my eyes, I knew the lights wouldn't be working. Neither would my alarm clock or my phone.

Another thing I knew was that I needed to be quiet. I slipped out of bed and tiptoed to the door. I tried it. Locked.

Wrong. There was no lock on my door.

I tried again, pushing, and then pulling with all my might, suddenly not remembering which way the door opened. It didn't either way.

Breathing was getting difficult now that cold panic sipped in. I ran back to bed, hid under the blankets in the only safe place I knew. There was something here. A presence, dark and looming, but invisible.

I was dreaming. I knew it now. All I had to do was open my eyes.

I opened them. I was still in my bedroom. It was still pitch dark and icy cold. The lights still didn't work. The presence loomed over me.

I opened my eyes again. The presence reached out and touched me. Dread, so immense it hurt, tore through my body. I could not let it get me.

I opened my eyes again. The presence had a hand in my chest and pulled. Pain and fear so bad it should've blacked me out. There was only the certainty I would die if the presence succeeded in whatever it was trying.

"Wake up," I screamed to myself. "Wake up, wake up, wake up!"

I opened my eyes. Again I was in my bedroom. Alone this time. I tentatively reached out my hand and flicked on the light button. It went on. I sighed in relief. I sat up, and wrapped a blanket around me as I walked to the door and tried it. It opened. From the living room I heard the soft murmur of the TV from where Dash was probably still sulking. He hadn't said a word to me since he brought me home. His anger and hurt had been so nerve-racking I had gone to bed despite my fears. I had hoped my book would keep me awake, but there is a point where your body shuts down despite yourself. Next time I would go to the gym instead. I might as well get fit while I tried to stay awake. Cold showers might work as well. If I was lucky I could reduce sleep to one night a week, maybe two.

“Hey,” I tried, while sitting down on the couch farthest away from him. I huddled in my blanket, still freezing cold from my dream and wished I could cuddle up to Dash instead. I really craved something hot to drink, preferably anything containing huge amounts of caffeine and maybe some chocolate for good measures. Dash still ignored me, so I either had to get up and make me some coffee, or get dressed and go to the coffee place across the street. I didn’t have the energy to do either, so I stayed where I was, silently watching the TV.

Dash was eating a big carton of Ben & Jerry’s Chocolate Therapy ice cream while watching *Notting Hill* for some inconceivable reason. He was the picture of a scorned man. If I hadn’t been the one who landed in jail in Dubai, I would almost feel sorry for him.

This got me a glare. I scowled right back. He had no right, no right at all to make me feel bad for thinking things. I could hardly censor my thoughts. Nor would I, especially when he hadn’t felt the need to save me from the nightmares. The memory crept up on me, and I shivered, desolation filling me until I thought I would burst.

Dash looked at me, his angry expression fading into one of concern. “What nightmares?”

“Like you don’t know.”

Dash shook his head, jaw tense. “You’re treating me like I’m a monster.”

“And you think you’re not? Killing people? Blowing up the Wonders of the World? Stealing my soul? Fucking me, and then sending me to jail? You don’t give a fuck about me, or how all of this affects me. All you think about is your stupid revenge.”

It was the worst thing I could’ve said.

I thought I had seen Dash furious before, but nothing had prepared me to see an almost almighty being in the grips of a rage. The feeling exploded from him in a shock wave, knocking me off the couch against the far wall. It left me numb and uncomfortable in my body as further waves of fury battered me. His human shape was shimmering, showing as the mask it was. Power brighter than the sun exploded from his core, but dark and chaotic as a tornado. He reached out a huge hand to me and I pushed back to the wall, certain I would be blown to smithereens, that he’d pull my heart out of my chest with a mere thought, that he’d tear my soul from my body.

A rush of power was sent my way. Before I had time to scream, it hit me.



For a moment I thought I was dead.

Then I wished I was.

Emotions seared through me, so strong, so incredibly powerful; impossible to understand, to handle.

Hurt. Loneliness. Fear. Anger. So much anger. Hate. Shame. Humiliation. Things too alien to understand for a human mind. The endlessness of time going by. The terror of being locked in a very small place, in the dark, with no way to know if you'll ever get out. Being used and abused for your power. Hurt beyond recognition, without even death to hope for.

I had no idea why he showed me this. I'd heard his words before. I understood his mission. I still thought it was time to let go of his anger and move on. It was breaking him apart, affecting him... and me.

Dash shrunk back to his normal size and let me go. I fell down on the ground with a thud that made my teeth rattle and would probably mean a huge bruise on my ass. My body was too numb to feel anything right now. My apartment was trashed once again. This was getting old.

"How can you make this about you?" he asked exasperated.

I didn't answer. If he didn't know why I was mad at him, I wouldn't damn well tell him.

*Great. Now he had me turned into a woman.*

"I don't understand why the elimination of slavers is such a big problem to you. How does that hurt you?"

It *so* wasn't about that. And I refused to think what it *was* about. Because he'd pluck all the humiliating stuff I wasn't ready to acknowledge right out of my brain. He'd laugh about it. And I couldn't even get rid of him long enough to nurse the wounds and get back on my feet.

"Arg!" Dash exclaimed, ripping at his hair. "I don't understand what the fuck this is about. Has it got anything to do with the nightmares you mentioned?"

I narrowed my eyes at him, still thinking he was bullshitting me for not knowing. He was in my mind all the time, read my thoughts and rummaged through my most private emotions. How could he not feel my dreams?

"You disappear when you fall asleep," Dash said with a shrug. "I assumed sleeping turns your brain off."

*If only.* Memories assaulted me once again. With it came the cold, and the absolute terror. Maybe it would be better if he did kill me. Ghosts don't sleep.

“Don't be ridiculous. I'd have to bind your soul to a container of some kind. You wouldn't enjoy living in a vase or a pendant. Believe me, I know.” Another surge of endless boredom assaulted me. Still, it might be better than risking not getting out of the nightmares. An eternity of opening my eyes only to find I was still trapped inside the dream.

“Come here.” Dash's voice was soft and full of worry. It was warm like the hug I wanted, but still was too stubborn to ask for.

Dash sighed and waved me over once again, opening his arms. It surprised me he didn't force me to come to him.

A shake of his head, combined with a sad little sound, made me change my mind. I went back to the couch, stubbornly sitting a few inches away from him. I wanted the hug. I just felt pathetic for wanting it from a creature that only saw me as cheap amusement.

My thoughts were answered with a loud groan. “You must be the most aggravating creature I've ever met!” He reached out and wrapped a strong arm around me. “And you know I've been around since the beginning of time. I have traveled the seventeen dimensions, I have dealt with the idiotic requests of men for much longer than I care to remember, and still I have never run into someone as stubbornly stupid as you.”

I tried to pull away from him, but was only held closer, until I was basically sitting on his lap. I pouted, but couldn't stop myself from snuggling into him. He was so warm, and strong, and smelled so good. I hid my face in his neck, finally giving over to him. I wouldn't cry though. And I wouldn't make the mistake of getting naked with him. I sucked at keeping sex casual. Especially awesome sex. Something I shouldn't think about right now, because it would get embarrassing with him being so close. And reading my thoughts.

“That's better. Now tell me about the nightmares. Maybe I can do something about them.”

I shivered and pushed closer. “Don't want to talk about it. Don't want to make them real.”

He put a hand under my chin and forced me to look him in the eyes. His face showed real worry, something that surprised me. But maybe it was like caring for a distraught pet.

“Yeah, you’re like a guinea pig to me, Ciaran. Think what you want to think. You don’t listen, and you don’t do anything with the things you see as well. Now show me the nightmares. Don’t make me do it by force.”

I blinked at him and hesitantly let the memories seep back. With the memories came the physical sensations; the fear, the panic, the cold, the pain, until I couldn’t handle it anymore. With a sob I pushed against his shoulder, trying to give in to the instinct to run, to hide. Dash didn’t let me go and after a humiliating short struggle I was once again wrapped in his arms. It was hard to feel him now. I was being dragged back to the cold and darkness.

I think I passed out. The next thing I knew was dazzling sunlight. I had to blink my eyes against the intensity, and then shielded my eyes with my hands. A moment later I peeked again and saw a pristine white beach, lined on one side with palm trees, and on the other by the azure ocean.

Dash was lounging close by, wearing brightly striped board shorts that had no business looking that good on him. He grinned sheepishly at me. “Hope you don’t mind. I thought you needed sunshine and a bit of peace.”

“As long as you don’t get me arrested again,” I said, with a smile, but unable to hide the sting behind my words. It was hard to keep up with the emotional rollercoaster Dash had trapped me on. Fear and anger and laughter and affection all went hand in hand these past weeks. It was driving me crazy. I’d like to let the negativity go, leave it behind us for good.

He was trying, that much was clear. Would it be enough, though? Could it be enough if Dash didn’t let the hate go as well?

I forced myself to stop thinking and focus on the hot glare of the tropical sun. Gradually warmth replaced the icy fear that had taken residence in my bones. I lay there for a while, quiet and in a slumber that was close to meditation, finally relaxing for the first time since he’d run out on me yesterday. I was ridiculously grateful for Dash, considering he had brought me into this madness in the first place.

“You could just say thank you, you know,” he said, sounding a bit grumpy. “I don’t understand why you keep fighting me. I’m trying here. I’m being as nice as I can.”

Gone was my good mood. Damn it, Dash was starting to make me feel like I was bipolar! “Thank you so much,” I snapped. “Thank you for taking my soul and giving me terrible nightmares. Thank you for trying to destroy my world.

And mostly thank you for going out of your way to be *nice*.” The last word was a sneer. “It’s highly appreciated.”

Smoothly he stood up and stalked towards me. Just as smoothly he sat down next to me and leant over me. I sighed and defiantly looked the other way. I was done being intimidated by him.

“Look at me,” he ordered.

I pointedly took a long moment to look at an interesting palm tree instead before sitting up and meeting his eyes. One of us needed to be mature.

“Better. Now listen to me.”

*La la la la. I can’t hear you.* But the mature one wouldn’t be me today.

Dash growled. It was a dangerous sound. A delicious sound. It reminded me of the sounds he’d made when he was in me yesterday. “You are impossible, Ciaran. Truly and completely impossible. I have no idea why I like you.”

*Huh?*

“Why do you think I even bother being nice? Can you maybe think of one reason why I put up with you? It would be so much easier to strip your soul from your body and put it into a nice key chain.”

I shook my head. Dash stroked his hands up my arms and to my face. “Think, Pumpkin! I might call you stupid, but I refuse to believe you truly are.”

I just shook my head, wanting him to say it. Another growl, again very reminiscent of his sex noises. He cupped my face, stroking light fingers over my cheeks, before leaning in to press his lips lightly on the corner of my mouth. Moving back, he checked to see if it was okay. His eyes were soft and dark like molten chocolate, and I melted right with them.

Still, I shook my head. “Tell me,” I whispered.

Dash smiled sadly. “I wished you’d learn to see instead. It would make things so much easier.” Before I could protest he leaned close for another brush of his lips against mine, effectively silencing me. My lips tingled from the light touch. “You are fun, Ciaran. You bicker and you argue and you do all kinds of stupid shit, and for some reason you still seem to mistake me for an errand boy. You have morals I don’t understand. You make me angry all the time. But you make me laugh even more. Please understand, once and for all, I don’t want to make you into a slave. I don’t want your soul to be anywhere than in your body, because whether you like the current packaging or not, I like it a lot. It’s not

morals or guilt or whatever you imagined that makes me try being nice to you. I just want you to like me.” The last bit was spoken softly and Dash’s cheeks burned.

All I could do was grin like an idiot, wrap my hands around his neck, and kiss him senseless.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 10

We stayed on the beach for two awesome days of sun, swimming, and sex. Dash had gotten himself a surfboard and he was showing off. I had tried it as well, had taken three embarrassing tumbles, and almost drowned the last time. I'd had to be saved by Dash, who might have been pretending to be properly concerned, but wasn't all that good in hiding his laughter. After that I'd taken to snorkeling instead, finding the colorful fishes and playful dolphins much better amusement than trying to ride the waves.

He'd even brought a pretty white cabana here. It had comfortable beds and a palm leaf roof, so I could lounge in the shade and not get sand in all kind of uncomfortable places. I should really be feeling guilty for stealing all this, but Dash simply called it borrowing. In the end we made a deal. He'd take one from a place where it was night and replace it every twelve hours with another one. He grumbled about that, saying things like he wasn't an errand boy and he had no idea how I could still function with all those morals getting in the way, but he liked showing off too much not to give in. I sighed happily, leaning my chin on my hands and staring at Dash playing in the waves. Yeah, he was my very own cabana boy.

"I heard that," Dash called in the middle of doing a gravity defying—and most likely scientifically impossible—jump and somersault. His voice sounded right in my head. "You're the cabana boy here, Pumpkin."

He made me make cocktails to pay for that comment—virgins for me of course—and he made me massage him with sunscreen I was sure he didn't need. I didn't mind. He did me in return and it made for some very nice, very slippery sex.

Yes, I had all the great things in life. Except sleep.

The first night, I had kept Dash busy with skinny-dipping, sex, and more sex. Since Dash had no problem with learning all the sensations that could be wrung out of his body, he was an easy target.

The second day I went into the water as soon as I got tired, and again, made sure Dash was constantly distracted from his quest to conquer my nightmares. He was insatiable, and had supernatural endurance and recovery times, so it made for another fun night.

There was only so much my human body could take though, and only so many times I could come before being wrung out and exhausted. I managed to keep awake until the sun came up on the third day. Then my eyes fell closed, and try as I might, I could not get them to open again. Still half-awake I shook Dash, making little panicked noises. He pulled me close and murmured.

“I’m here. You can sleep safely.”

I felt the reassuring touch of his mind against mine, the warmth and light reaching out as an anchor.

Then it was gone and I was lost in a darkness different from last time. A labyrinth this time, impossible to escape. Opening my eyes only brought me deeper in the labyrinth. The walls were wet and slimy, impossible to climb. The way changed behind me and before me. There would be no escape but waking up.

I opened my eyes, again, and again, and again, and again. I kept trying, kept reminding myself it was just a dream. Dreams couldn’t hurt you.

I doubted for a second, and I flailed, falling down on the slippery floor, my ankle making a cracking sound. The pain was instant.

Dreams aren’t supposed to hurt you.

*What if they can? What if I never come out?*

Another attempt at waking up. Another attempt at running with a broken ankle. The pain felt real, as real as the stone walls pressing in around me, as real as the stale air smelling of moss and rot and dead things. I was so cold that moving became difficult.

*What if I died here?*

A final attempt. I opened my eyes to pain, cold, and bright sunshine. To an enraged Djinn calling up the powers of the universe. There was a storm growing, the earth was trembling, and the sea was looking, well... wrong. A huge whirlpool was forming. Electricity crackled through the air.

“Dash, stop it,” I said weakly, struggling to get up and go to him. When I tried to stand, I yelped and fell down. My ankle. It was broken... “Dash...?”

He swept around, terrifying in the grips of power. The currents around him raged and lightning crackled, hitting a palm tree and making it go up in flames. Then he calmed down, and the elements settled with him. I couldn’t help but

think about what this disturbance would do to the world. One butterfly's wings could cause a storm. Dash was a hell of a lot more than just a butterfly.

“What are you rambling about?” Dash growled at me, picking me up and laying me back on the bed. “Why are you always worrying about others?”

“Because one of us should have some morals,” I threw back, but not without hugging him close. Waves of power were still coming from him, surging through me and taking the effects of the dream away with them. It was impossible to be cold next to Dash. Like a moth to a flame, a cat to a lit hearth, a tiger to a stretch of warm sun—

“Stop with all the idiotic fire references, and tell me what happened! Are you supposed to get hurt in dreams? Are you supposed to disappear like that?”

“No,” I said. The racing thumps of my heartbeat thrashed in my ears. I couldn't breathe.

Soothing warmth seeped through me as Dash took care of my panic attack. He couldn't take care of all my fear though. “My ankle. I didn't fall off the bed? You didn't accidentally sit on me and break it?”

All I got in reply was a glare.

“I broke it in the dream, but... It's impossible...”

“It's happening. I couldn't reach you. I couldn't even heal you.”

“My soul... Is it... did it go anywhere?”

“I'm still here, aren't I?” Dash said, looking at me like I was an idiot. “The connection is still there when you fall asleep. I just can't reach you. First I thought you simply turned off when you recharged. Like you went on standby.”

“I'm not a TV, Dash.”

“I know that. I can't change the channel and I haven't been able to find the off button.” He grinned at me, daring me to come up with a good reply. I might've, but there was something in his eyes, predatory and wild. Powerful ripples of lust that he sent deliberately my way. I gravitated towards him, finding his mouth on instinct, pulling him on top of me—

“Ouch!” I screamed, pushing Dash away from me and sitting up to check my ankle. “Why isn't this fixed yet?”

“Well... You kissed me.”

“Don't you feel how much it hurts?”



With a shrug Dash said, “I’m kinda blocking it out. You feel a lot of unpleasant shit all the time. Human bodies are messy.” He didn’t even have the decency to look guilty.

“Just fix my damn ankle.”

“Your wish is my command.”

“It’s not a wish. Just a request. If you don’t want to, simply bring me to an ER, and I’ll get a cast.”

“You really don’t want to waste your wishes, right Pumpkin? Still feeling bad for using one to get out of that Dubai prison? I would’ve gotten you out anyway. I would’ve been stuck there with you there otherwise, remember?”

Despite his arguing, my ankle started hurting five times as bad and I realized we forgot the painkillers again. *You would think I’d learn!*

“Yes. I remember,” I snapped at him, trying to distract myself from the pain. “Everything you do is for yourself and for your quest of world dominance.”

“Indeed, Pumpkin. Be grateful I let you be the sidekick to my superhero-ness.”

“That is not a word. And you are not the hero,” I mumbled. Revenge was very much unheroic.

“Hero or villain, potato-potahto. It’s all a matter of interpretation. But I can turn you into a minion if you want to argue semantics. Those funny yellow ones from that movie we saw last week?” His grin showed me he didn’t need an answer.

“Heroes don’t blow up ancient monuments. They don’t kill people by using herds of murderous reindeer.” I still got nauseous as I thought about the poor idiot. I’d never be able to think about Santa without retching. *Thanks for ruining Christmas for me, Dash!*

“I told you not to look,” Dash said with a smirk. “I can’t help it if you are too stupid to listen.”

“You told me that after the guy’s guts were decorating a deer’s antlers.”

“Buck.”

“Potato-potahto, and not the fucking point, either.”

“What is the point?”

“The point is that you are no hero!”

“Then what are you if not the minion?”

“I am the hero who will try to bring you to the path of righteousness with my brilliant reasoning and my powers of seduction. Also by distracting you with water sports—”

He blinked at me confused.

It took me a moment to connect the dots. “Not those water sports! Come on, man! I really need to teach you what NOT to watch on the Internet. I meant surfing and snorkeling and swimming! Yuck!”

“Thank the Djinn,” he said with a relieved sigh. “I really didn’t want to try that.”

“You’re praying to yourself?”

He shrugged. “Do you know any beings more deserving to be praised? We’re almost almighty.”

“Yes, until you come across an idiot with a magic lamp,” I muttered. “And then you’re suddenly just a... ehm... G—Djinnie in a bottle.” I hummed the song to his increasingly darkening expression.

“I don’t know why I even try to be nice to you!” he said with a glare, stomping off to set more palm trees on fire. “I can’t believe that out of all the idiots doing drunk summonings, I ended up with you!”

“Just admit it; you like that I don’t roll over to obey all your insane demands. You don’t need a pet. You need a...” *Partner*. What I didn’t say didn’t exist, even if we both heard the word echo in my brain. As I said, I don’t do casual very well.

He looked at me and swallowed, the trees slowly sizzling out as his anger went away. “Okay. We have things to do.”

“We do?”

“Yes. We need to find out what causes your nightmares, rescue the remaining Djinn, and destroy all knowledge of Djinn enslavement. Oh, and I have to destroy the Taj Mahal.”

“What? No! You can’t! Not the Taj Mahal. It’s supposed to be insanely beautiful and I never even got to see it. Plus it’s a monument of never dying love!”

“It’s a monument of twenty-two years of slavery! My slavery!”

“You built the Taj Mahal? Dash, that’s just... that’s even better than building the pyramids.”

“Didn’t you hear me? Twenty-two years a slave?”

“You built the symbol of undying love,” I said, feeling a bit weak in my stomach. “That’s so much better than designing Valentine’s Day cards.”

“It’s not romantic to be forced to build anything!”

“It is when it’s so beautiful. Will you make me a pretty mausoleum after I die?”

“Why is everyone so obsessed with having things built for them after they’re dead? I could get you a castle to live in. Or a house like Kim Kardashian, with a lazy river and a tennis court. Something you could actually use. While you are alive?”

“I don’t even play tennis.”

“Like that is the freaking point! And you’re not dying. Not as long as I have anything to say about it.”

“Do you?”

“Yes. I want to stay free, so you need to stay alive.”

Hmm... Didn’t he mention numerous times he could just as well put my soul in a snow globe?

But again, I wouldn’t ask questions I might not like the answer to. I did wonder what would happen to me. Would I grow old and simply never die? Would he plant my soul in a new body when he got sick of me being old and needy?

“I’m making you a day younger every morning,” Dash said. “Now stop whining about shit that doesn’t matter and start thinking about things that do. Like what demon is trying to kill you in your nightmares.”

*What? And WHAT?*

“Demon?”

“Is the one logical explanation. Though I don’t understand what demon would be stupid enough to mess with a Djinn’s property.”

*Property, eh? I’ll let that one go—for now. He might own my soul, but he would never own me... Oh crap!*

“Dash,” I said softly, putting a hand on his face to turn him towards me. “The nightmares started when I sold you my soul. Wouldn’t it be more likely it has something to do with that, rather than being a demon with powers I’ve never heard of?”

Instead of getting angry, he kissed me, passionate and deep. Possessive. Protective. The feeling that radiated from him was fear, and that scared me almost to death. It wouldn’t hurt to look into his demon theory. We’d deal with the other possibilities later.

“Can we go and free a Djinn first?” Dash asked into my hair. “I have a bad feeling about him. Your nightmares are important too, but...”

I nodded. Better to do something concrete than solving riddles I was sure we would like the answer to.

\*\*\*\*

“I don’t like this,” I said as I studied the creepy looking mansion Dash had brought us too. It wouldn’t be that bad if the boarded up, overgrown house hadn’t had a car hidden behind some bushes. Or if smoke—terrible smelling green smoke—wasn’t coming from the chimney. Without those signs of life it would simply have been an abandoned house. Then we simply had to find the Djinn and get the hell out of here.

Now it was obvious the house was made to look deserted. The whole atmosphere had the hairs on my arms standing straight up. Powerful magic was being practiced here, and even the presence of Dash wasn’t enough to make me feel any better about this.

“Barajas couldn’t hurt you because he was bound to me. What would happen if a sorcerer commanded this Djinn to attack you?”

For the first time since I knew him Dash looked worried. “In theory, I am stronger than Gharentias.”

I gulped. “In theory?”

“Yes. But if the sorcerer is powerful enough, and has strengthened Gharentias with the help of demons or his own powers, or channels Gharentias’s powers to add to his own...”

I waited, then asked, “Please finish that sentence.”

“I can’t.”

“Okay. What’s the plan?”

“Plan?”

“Yes, plan. How do we overcome both a Djinn forced to fight for his master, a sorcerer powerful enough to make me feel his presence without trying, and whatever other help he has?”

“Ehm...”

“So you expected to barge in there and simply hope for the best?”

“Yes! That’s my plan!”

“In that case, I’ll be waiting here. Just being curious, what would happen to my soul if you got killed?”

Dash glared at me. “I can’t get killed. I’m Djinn.”

“How sure are you of not getting captured?”

“Sure enough.”

“Then go have fun.” I found a relatively dry place under a tree, took out my phone, and started to read. Over my screen I watched Dash pacing, a few times blinking out as if he was going to teleport in, then coming into view again.

“I might need your help after all,” Dash said hesitantly. “I don’t like the feel of the magic inside.”

I looked at him without speaking.

“Please.”

“I’d be happy to. You got a plan already?”

“I need you to summon a demon. Someone powerful.”

“Anyone in mind?”

“Dub,” Dash said without missing a beat.

“Are you fucking kidding me! Why not just have me summon Balor? Or Lucifer himself?”

“Can you?”

“No!” Maybe... Probably. “Even if I could, I wouldn’t! Are you crazy?”

“Balor doesn’t really kill everyone he looks at, you know. He’s just capable of killing with a look. If he chooses to.”

“Thank you. That *is* a big reassurance. Now what do you propose we offer one of those upper-tier demons for helping us free one of your friends? And please remember I don’t even have a soul to barter with!”

“Simple: the sorcerer’s powers.”

“And what if the sorcerer decides to cut the demon a better deal? Like his soul?”

Dash huffed. “You are horribly pessimistic!”

“You are not only risking my life—not yours I’m sure Mr. Immortal—but a lot of other lives as well. I have no intention of setting an upper-level demon free on Earth.”

“He won’t be set free. I promise you I can keep him under control. I’ll bind him to my powers and let him leech off those for a few hours. I can assure you, a fraction of a Djinn’s power will be enough to satisfy even the most powerful demon. No human soul can compete with that kind of chaos.”

“I can’t believe I’m going to do this,” I mumbled.

\*\*\*\*

“I still don’t like this,” I whispered much later to Dash as we barged into the house following Balor. I was still perplexed Balor had not only answered my summons, but also agreed to do Dash’s bidding. Even more surprising was that both the demon and Dash had agreed to no killing unless I decided it was necessary. Of course, even though Dash provided the payment for the deal—and Balor seemed already a little bit drunk on what he was leeching from Dash—I held the strings to keeping him here. The moment I decided, Balor would be gone. If I did it too soon, I’d definitely pay for it later, and not just by Dash. High-level demons never got to have any fun. At least, that was what Balor had bellowed at me.

Balor was mighty impressive. He was huge, with black leather wings that were on fire. He had big horns, also on fire, and a flaming sword. Personally I thought the sword was overkill, but I had learned at a young age to never argue with a demon’s attire. They were as touchy about it as a woman dressed up for her wedding. Despite all the flaming stuff, nothing was being burned down... yet, but I’d had to promise Balor he could burn the place down afterwards. Dash had tried to argue that it made more sense to burn the place down first. I wanted to see this sorcerer though. I wanted him to be mighty impressed with my cavalry. I didn’t say this out loud, but Dash picked up on it, of course, and gave me a delighted chuckle and a pat on the head as a reward.

“Ah, come on, Pumpkin. This is fun!” Dash replied to me, voicing my concern.

I rolled my eyes at him. “Please remind me to look up the definition of fun for you.” I was sure the dictionary wouldn’t mention being so scared you nearly pissed your pants.

We burst into a large room completely covered—floor, walls, and ceiling—with runes. I recognized only part of them, and didn’t like any of them. None were used for nice, honest, fun spell casting. Most of the ones I did know I had just used to summon one of the most dangerous demons in existence.

“Still think it was a bad idea to bring some muscle?” Dash asked, looking smug.

Balor bellowed at the sight of the room and set it on fire. Great! A sorcerer with powers dark enough to make a demon angry.

“Do we really need to free this Djinn?” I asked, pushing closer to Dash in the hope he’d protect me from burning debris.

“Do you really want this guy to have access to a Djinn?”

Point taken.

Balor roared and charged forward. I guess he caught smell of the sorcerer. Dash followed him in a much calmer pace. We walked through a long, now slightly smoldering, hallway and into yet another huge room Balor set on fire before I could even see what was so offensive about it. When I looked closer, peering through the flames I saw we were in a library. It held thousands of books, mostly magic tomes by what I could make out; ancient, and most likely priceless.

“Can you spare the books?” I asked Dash. “Just for now. There might be some I’d like to keep.” Immediately most of the room stopped smoldering.

“Well, well, well,” a paper-thin voice rasped. I startled and looked for the source of the voice.

“Who do we have here?” The voice turned out to originate from an armchair sitting in the corner of the room. It was on fire, but the ancient-looking man didn’t seem to be bothered by it. He also didn’t seem to be impressed by the large demon towering over him.

*Oops...*

“Juneraddash, how kind of you to come visit me. I haven’t seen you since... well... Please remind me... It was so long ago. I should’ve known you were back when I heard the news about the pyramids.”

Before I could ask Dash what the hell the sorcerer was talking about, Dash exploded from his human shell and showed his real form. He was magnificent. Like a tornado, a burning one, with a slightly human shape to it. It was dizzying to watch. Balor also increased in size; I assumed Dash was no longer restricting the amount of power he was allowed to feed on.

The sorcerer calmly tapped on one of his rings and spoke a single word.

Everything went quiet. Dash stopped whirling, Balor stopped bellowing, and I had been smart enough to stay out of it completely. I did hold my breath, just to fit the mood.

The sorcerer smirked as he pointed the ring towards Dash.

The link between Dash and me lit up with a blinding flash. I felt a tug right between my eyes.

And absolutely nothing else happened.

Sound and motion started again. The sorcerer stood up and bellowed the word over and over again. Dash pointed a huge finger. The sorcerer froze in midmotion. Balor made to jump him, but a gesture from Dash threw him aside.

Dash hung over the sorcerer, enveloping him with his power. An unholy scream filled the room. When he pulled back, slowly shrinking back to his human form, all there was left of the old man was a swivel of dust and the faint shape of a ghost. Dash made a gesture towards Balor, who pounced and ripped the ghost to pieces like a dog playing with a dead rabbit.

I was still pinned to the ground, trying to work up the courage to go to Dash. Suddenly I felt a surge of grief from him and I hurried to his side, taking him in my arms and cradling him to the floor. Uncoordinated, like it took some getting used to using the human body again, he reached out his arms. I helped him hug me and held him while he cried. Unable to speak, he kept sending me his emotions; his grief, his pain, his relief.

I sunk into myself so I could see his aura to understand more of what was going on. The bloody red was seeping out of his aura, sinking into the earth. He was letting go of his anger. But why? Who had the sorcerer been? How had he known Dash's true name?

“Remember when I told you about the pyramids? About the sorcerer who summoned me and bound me to a ring?”

I nodded.



“That was the sorcerer who made the spell.”

“What? How? He must be... what... over ten thousand years old?”

Dash shrugged. “He must’ve found a way to become immortal. Maybe he sold his soul to some demon. Maybe he found a spell.”

“If he sold his soul, I guess that demon won’t be happy with Balor ripping it apart. I wonder what he did that made Balor so angry.”

“That’s not our problem. Our concern is to free the Djinn, and to see all this dark knowledge destroyed.”

I nodded and pressed a kiss to Dash’s temple.

“Ciaran?” Dash’s voice was quiet and subdued. “I hope you don’t mind me killing him even though I promised you’d have final say.”

I blinked some tears away. “If you think that I would let anyone live who hurt you like this, then—” I had no words for him “—you are wrong. I’d have killed him with my own bare hands.”

“He would’ve slain you like a baby chicken,” Balor interrupted us. “Thracious had powers so vile and so powerful you can’t even imagine them, young summoner. Thank you for allowing me to end him for good.”

Look at that. A polite demon. I might have to reconsider my opinion on only dealing with the weak ones. They had terrible manners and were much harder to handle.

I left it to Dash and Balor to find the Djinn. A powerful demon like Balor would be extremely sensitive to the threads of chaos even a captured Djinn emanated. In the meantime, I went to explore the library. It held volumes on subjects I never heard of, and more on subjects I didn’t even want to know existed. A lot dealt with the enslavement and use of all kinds of occult beings, and not in a way any of those beings would enjoy. I saw tomes about the leeching of energy, the many uses of blood sacrifice, countless handwritten volumes about the Djinn, travel between the seventeen dimensions, and mind control. That was when I stopped looking. Priceless this collection might be, I wanted nothing to do with it. I needed this whole place torched, and then I wanted to go home and take a bath—in bleach. Even leafing through some of the books made my aura feel vile.

I wandered after Dash and Balor, who were sharing horror stories about the sorcerer and his deeds. They were gathering the sorcerer’s jewelry, none of which had been destroyed.

“Please don’t tell me these are all Djinn,” I said. I reached out a finger to touch a particular ugly signet ring. Dash slapped my hand away.

“Don’t touch! These are all enslaved beings. But we haven’t found Gharentias yet. There’s no saying who the others contain, and what they will do to a mortal.”

“Carman,” Balor said, holding up a ring. “Loki.” Another ring. “Harpy. Ghoul. Sith.” Rapid pointing to more rings. “I will free these.” Dash tried to pick up a necklace and failed. He looked at Balor, who nodded. “The Djinn.”

I grabbed it, careful not to touch anything else, and immediately wiped it. The reaction was much slower than we’d seen before, and much weaker, too. Only a smoky outline of something slightly humanoid came from the necklace. He still seemed to be tethered to the ring by a pushing black energy.

“Master,” the Djinn coughed. “I am yours to command. Make your wishes and I’ll try—” More coughing. The Djinn winked in and out of existence.

“Gharentias,” Dash said. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Power... leeches... nearly gone...”

Dash grabbed the Djinn’s smoky head between his hands and tried to feed him some energy. He failed.

“No use,” Gharentias said between gasps and coughs. “Necklace...”

“I wish for you to be free,” I quickly said. My words were met with a look of disbelief and a sigh of relief as the black tether broke. Balor grabbed the necklace and it burst into flaming dust. It released a horrible stench and blast of foul power. Immediately the Djinn became stronger, aided by Dash feeding him energy.

“I don’t know how to thank you, chick.”

“By calling me Ciaran,” I said with a groan. “What the hell is up with you Djinn and nicknames?”

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 11

“We really should’ve asked Balor about the nightmares. He might’ve known,” Dash complained, bored with me buried in dull, too big books. Of course, he was contributing absolutely nothing. He was watching me from his usual spot on the couch, commenting on my lack of progress between commenting on *American’s Next Top Model*. “You should summon him again.”

“Great idea. I’m sure one of the most powerful demons in existence wouldn’t mind being used as an errand boy!”

“He did seem to like you. Why don’t you simply summon something else and ask it?”

“You think it is a good idea to summon a random demon to ask it if it knows of another random demon going around trapping people in nightmares?”

“Well... not a random demon maybe.”

I looked up from the huge, dusty tome I was flipping through. I hated research. It made me sneeze. One of my IT savvy cousins was always talking about digitizing everything, but last time I checked he was too busy playing *Dragon’s Age* and watching *Game of Thrones*. Considering all that, he was more likely to try and summon an actual dragon for a pet than ever doing anything useful.

“So what do you propose, all-knowing entity?”

“I propose you will not call me an entity again. It sounds belittling. I don’t call you animal, right?” Dash sounded positively snooty. There was something disturbingly hot about it. It made me think about him in a tux, somewhere delightfully fancy, a glass of overpriced whiskey in his hand—

I cut myself off. I needed to stop the fantasies, before Dash would see fit to make them come true. A nice idea, but definitely not for now.

“You call me human all the time,” I quickly replied to Dash’s earlier comment, before the gleam in his eyes would cause the kind of distraction we surely didn’t need.

“You are a spoilsport,” Dash said, most likely in response to my thought. “And I call you human because you are one. Like you call me Djinn. If you think being called human belittles you, you should take a long hard look in the mirror and consider what that says about how you see your own species.”

I had to think about that. “It’s not in what you say, it’s how you say it,” I finally said. “Now stop distracting me. I was trying to figure out how we were going to figure things out.”

The merry laugh behind us made both of us jump. “Oh, you boys are so cute together. I still remember your grandpa when he was that age. He was like that too, all bantering and arguing and refusing to tell me how much he loved me.”

“Grandma!” I grunted between clenched teeth, feeling my ears heat up.

“Hello Nia,” Dash said calmly, turning back to face her. His shoulders were shaking in silent laughter. Somewhere between Grandma being angry at Dash for stealing my soul and Dash being a general pain in the ass, they had managed to find a mutual appreciation. “It’s nice to see you again.”

“Hmf.” Grandma studied me with narrowed eyes. “You are not looking good. Why aren’t you sleeping?”

There was no reason to turn red. No reason at all. There was a big difference between the reason I was not sleeping and the way we were occupying all that free time.

“You better take good care of my favorite grandson, Djinn!”

“You see?” Dash said to me, “Seemingly, it’s okay to address me as a Djinn, so stop being insulted when I call you human!”

“Not the point, Djinn!” Grandma could argue with the best of them. I always loved hearing her and Grandpa bicker over everything. “I asked you a question!”

Dash scowled in that way he did when he was about to set something on fire. I elbowed him in the side and inwardly begged him not to start the fight with my grandma.

His arched eyebrow said, *Why not?*

My scowl—well, mostly my thoughts—said, “Because you want to get laid later.”

“Boys, stop talking in meaningful glances and tell your poor, old, *dead* grandmother what is going on. I don’t have all night. Cousin Merryl is making a mess of his marriage and he needs some talking to.”

She did have all night. Ghosts didn’t sleep, and because of teleporting skills almost as slick as Dash’s, they also didn’t waste time traveling.

Dash opened his mouth to speak, but I stopped him. I didn't want to bother my grandma with more tales of my insane stupidity.

"She knows you're stupid already, believe me. It's very hard to miss," Dash said with a smirk. "But sure, be my guest, don't ask the wise lady who might actually have answers. Go back to playing with your stuffy, boring, *useless* books."

I groaned and sat down on the couch, wishing I had a drink to distract myself. My grandma might be anything but frail, even when she had been alive, but there was something wrong about worrying a woman who had changed your diapers.

"I am not a delivery service, Ciaran!" Dash snapped. "Get your own damn beer. And get me one as well."

"I didn't ask you! Lips are not moving, remember?" I stood up and got myself and Dash a beer from the kitchen.

Grandma had made some ghostly looking knitting appear and pretended to be a picture of patience.

"I have nightmares. Very bad ones. I can't wake up—"

Dash took over, obviously having exceeded his patience in the whole matter. "I can't reach him. I can't even feel him, not even when he gets hurt—"

"He gets hurt?" Grandma sat up straight at that notion, her impression of being a sweet old lady disappearing with her knitting. "Physically?"

I nodded, trying to swallow away the lump in my throat. "Broke my ankle in a dream yesterday. But the worst is not being able to wake up."

"You still know it's a dream?"

"Yes." The ability to dream lucidly was a part of our family's powers. "But I have no influence. I can't change anything. I can't escape. And I do get hurt." Deep inside I knew it had to do with Dash owning my soul. It was like the safety between my soul and my body was broken, and I got sucked too far into the dream dimension to get back.

"Can it be a demon?" Dash asked with a desperation I hadn't heard from him before. He was pacing again, growing bigger, and magic was lighting him up like a flickering candle.

"I don't think so," Grandma said softly, "There're demons and spirits who meddle with the dream world, but none should have the power to hurt you

physically. They mess with your mind by planting fears and nightmarish situations in your unconscious mind. Most nightmares are simply our own fears, our own bad memories coming back to haunt us. It's annoying and bound to drive you crazy, but only dangerous if they cause sleepwalking."

Grandma wiped at her eyes. The ball in my chest grew to the size of a basketball and turned to lead. I wished I could give her a hug and tell her it was all alright.

Grandma spoke with a trembling voice. "It's a unique situation, as your bond is unique. I'll ask the other ancestors, but I'm afraid..." She didn't need to finish that sentence. "To be certain, do a searching spell to see if there's anything looming nearby."

The searching spell brought nothing but a tiny chaos demon. It was the kind responsible for lost socks and pencils, and for not being able to find your glasses when you're already wearing them. I banished it. A broader search gave me a poltergeist that was tormenting a neighbor. This particular neighbor kicked dogs and refused to give children their ball back if it accidentally landed in his backyard, so he could keep his poltergeist. There was also a regular ghost unable to let go of an old love, and a few fairies who hung around a highly imaginative child. Nothing with the ability to influence dreams.

I shook my head at Dash. He was still about a foot too big, and gave off a spooky, flickering light. "I just have to find a way to function without sleeping, or a drug that stops me from dreaming." Both would drive me crazy, but Dash didn't need to know that. So I was very careful in not mentioning or thinking it.

A quick Internet search gave a drug used by victims of PTSD to reduce nightmares. I highly doubted it would work, but considering the drugs didn't have three pages of listed side effects, I'd give them a shot. A look at Dash gave me the medicine—and no, stealing from pharmaceutical companies didn't make me feel guilty—and I pocketed it to take before going to sleep. Dash let out a huge sigh and shrunk back to his usual size. The sense of power and anxiety didn't subside though.

"Now take me somewhere beautiful," I asked. "Somewhere where it's just us."

I screamed when we touched ground, jumping back from the abyss at my feet. I laughed a moment later, letting all the tension and adrenaline out in one burst of raging laughter. I laughed so hard and long that Dash couldn't help but start to giggle himself, a sound so unbelievably cute it made my stomach hurt

for reasons other than the uncontrollable way I was still laughing. I plopped down on the ground and let my glee subside while I watched Dash's expression of pure happiness.

"I needed that," I said when he sat down next to me, an arm draped around my shoulder. It felt important, like everything that was happening between us felt important. I moved forward a bit so I could sit with my legs dangling down the Grand Canyon, knowing that Dash would keep me safe from falling, and stared at the unbelievable beauty lying at our feet. Dash moved until he was behind me, cradling me to his chest, his arms around my waist and his chin leaning on my shoulder. Rubbing my cheek against his, I laced our fingers together. He was calmer since we killed the sorcerer, his urgency for revenge gone. For once I succeeded in not thinking and only enjoying; watching as the sun painted the sky red, pink, and purple, and the rocks all shades between the lightest pink and the darkest black. I ached for my painting supplies.

"Do you want them now?" Dash whispered in my ear. I looked back at him and smiled while shaking my head. I would remember and paint it from memory, mix it with imagination, and make it truly magical. The expression in his eyes was sweet and happy, and it gave the butterflies in my stomach a reason to throw a dance party. Angling back, I kissed him, soft and tender and with no goal in mind. We were simply enjoying each other; sharing and bonding.

The kiss ended, and Dash's sigh was shaky. He pulled me closer, encouraging me to let him take my weight.

"It's weird," Dash said, while lazily tracing his thumb over mine. Every touch sent tiny streams of excitement through me. "I really hated the idea of spending eternity with you attached to my hip—"

"Likewise." I turned around so I could watch his expression.

His mouth turned up into a smirk. "Smart-ass. Stop interrupting me when I'm trying to say something nice."

"This is you being nice?"

"I was trying to be, Pumpkinin."

"Let me explain something about compliments, Dash. They are supposed to make people feel better. So they need to be positive. You don't tell people their presence annoys you. You actually tell them something positive. Like how beautiful their eyes are."

“Why would you compliment people on their eyes? It’s not like you did something to get those pretty green eyes.”

I blinked at his words, then blushed.

“So saying something about how skillful your mouth is, or how great the sounds are when you’re getting close, that might be a compliment. Or, if I understand the lesson correctly, the way you don’t back down from me even when I’m mad enough to blow up an entire city, or the way you see the good in people who really don’t deserve your attention, or maybe your demon negotiating skills. At least, when sober, those could be compliments.”

My smile grew while he was talking, helped by the way he looked at me like I was something special. I knew he could read me like a book and felt my heart quicken and my stomach fill with even more butterflies.

“But that was not what I was trying to say. I was trying to tell you that ‘Until The End Of Time’ is starting to feel rather short. We might have to migrate to another multiverse when this one goes kaboom.”

I had to swallow away a lump the size of Africa to be able to talk, feeling all mushy and hopeful inside. “I love you, too, Dash.”

His eyes grew thoughtful. “Love, huh? Is that what this is?”

Endless eye contact turned into an equally endless kiss, again slow and sweet, but now deep and so passionate it was almost too much. It most certainly *was* too much without skin on skin contact. A four-poster bed appeared directly under us, right on the edge of the Grand Canyon. It would’ve made me laugh if our clothes hadn’t been gone as well, and his smooth heat wasn’t taking my breath away. We were on our sides, face to face, touching with careful, electrifying strokes.

“I’m going to make love to you,” I said between kisses, sounding cheesy even to myself. The way his eyes filled with yearning made the silliness of my words dissipate. A moment later, he allowed me to feel the depth of his longing as he opened the connection between us.

Slicking my fingers with the lube he let appear the moment I thought about it, I caressed him. One hand played with his beautiful cock, satin and steel moving through my fist, and the other moved to his back, finding his opening to tease. Even the slightest touch there made him tremble. He protested as I moved away to add more slick. I massaged and plucked and played him until he was pushing his ass back against my fingers, begging for more. Dash was still



sending me his sensations, so I felt the slight stab of pain when I carefully pushed a finger in, and also felt him dull the sting immediately.

“Don’t,” I said, kissing him reassuringly. “Don’t dull what you feel. Life is nothing without pain. You can’t enjoy the highs if you don’t live the pain as well.” A look of disbelief, then a sigh as he relaxed into the kiss, into the feeling of the burn turning to pleasure, to needing more, more, more, or you’d burst.

I turned him on his other side, spooning behind him so we could both watch the sunset while we made love. I pulled his top leg over mine, positioned myself, and slowly pushed in, having to gasp for breath at his heat, his tightness clinging around my sensitive head. He hissed in pain and I went slower, stroking his cock to help him deal with the sensations. I breached the second ring and waited for him to relax, for the sign to continue. When his breathing evened out, I moved with slow, tiny movements; fractions of an inch to let him get used to my girth. Dash’s breathing quickened and went raspy and shallow sooner than I’d expected.

“It’s how... this feels to... you,” Dash panted in a rough voice. “Move... dammit. Gimme... all.”

He turned his torso so his shoulders were flat on the mattress, grabbed my head, and kissed me deep. His tongue swept deeply into my mouth, showing me how he wanted me to plunder him. I did what he wanted, pushing in with short thrusts, every one sinking a tiny bit deeper in him, bringing us closer, connecting us further.

I had to pull back from the kiss as the sensations started to overwhelm me, both his and mine. The rolling waves of sweetness I felt could’ve been either Dash’s or mine. I didn’t know. I didn’t care. The way he looked at me, all awe, all want and love, partly human and partly ancient and alien, all mine, and all perfect.

I was completely inside him, finally. The feeling of him clenching around me, the possessiveness I felt, coupled with the fullness he echoed back to me, was enough to choke me up. I could stay like this forever.

“I appreciate... the sentiment, Pumpkin, but... it’s taking the... joined at the hips... a bit literal...” Dash’s chuckle resonated throughout the both of us and sent a jolt of heat through me. I started to move with long, steady strokes meant to last. Dash worked with me, helping me find the right angle to give him the most pleasure, tilting his hips with the same slow rhythm, making for an

effortless and endless deep pleasure that was like slowly diving into an underwater abyss. Pressure built up in my entire body, hot and insistent and compressing me until my body felt three sizes too small for me. I exploded the moment his walls started clamping down on me, no longer sinking into an ocean, but shooting up into the sky.

I stayed in him until I grew soft, causing a slight whimper when I pulled out. Dash immediately turned completely on his back. Cuddling into him, I reached up for a kiss. I couldn't stop smiling. I laid my head back onto his chest, looking at the stars that had appeared now that the sun had completely sunk beneath the horizon.

“Look,” I said with a smile. “You made me see stars.”

Dash kissed my forehead. “You were pretty awesome yourself.”

I cuddled closer, watching the sky and listening to birdsong and to Dash's heartbeat. I blinked, my eyes falling closed, then opened them again.

“Take your pill before you fall asleep,” Dash mumbled, sitting up. The box with pills and a glass of water magically appeared in his hand. Obediently I took a pill from the strip and swallowed it down. We lay down again, this time with Dash as the big spoon, and tugged up the covers. I closed my eyes, praying for the medication to work.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 12

I only knew three things. One; I was dreaming. Two; I was in absolute darkness and absolute nothingness. Three; I was falling. *Light*, I thought. *Let there be light*.

Nothing.

My vision was narrowing, and I was feeling light-headed. I realized I was in a vacuum.

Nothing here. Including air.

I couldn't breathe. Or better said, I was breathing, but there was no oxygen.

I needed to get out now.

I was falling faster, plunging down with unbelievable speed. Even in the total darkness I knew there was ground somewhere, and when I reached it, I'd die. Dream or not. Real or not. I'd break all the damn bones in my body.

If I didn't choke first.

I had no idea how much time passed.

I opened my eyes over and over again.

I tried to change the dream to make it so that I was falling up, that I was sinking in an ocean.

I went back to opening my eyes time after time.

The ground was getting closer. I still couldn't see it, but I felt it, hard and unforgiving and oh so deadly. Again I tried to change it, make it a bouncy castle, a trampoline, while still furiously trying to open my eyes.

Finally, I tried to change myself. I tried for a parachute at first.

Nothing.

I tried to make myself light as a feather.

Nothing.

I made myself into a bird, the kind that can plunge down and stop itself a fraction of an inch before crashing.

It worked. I was a hawk, fast and gracious, the descent now planned, but still way too fast. Beating my wings I tried to stop my fall, to brake, but it was too late. I crashed into the ground just as I opened my eyes for the last time—

Again I knew three things; intense pain, a fear so deep and dull it froze me from the inside, and rage and panic coming from Dash that was even stronger than the other two. The scariest thing was that he wasn't even pacing or setting things on fire. He was simply sitting on the bed with me cradled on his lap.

"I'm back," I croaked. "Don't worry, love. I'm back."

"I'm killing you," Dash said in a voice filled with desolation. His hands sent streams of warmth through me as he eased my pain. "You almost died. You got blue and then you got broken again."

I didn't know what to say. Right now I didn't feel any pain, but for the pain seeping from Dash. He was right. I had been seconds from dying and next time I might not escape in time. Every time I slept the nightmares lasted longer and I needed more attempts to wake up. The pills hadn't done anything.

Not that I'd truly expected they would.

"Let's go home," I said, sighing. "Take the bed back from wherever you borrowed it from and let's go home to think about it."

"I don't need to think," Dash said, but he did what I asked him anyway.

The moment we arrived back home, right on my couch as I expected, I stood up to make myself some hot chocolate. I found my knee wouldn't support my body, nor did my shoulder obey when I reached out to stop myself from face-planting on the coffee table.

"Come here, idiot. You aren't healed yet. I only took away your pain for the moment."

"Just to be clear, once you start healing, the pain will come back right?"

"Yes."

"Then pump some morphine into my veins first."

Neither of us knew what to do with the syringe of morphine Dash teleported in, so he also teleported in Cecile, my second cousin who was in nursing school. She merely raised an eyebrow at Dash, before quickly and efficiently injecting the morphine, while mumbling something about the insanity of dabbling with the occult while drunk. Apparently my family's gossip train still worked like a charm. I didn't even manage to thank her before Dash sent her away again. I would just send her a nice card or something. If I lived long enough to do so.

The painkiller set in quickly, but wasn't enough to completely drown out the pain of bones realigning and joints popping back into their sockets. By the time the pain subsided I was sweating and close to crying. Only the misery on Dash's face kept me from showing it, and well, maybe the morphine. But I didn't get a long reprieve. Dash burned the morphine from my body to prevent me from falling asleep. He also got me a large hot chocolate with plenty of cream, and not the lactose-free kind that didn't taste the same no matter what the commercials promised, and nothing for himself. Both were sure signs something was wrong.

He didn't say anything though. He watched me intensely, waiting for me to finish my drink. Then he kissed me, so deep and so desperate I knew he meant farewell.

He pulled back from the kiss, still cradling my head between his hands, still close and so beautiful it made my heart burn. "I'm giving you your soul back."

Panic threatened to choke me. "I'm not taking it. You need it to stay. I need you to stay."

"I need you to be safe."

"I need you!" My voice sounded weird in my own ears, garbled and desperate with the tears that threatened but didn't come out.

"Maybe I'll find another idiot who'll sell me his soul," Dash said with an attempt at a smile. "I'll come back."

No! The idea of someone else sharing this bond with him, sharing his feelings, bickering, laughing—and making up—made me nauseous.

"I'm pretty sure that'll always be just you." Dash swallowed. "I love you, Ciaran. I have to—"

"Then pull me out of my body. Put me into that snow globe you keep threatening me with. Or let me be a ghost. Ghosts don't sleep."

"Exactly!" The voice made both of us jump. "Ghosts don't sleep."

"Grandma," I sputtered, turning into the direction of my grandma's chair. "I didn't know you were here."

"I've been waiting for you for a while. I popped in on that lovely scene at the Grand Canyon, but I suspected you wanted some privacy."

My cheeks grew hot.

“Oh, don’t worry, Cia. You were still dressed when I left. I came to offer you a solution.”

“There’s a solution?” Dash perked up. “I thought it was impossible. I thought about everything, but the only thing even remotely feasible is for me to alter Ciaran’s physiology so he doesn’t need sleep anymore, or so he can’t dream, but messing with the brain is just too dangerous.”

“It is,” Grandma confirmed. “So I came to offer you my soul.”

“What?” I shouted. Dash leaned back in thought.

“Ghosts don’t sleep,” Grandma repeated calmly. “I don’t mind. I lived a long life and a long afterlife and many lives before this one. I don’t particular like what is happening to the world. I’m pretty sure I don’t want to be reborn in an age where people spend more time looking at their phones than at each other.”

“But... Dash will have to trap you in a box!”

“Ciaran is right. It isn’t pleasant,” Dash shivered visible. “I wouldn’t even do that to my worst enemy.”

“I thought about that as well,” Grandma said with a serene smile. “I gathered a cat might make a pretty box.”

Dash perked up, a smile lighting up his features. “A cat?”

“Cats dream,” I said feebly. “I think they sleep about twenty hours a day!”

“I wouldn’t be a cat. I would be a ghost, a soul if you want, sharing a body with a cat. The cat will be sleeping. I won’t.”

“It could work. It should even.”

“We are not turning my grandma into a cat! What will the family say?” I protested.

“You are not doing anything, Cia. I am negotiating my wish for an afterlife with the Djinn who can make it happen.”

“You can’t,” I said, now to Dash. “It’s ridiculous! A cat!”

“You’d rather die?” Grandma asked.

“Well... no...” I had to admit.

“Want to say good-bye to Dash then? Never see him again? Or, if he stays with you in his normal form, never touch him again? Risking every day that he’ll be summoned away from you and be captured?”

I didn't answer. I refused to deal with this whole reverse psychology thing. It was exactly what Paige always did.

“What’s so wrong about this solution? I get to be a cat. Cats have great lives, all that snoozing in the sun or in front of a fire, and everyone taking care of you, and doing whatever you want. If you think it’s a big sacrifice to me, you’re wrong. I’m done with having to run around making sure nobody in the family acts stupid. It’s hard. People don’t listen to their dead grandmothers. I want this, Ciaran. I want to do this for you.”

“Eternity is a long time,” Dash said seriously. “I can do it, will do it if it saves Ciaran and keeps me with him, but what if you change your mind?”

“There are other animals. I imagine being a dolphin will be fun too, or a seagull. I’ve been human for a long time. I’m done with it.”

“Ciaran?” Dash looked at me.

I nodded. “Let’s go to the animal shelter and pick out a cat.”

\*\*\*\*\*

## Epilogue

*2515 AD*

“I can’t believe it took you humans this long to invent a flying car,” Dash said disapprovingly, peering at me like I was personally responsible for this failure.

“I’m sorry?” I said with a grin. Turning to him, I muted the newsfeed with a wave of my hand. We were on our huge bed, in our underwater bedroom watching the fish swim by. It was by far the best house we’d lived in so far. It also had an above-water bedroom with an equally big bed and an awesome view of the ocean and the group of tropical islands nearby. All still paid for by the money Dash was siphoning from the ever-successful Disney Corporation, and in part by my paintings. I had managed to become a bit famous during my lifetime, and seemingly being dead for over four hundred years did wonders for the asking price of art. Djinn in a Lamp had just brought in a stunning fifty million dollars, a hundred and eighty years after it disappeared—aka been stolen back from the collector by Dash. “But I have no idea why you even care, Mister I-can-teleport-where-ever-I-want-so-I-don’t-have-to-bother-with-traffic.”

“It’s the principle of it,” Dash said. “It should’ve been top priority.”

“Instead of curing cancer? Or learning how to make limbs grow back? Or solving the energy question? Or getting rid of world hunger and poverty? Getting clean water, decent housing and medical care to all?”

“I can remember having this discussion with you before.”

“Yes. It was fifty years ago when you got angry because there were still no hover boards. Remember? I pointed out that if you could make a flying carpet, you could make a flying snowboard, and you pointed out that it wasn’t the point.”

“Well, curing cancer is still no excuse for not having flying cars way sooner. They are made by different people, Pumpkin. You’ve got medics and you’ve got engineers. It might be too hard for your little artist mind to understand, but you wouldn’t go to a hospital to fix your car, right?”

“I don’t even have a car.” I had a teleporting Djinn for the large distances and a bike for the shorter ones.



“You know what I mean,” Dash said, pushing close to ask for a kiss. “I don’t get why I can’t say anything without you arguing with me.”

“You love it,” I said, inches from his lips, teasing him until he couldn’t handle it anymore and he rolled on top of me, pinning me down and kissing me to his—and my—heart’s content.

With an annoyed meow the white, fluffy cat who had been dozing between our feet jumped off the bed and left the room with her tail high up in the air. Good. Having sex in front of my grandma was not something I’d ever feel comfortable with. The past centuries she’d been a lot of different animals, but she always came back to being a cat.

“I love you,” Dash said, hovering right above me. “Even when you’re being stubborn and annoying.”

“Likewise.” I arched up to get my kiss, stroking my hands down his muscled back. He was still perfect and still mine. Always.

“That’s not how you should respond, Pumpkin,” Dash said with a pretend pout.

I grinned and rolled us around, dipping in for a kiss that showed him exactly how I felt about him, and how I still wanted him even after five hundred years.

“You are right, my mighty Djinn. I love you in all your infuriating, bothersome, exhausting ways.”

“Always.”

“And forever.”

**The End**

## Author Bio

*Gwynn Marssen was born and bred in the Netherlands, where talking about the weather is the national sport (although we pretend it's soccer) and a favorite saying is: "To act normal is crazy enough." She is pretty obsessed about the weather but is not a big fan of normality. Despite that, she leads a mostly quiet and disturbingly ordinary life and keeps the craziness contained in her head.*

*As a child she read too much, finding the world of fiction far more interesting than everyday life, and even now, she tries to spend as much time as possible in other people's heads, through books and writing, and through her alter ego as a psychologist. On any given day, you can find her curled up on her couch—or on those few occasions the weather permits it—in her hammock, with a spicy book, one or both of her two cats, some tea, and ample amounts of Dutch chocolate.*

*She's been writing for about five years, after she started watching professional wrestling. Those hot and practically naked men invaded her head, became her muses and forced her to start writing. They woke her up, filled her mind with images she couldn't resist, and, on more than a few occasions, drove her out of bed at five a.m. to write their steamy stories. Eventually, she managed to house-train them, and thus, highly increased the time she could spend procrastinating (which in her opinion is an art in itself). In the little time left over, she writes stories about men living and loving with all their heart.*

## Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Website](#) | [Goodreads](#)