

DAYTON IDONI



UNDILUTED

A Love's Landscape Story

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

UNDILUTED

By Dayton Idoni

Introduction

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

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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's Landscapes*.

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.

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.

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Photo Description

At war with the shadows, a young man conjures a weak shell of smokeless flame about his body. The darkness in his dirty, dank surroundings is split asunder. Cut away by the youth's amber light. He stands defiantly, half-naked and half-starved, bathed in the blossoming heat which bends to his will. Gazing forward, his mind wonders. Yearning for companionship; desperate to escape the life in which he is trapped, while dreaming of solace.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He was stumbling through the streets without any goal in mind. It was getting colder. He should be searching for a place to sleep, but he kept walking. Today was a bad day. Scratch that, the last eight years were bad. Ever since he realized who he was, what he could do, just how powerful he was, his weeks were full of bad days. He couldn't trust anyone. Those who didn't want to use him for their own goals were afraid of him and wanted to see him dead. He wrapped his arms around his skinny upper body, trying to stop the trembling. He was starving and the thirst was making him dizzy. His control was slipping he could feel it. The air around him was getting restless; he heard the ground under his feet cracking and felt the fire under his skin trying to break through. He was just thankful that it wasn't raining.

They came out of nowhere (or maybe he wasn't paying attention). Before he had a chance to run away, he was lying on the ground his hands instinctively wrapped around his head. They kicked him and shouted at him. He couldn't understand what they were saying too busy listening to his own thoughts. He almost wanted to laugh. He could easily kill them all, it would be a matter of seconds. But he didn't do anything. It wasn't that he wanted to die per se. It was just that he was tired. Tired of running, hiding. Of not being able to trust anybody. He didn't even flinch when the shot came.

It was on his way to get some food when he heard the shot. Without thinking he started to run, drawing his gun. But he wasn't fast enough. When he ran around the corner he saw a black SUV starting to drive away, his shouted "Stop! Police" was more than useless.

He was about to look at the license plate when he heard a soft whimper. Lying on the ground was a body. The Man was tall, maybe a few centimeters smaller than him, skinny and clothed from his head to his feet in black. He wasn't moving. But what made him hesitate to approach the hurt man wasn't that he seemed dead. As a cop, he had seen many things he rather hadn't. In particular, cases involving Elementals were especially gruesome. But that was something else. He had never seen something so disturbing and so beautiful in his whole damn life. The whole body of the kid (now that he was near him he saw that he couldn't be much older than 18) was on fire. It surrounded him like a shield. A bullet hovered only a few centimeters above his throat, stopped mid-air in the glowing wall of fire, saving the kid's life. A soft sob drew his eyes to the kid's face. Black hair, red, full lips and shocking pale skin distracted him for a second. But the bruises that were slowly appearing on his sharp cheekbones and the blood that was trickling from the corner of his mouth threw him back to the situation. His hand closed around a bony shoulder, shaking him carefully.

"Hey kid, wake up!"

The kid's eyes fluttered open. He got an impression of dark green eyes before they closed again. A chuckle escaped the kid's lips:

"Figured I wouldn't die... story of my life"

"Son of a—hey kid stay awake! I'll call the hospital"

Suddenly the fire surrounding the kid was getting brighter.

"Please, no hospital, please... they'll find me... please" he mumbled, his words almost indistinguishable. The fire was starting to fade away.

"What? Hey, no! Stay with me" the fire disappeared

"What. The. Fuck!?"

Sincerely,

Sofia

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: new adult, action, non-explicit, mythical creatures, mystery, alternate universe, magic users

Word Count: 40,549

Author's Note

I want to thank Sofia for her additional input during the early steps took to create this story. I'd like to thanks to my friends, Kerry and Michael, for beta reading the initial (and somewhat messy) story. And finally, I want to shower masses of gratitude upon Astrid for her phenomenal editing, along with her arsenal of beta readers. You've all been *amazing*!

With regard to the story, I hope that those of you, who have persevered through its pages, enjoyed the adventure! This is the first time I've ever written to a deadline, and I'll admit, I found it incredibly tricky. I think I was a little over-ambitious with the story line and tried to cram in the plot of what could have been a 150,000 word story, into 38,000 words. I've ended up chopping out a lot of what went off in my head, because there simply wasn't enough time to squeeze it all in. However, I thoroughly enjoyed writing this story and the prompt was marvelous! The whole experience was awesome, and I've certainly learned a lot from it. To all those who make this event possible, hold your heads high with pride; you're doing a grand job!

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Prologue

She cried softly as she cradled the quiet bundle in her arms. How could she have been this foolish? To think that she could pass her curse along to another living being and not regret it. To assume that she could carry a child in her womb for nine months and not come to love it.

His scarlet skin was still smeared with gore, but his tiny green eyes were clear and inquisitive. Barely even a day old and already he looked out at the world, seeking to unravel its mysteries.

She wiped at her eyes and sniffled, the sound echoing out into the blackness of the cavernous space. The Cathedral of St. Darren had been easy enough to break into, and offered a welcome shelter from the biting snow outside. The dark wooden pews were lined up symmetrically, leading towards the great cross which hung above the pulpit. The red velvet carpet had been recently washed, the strip of fabric dividing the huge edifice into two halves. The stained glass window on the far side of the entrance depicted three figures leaning over a crib; an angel with its huge feathery wings outstretched, a human with a crown of golden sunlight about his head and a primal. The ruby elemental entity stood in a ring of its own fire, smiling serenely down at the baby in the hay.

Beyond the translucent pane, snow fell in heavy clumps, gathering on the lead that protruded from the ancient mosaic.

“How about a story, my radiant little boy?” the mother offered, barely any older than a child herself.

She carried the infant up the center of the construction, cautiously walking along the plush rug.

“I can’t read,” she confessed, “but I know the story and we can look at the pictures.”

She reached the pulpit and pulled the book, which was almost as big as the baby, down from its perch. Settling onto the steps, she flicked through its pages.

“The Holy Bahriel,” she sighed, skipping to the front of the book.

“In the beginning God created the World, and it was beautiful. Then God made the primals from the different elements of his creation. They were ethereal creatures and were told to tend to His kingdom. Some were made of air

and guided the wind about the sky. Some were made of water and ensured the rivers flowed to the sea. Others were made of earth; it was their job to make the plants grow. There were lightning primals, whose static energy kept the world spinning, providing night and day. And finally there were the fire primals, who would eat death away, turning it to ash and from the fertile remains new life would grow.”

The baby in her arms wriggled, his petite hand pointing up to her face as she continued to read.

“After the primals, God made the angels from His holy light. They were His voice and carried His words with them. But His last creation was the one He took most pride in. Finally, from His blood, God made men and because He loved them so much, He gave them a soul.”

Cooing merrily, the child nuzzled into his mother's bosom, kicking at the book which balanced on her knees.

“The angels and the primals were aghast. They too wanted to live forever. God stated that if the angels and the primals wanted to share a human soul, then they must also share their gifts with the humans. The angels and the primals bonded with the humans, bestowing their elemental powers upon mankind, becoming a singular being. This is how the djinn were created, and now to this day, all races created by God have the opportunity to join Him in heaven, as long as they live honest and pure lives. However the most powerful of the primals were not able to fully fuse with humans. The five elemental Lords were too powerful. Sensing that there would be strife between the djinn and mankind, God offered the elemental Lords a boon. If they would retain their primal forms and keep the peace between the djinn and the humans, He would make them immortal. Thus the Paragons of Five Points was born, and the elemental Lords ensured that a balance was kept between men and djinn.”

The newborn dozed in the girl's arms; his emerald-green eyes disappeared behind his delicate lids. She stifled a sob, wishing she had the courage to stay with her baby, but what could she do against the evils in the world? The Bahriel spoke of a time long dead, and in this modern one, few she knew of lived honest and pure lives.

“This bit isn't in the Bahriel,” she said, closing the holy book. “It happened much more recently, during World War II. You see, there was a big war between lots of different countries and lots of djinn and humans were made to fight each other. Lots of people died. But in a city named Turin, in a country

called Italy, a djinn summoned one of the primal Lords. It was a giant beast, that the soldiers called The War Weasel. Its master, a woman named Carlote Galampier, and the primal destroyed half the city before disappearing into the air. Ever since that time, djinn have been shunned by the humans. Our world is not a place where people are pure and honest. Our world is full of danger and greed and men that wish us harm because of what happened decades ago.”

The thought caused her to tremble, and a wail escaped her throat. There was nothing pure and honest in what she had done, and until the day she died, she would hate herself for what she was about to do...

Chapter One

Seagulls screeched furiously at the intrusion, flapping their large, feathered limbs. They took to the bright, cool air and sought a safe spot to observe from, landing on the mossy roof of a disused warehouse. The dingy, plastic sheets creaked indignantly under their weight, threatening to topple the tiny flock over the side.

Beneath them, a young man walked sluggishly by, barely noting the gulls' irritated chatter. He pressed on along the deserted dock, focusing on the sloshing of the rhythmic waves as they slid against the harbor wall. On the opposing side of the bay were gray constructions of dilapidated brick and dust-layered contraptions. The once-thriving harbor now lay desolate, its monstrous machinery abandoned to the twenty-first century.

No more than a mile away, the hustle and bustle of the modern anchorage sounded dimly over the gentle rocking of the ocean. The youth strode slowly and deliberately towards it, spurred on by the clanking and calling of human voices.

Towards the salvation of the sea and away from the city. Away from the shantytowns, away from the high-rise buildings, away from the mansions and their denizens. Away from the huge column of black smoke that rose above the city, looming like a giant monster, readying to attack.

He was done with it. Finished with the users, abusers, and traitors who called the city of New Yarlynn their home. Those that weren't trying to exploit him against his will, shunned him like a leper. He'd been bought, sold, traded, stolen, rejected, beaten, and bled. He was an object, a container; the chrysalis that housed his enigmatic elemental power. The only part of him that had worth.

Licking at his cracked, pink lips, he shuddered at their dry, brackish taste. A gust of salty sea air assailed him, scraping against his bare skin. It caused him to sway and halt in his retreat. He wrapped his sickly arms around his slight torso, tearing the black fabric of his tattered T-shirt. His skinny frame trembled as he weakly tried to fend off the wind.

I need a drink he thought grimly.

When had he last eaten? It must have been days ago, maybe even a week.

The scuff of a foot on the cracked concrete, close behind him, caused him to flinch. He danced away from the thud, spinning as he shuffled.

Too late.

A bullish man in his late thirties, dressed in dark jeans and a navy blue shirt, lunged forward. With his bulbous fist, he landed a blow as hard as a hammer and quicker than was humanly possible. It crunched into the eye socket of the boy's face with a sickening crack.

He laughed with delight as the wraith-like youth's skin split open.

"Dirty fucking deserter!" he declared.

It sent the scrawny teen spiraling through the air, hissing through his clenched teeth, smothering a cry. Behind the assailant, two more appeared, each dressed in a similar fashion to the first. The three of them set to work, raining punches down upon the teen like a monsoon. As the younger man crumpled to the ground, he instinctively shielded his head with his arms, wrapping the gangly limbs around his face. He closed his eyes, vainly trying to drown out the agony that flared through his body.

His mind speculated over the details of his predicament. *How have they managed to find me here? I was sure I'd be safe by the sea. How did they know I would try to find a boat?*

A heel to his chest caused something to snap, and a cacophony of pain sang out through his body. He moaned involuntarily, the sound of his own voice aggravating him. The embers that resided in the deepest part of his consciousness flared suddenly brighter.

He could kill them all in an instant; disintegrate them like moths in a flame. He could allow the growing fire beneath his skin to expand, becoming an inferno of uncontrolled rage.

Imagine the smell...

No. He had seen enough death at his hands, navigated through the carnage he'd wrought before, and he was tired of it. Another thought skittered quickly into his brain.

He could let them have their way. Let them end his life. It wasn't that he wanted to die, but what did he really have to live for? Why did he feel compelled to survive? He had no family to speak of, no friends or possessions other than the clothes on his back. His only plan in the world was to stowaway

on a ship and get out of the States. After that, then what? Mayhap he should just let the three men hurry him along to an early grave.

“That’s enough,” barked a cold, unfamiliar voice.

The savage pummeling came to an abrupt end, as the three men backed away. Not concerned with opening his eyes to glare at the orchestrator of this assault, the dark-clothed teen lay still. In his head, he listened to a familiar pulse which echoed about his ears. The ghost-like heartbeat, throbbing slower and with more vigor than his own.

“Not the lamp we were after, but you’ll do just fine,” the thug snarled.

Lamp? the youth wondered.

“Elson will be well chuffed when we roll up with your corpse,” a tremble of venomous anger trickled into the tone. “You know, because his old man died after you torched half their house down.”

The distinct click of a revolver being cocked sounded out over the still wailing gulls.

So Aaron was dead then? the teen mused and then opened his mouth to offer his attackers one word, “Good.”

Officer Bronson sat in a squad car, thankfully off duty, outside Smiths’ Sea Shipments. It had been a busy day, what with terrorists executing the honorable judge, Hugo Baxter, on the steps of New Yarlynn’s Galleries of Justice and then setting fire to the building. Djinn had run riot through its halls, making holes in walls, dropping hostages from the highest floors. The D.O.T. had claimed responsibility for the act, threatening that more death was imminent if the balance between the djinn and the humans was not maintained. Firefighters had the blaze under control, but a plume of toxic smoke still crawled away from the smoldering remains.

He sighed, relinquishing the memory of the burning building, as he gazed at the precarious wooden shack before him. The sign of S.S. Shipments drooped from the wall, a mocking echo of the policeman’s melancholy mood. Bronson was unsure how he’d ended up here again. A short while before, he’d left the precinct, spurred on by the rumble in his stomach, yet he found himself staring at the crumbling timber cabin.

Three week prior, Bronson had been called to the scene of a homicide in this exact same location, down at the docks. The body of a woman had been

discovered, and the press had gotten wind of it somehow. Bronson and other rookies were called in for crowd control, barring entry to the disused office. Upon arriving, Bronson entered the building to report for duty, only to catch a glimpse of the decaying body.

A dull shock of horrified recognition rippled through his mind as he stared at the half-naked corpse.

Kacey.

His older sister, who he hadn't spoken to for almost a month, lay dead on a rotting desk, her slack-jawed face seeping a black residue into the dark, damp wood.

Cause of death: asphyxiation.

There hadn't been any sign of a struggle, and the C.S.I. unit confirmed that the body hadn't been moved since the homicide had taken place. She had been killed at the location. The murderer was still at large, and so far there wasn't even a serious suspect.

The sudden, explosive echo of a shot being fired snapped his mind back to the present. His body responded quicker than his brain, already moving out of the squad car, and rapidly, yet stealthily toward the source of the sound. Now out of the vehicle, he could hear the muffled reverberation of conversation coming from near the harbor's end. He navigated around the leaning structure of S.S. Shipments and tiptoed towards a walkway between two of the disintegrating warehouses. Familiar with the area after having combed through it on countless occasions to find evidence that would shed some light on his sister's murder, Bronson made his way to a chain-link fence. The rusted corner of the metallic frame was broken and the thin grid curled away from the post, leaving enough of a gap for him to fit through. From there, he could shimmy silently down the passage and discover whatever was occurring on the other side of the structure.

Reaching the end of his hiding place, Bronson peeked cautiously out of the alley and bit back a gasp. Lying on the ground were the distinct remnants of a human body, set aglow by an unnatural ruby-red fire. The smokeless flames licked at the charred remains of the deceased person, rising several meters in height. Around the body, the blistered concrete cracked, and chunks of stone jutted up from the floor. The whistling of car wheels ricocheted off the abandoned buildings, over the crackling and popping of the fire. Bronson turned his gaze sharply, just in time to see a black SUV speeding away. He leapt out from his hiding place with his gun in hand.

“Stop,” he bellowed. “Police!”

Seemingly unaware, the SUV continued in its rapid retreat, the tires screaming again as it disappeared around a corner.

Bronson plunged his hands into his pocket, retrieving his cell phone. He frantically fingered the keys, intending to call into the station and request a tail for the conspicuous SUV, but a pleading croak sounded from the sizzling mass on the ground behind him.

“Don’t.”

Incredulously, Bronson spun on his heels. To his amazement, what he had earlier mistaken for a charred corpse was in fact a young man, dressed entirely in black. His body was bathed in crimson flame from head to toe, yet what little of his skin was visible seemed unmarred by the fire. Even his long, ebony hair was unaffected by the heat as it hovered around his head in wispy, dark tendrils. His eyes were closed, but his shadowy brows were creased, his young face a mask of concentration. Levitating a few centimeters from his throat, a bullet spun in the blaze, its steel-like sheen changing color from a silvery hue to one of gold.

Bronson took a cautious step toward the young man, unsure of how best to approach the situation. Abruptly, the fire surrounding the youth died away, revealing its fleshy core. Still dazzled by the flames, Bronson gave the boy a quick once-over. Blood seeped from a gash over his right eye, and there was a split on his lower lip.

When the young man didn’t move, Bronson knelt at his side.

With a trembling hand, he nudged the teenager’s shoulder. “Hey kid, wake up.”

The young man’s lashes fluttered open and emerald-green eyes stared out from behind them, meeting Bronson’s gaze. His pupils were elongated, as Bronson had suspected, like that of a goat.

“Figured I wouldn’t die,” the teenager mumbled, his lips twitching into an ironic grin. “Story of my life.”

The smile on his lips faded, and his irises rolled up into the back of his head.

“Son of a...” the rookie whispered. “Hey kid, stay awake. I’ll call the hospital.”

The pasty boy snatched blindly at the older man's wrist, "Please no hospital," he pleaded feebly. "Please, they'll find me... please..."

His voice trailed off as consciousness left him behind, broken and drained.

"What?" Bronson asked, shaking the kid again gently. "Hey, no! Stay with me!"

More vigorously, the officer wobbled the other man's shoulder, yielding no response. Giving up he sat back, weighing his options.

The only thought that passed through his brain was simply, *What. The. Fuck?*

Chapter Two

Sleep had been an abyss of darkness. Dreamless, empty, like his life. Rising from its depths, he inhaled a deep lungful of air, glad to be away from the ocean's edge and the stinging, salty atmosphere. As his awareness emerged, he tried to force it back down, to allow his mind this brief respite. However, his brain had other ideas and jarring thoughts jostled to the forefront.

Where am I? he pondered, daring to open his eyes a fraction. *What happened?*

He found himself sprawled out on the backseat of a car. Through the sealed window, countless stars seemed to throb against the inky blackness of night. Incomprehensible miles separated him from their glow, and yet, somehow, the radiance of their flame managed to cross the vast lonely span of space. He longed to join them, to burn bright in response to their hailing, protected by the desolate vacuum of near nothingness, which encased the world.

"Good, you're awake," a quiet voice rumbled from the front of the car.

Through the cage that separated the two halves of the vehicle, he could spy a young policeman. The silvery moonlight cast itself through the meshing, obscuring the officer's face with shadow.

"You got a name, kid?" asked the darkened figure.

"Kid?" he responded. "How old are you? I bet there aren't many years between us."

"What's between us is a salt-infused steel grill, and unless you start answering my questions, there will also be several miles between us when I kick you out of the car and leave you here."

"And, 'here' is where exactly?"

"We're in the Rural District, between a couple of farms. I figured you'd want to be away from the sea spray. I also didn't know if you'd go nuclear again, so I brought you away from that giant fire hazard of a city," the young officer pointed to a glow on the horizon, where New Yarllynn hid behind a hill.

Weighing his options, the green-eyed boy thought for a second. He didn't know this man or this place. He wasn't sure how much this cop knew about him, aside from the obvious. When he didn't answer, the older man continued, "You're a djinni, then? A fire elemental? I'm guessing you're quite the find,"

he held up the golden bullet, which had altered its metallic compound in his flames. "I'm also guessing that you're worth a lot to those men who were trying to kill you. Which begs the question; how could someone with your talents possibly be worth more dead than alive?"

"Ren," the youth stated, dodging the torrent of questions by answering the first.

"What?"

"My name," he croaked, "is Ren."

"Ren," the obscured officer repeated. "Well Ren, you look like shit and you don't smell much better either. What sort of drugs were they trading you, in exchange for your expertise?"

The cop's face wrinkled with contempt.

"You assume too much," Ren mumbled, sitting up, sliding against the black upholstery.

"No offence, but you're practically a walking, talking skeleton. Only junkies and supermodels look that thin—" he nodded to Ren's protruding ribcage, through the tattered remains of his T-shirt "—and kid, you ain't on a catwalk."

The skinny teen looked down at his torso and the pale skin that constricted around his scrawny bones. There was nothing to him, no substance, and no meat. He was, as the stranger had said, a living corpse, existing solely to haunt the world. His long, dark hair hung from his skull, trickling down into his lap, the wispy strands a stark contrast to his almost opaque flesh. He must have looked ghastly; his outer shell perfectly projecting his inner, broken, persona.

"I'm not a junkie," Ren protested weakly, annoyed. "I'm just hungry is all."

"I bet," the dusky-haired man sighed, "and I've got a glove compartment full of delicious goodies. Most of them unsalted too. You're welcome to all you can carry once we've had a little chat."

Ren narrowed his coal-colored lashes, "A chat? You're bribing me with food? To do what exactly?"

"First of all, just to answer my questions. I want to know what was occurring at the harbor."

"And because you think you saved me, I'm going to tell you?" Ren grinned, "You've locked me up in the back of your car, and you've driven us out of the

city to some strange place. I'm weak and half-starved, so you think you have the upper hand? You think you get to dictate what's going to happen?"

"You're a djinni, I'll never have the upper hand," the officer snapped. "But that doesn't mean I'm unprepared."

He briskly picked up a tub of table salt, which had been left beneath his seat, shaking it briefly. "And the door isn't locked. If you want to leave, I won't try to stop you. If you try to stay against my will, you'll be out the door, and I'll leave you to wander back in the darkness by yourself."

Ren eyed the tub of tiny, crystal-like grains irritably, imagining their blistering touch all over his body. He hated, that despite all his power, such a simple and insignificant thing could be so debilitating for him. He could shred through this car in a matter of minutes, leaving a charred hole in its place. But those tiny, twinkling shards of salt would render him powerless in a second, encasing his aura, imprisoning his innate elemental abilities.

The police man shuffled about in the front seat, producing a large bar of fruit and nut chocolate. Ren snorted irritably, as his mouth betrayed him, salivating at the sight of the delicious bar of sweet substance.

"What do you want to know?" he asked, pulling the ripped T-shirt about his chest, feeling suddenly self-conscious.

"Why were those men attacking you? And why didn't you want to go to the hospital?"

"Because I don't like hospitals and with regards to the men... Why not beat on me?" Ren quizzed. "I was a lone djinni wandering the docks. You know this city is infamous for its dilute bashings," he spat the last two words, emphasizing the derogatory word used to describe his kind.

Dilutes.

"And if the guys beating on you were common thugs, I'd believe that. But the SUV they drove away in wasn't exactly cheap. The men that shot at you, they didn't happen upon you by chance, did they?"

Ren shifted his greasy hair out of his face, and he rubbed at his temples, "What's your name?"

"I'm Mr. Don't-Change-The-Fucking-Subject."

"You know my name. Fair's fair."

"I know whatever bullshit alias first jumped into your head."

“If you don’t believe a word that’s coming out of my mouth, then what’s with the inquisition?” Ren fixed his company with a hostile stare.

The older man considered his words before he answered.

“Theo Bronson,” he finally said, shuffling back into the small seat. “Everyone calls me Bronson.”

“Tab? Theodore Amadeo Bronson?” Ren quizzed, the name conjuring up a long-lost memory.

The rookie looked down at his partly unbuttoned shirt to where he wore his badge, but the spot was vacant, “Only my sister used to call me Tab! How do you know my full name?”

The need to be away from the policeman overwhelmed Ren suddenly. He scanned the small space, looking for a weakness in its fortifications. No doubt the entire frame of the damned squad car was constructed of salt steel. He pulled on the door handle, doubting the honesty of the cop’s words, surprised when it opened. Slipping out into the blackness of night, Ren wobbled weakly on his legs, kicking up beige dust from the dry dirt road. On both sides of the squad car was shoddy fencing, used to keep larger critters out of the fields where vegetables were grown. Beyond them, rows of bulbous green plants bled away from the light of the auto, vanishing into the darkness. The only other visible light was that of the city, several miles away from his current position. The cop wasn’t kidding; they were literally out in the middle of nowhere.

“Where are you going?” Bronson barked, opening the driver’s door and nipping quickly to Ren’s side.

“Away.”

Bronson bumbled up to Ren’s left, as his figure limped from the car, “I thought you were hungry.”

“Fuck off!” the djinni kid spat back.

Bronson clamped his jaw shut and balled his fist. He had to rein in his own emotion and his fraying temper. The skirmish at the harbor, so close to where his sister’s body had been found, and then Ren knowing Bronson’s full name; it was all too coincidental.

This was all connected to Kacey.

He couldn't let this lead fall through his fingers. Bronson contemplated pulling his gun on the retreating teen, but he couldn't just arrest the young djinni. Not after breaking protocol and basically abducting the youth. Ren would probably cry bloody murder at the station, and Chief Shaw would have his balls. Why had he gone against his better judgment and not taken the djinni to the hospital?

Because of my gut feeling.

"Kid, wait," he urged, tugging at Ren's shoulder.

Ren shrugged the hand away and looked over his shoulder to glare at the policeman. As he spun back, the shadowy mass of his mane shimmied over his back like the oily tendrils of a squid. Bronson flinched away, afraid the kid might flare up like a firework.

"I told you to fuck off," Ren hissed.

"And I told you, I want answers."

"You wouldn't believe what I have to say! You didn't believe me when I told you my name."

"I believe you knew my sister, Kacey!"

Ren faltered in his already wobbly stride. "Yes, I knew your sister."

"How? What were you to her?"

The djinni boy came to a stop in the dusty dirt track. "I'm the reason she's dead."

Bronson gasped, the sharp intake of air was the only sound in the vacuum that had formed between them. Had the bastard dilute just confessed to murdering his last living relative? Was this djinni the reason he was all alone in the world?

He pulled his pistol from its holster and pointed the barrel at the back of the kid's head. "Why?"

"Because..." the anger in Ren's voice was gone, replaced with a hollow sadness, "she was unfortunate enough to befriend me."

"Put your hands in the air," Bronson's tone trembled.

Ren slowly did as instructed, wincing at the ache caused by his rapidly healing ribs. He spread his fingers as his hands reached the summit of his sloppy stretch. Sparks darted between the slender digits, then danced down the

length of his arms. Within a fraction of a second, too quick for Bronson to be able to respond, Ren's entire body was burning with crimson flame.

"Stay away from me, if you don't want to burn to death like your sister," the teenager warned over the crackling heat.

Kacey didn't burn to death, Bronson's brain retorted. *What is this kid going on about?*

The immediate area around the djinni was illuminated in amber light. Shadows clawed menacingly at the flickering brightness, trying to reclaim their territory. Bronson's breathing quickened as he held his pose, arms outstretched with gun in hand. He thought about shooting the djinni in the leg, preventing him from escaping. Would it even affect the burning entity opposite him? Bullets hadn't seemed to work earlier, and he'd left the salt in the car. Before he could decide on a course of action, something shifted from out of the shadow.

A young girl in her mid-teens appeared and stood with her back to the officer. Her stance was confident, and she bobbed from side to side like a boxer looking for an opening in her opponent's defense.

"Are you another one of Whitmore's lackeys?" Ren asked, frowning defiantly at the newcomer.

The girl didn't answer. She just stared at the fiery djinni, her eyes determined and cold. The dust, disturbed by her feet, began to swirl around her body, like planets revolving around a sun. Her shoulder-length, pink hair whipped about her heart-shaped face and the fabric of her black, hooded sweatshirt began to judder, as the air twisted around her body.

She's a djinnayah, Bronson thought, feeling the breeze emanating from her form and knowing that, had she been facing him, he'd have seen her elongated pupils—the same as Ren's.

The spinning vortex increased in intensity, dragging grit from the dirt road. The girl allowed the wind to coil around her arm, as she pointed her fingers towards Ren. The dust and shale particles rushed toward the burning boy, causing him to shield his face with his hands. He hissed, as a sharp piece of rock found its way past his appendages and gashed his cheek.

"If that's the way you want to play," the angered djinni sneered.

He stoked the embers of his ethereal fire, and it flickered momentarily brighter. Focusing his elemental energy into a single point, Ren shot a curl of

flame toward the girl. It snapped at its target like the whip of a beast tamer. The girl leapt from the ground, heading skyward, narrowly missing the blistering vine. She leapt over Ren, flipping around mid-air at a height no normal human had a hope of accomplishing, and landed on the opposite side. As she connected with the soil, she slammed her arms down, dragging a torrent of cool night air down with her. The blast of wind fanned at Ren's flames, and he laughed in maniacal delight as the plume of fire rose even higher.

“Stupid bitch,” he shot. “Don't you know that air feeds a fire?”

“Let's see how you fare with a lungful of sand then, shall we?” she retorted, gesturing with her arms.

Able to better see her face from this angle, Bronson could see that the djinnayah had oriental heritage. Her metallic-gray eyes shone with mischief, as she beckoned to the night air. The gust of wind doubled back towards the inferno that had become Ren. It scraped along the ground like a wave moving along the beach, clutching at the dirt as it travelled. The blast of grit and dust poured down over the scene, bathing everything in a cloud of dust. In the cloud, Bronson struggled to see his hand as he waved it about blindly, lost amongst the glistening filth. He felt his way back towards the squad car and, once inside, he slammed the door. He was safe inside—Ren's fire wouldn't be able to penetrate the frame of his vehicle. As the dust settled around him, he flicked the headlights on and searched the vacant space around him.

Nothing.

Both djinn had disappeared into the shadow of night.

Chapter Three

A week later, Ren was sitting in a small room miserably eyeing the cluttered shelves which lined the walls. Jars containing liquids of varying colors were stacked clumsily atop one another. His host, a rotund elderly woman with thin white hair, busied herself with a needle. She dipped it into a bowl of boiling water and then traced the veins in Ren's arm. Finding the spot she sought, she dug the needle into his flesh. It didn't hurt too much, and he watched as warm red blood flowed out of his body and through a pipe into a large glass cylinder. His vital fluid, the price for his protection, dripped into the transparent jug.

Barbara "Babs," Lebue had taken him in after his encounter with the airy djinnayah and the cop. The wizened creature had rubbed her hands together greedily when he'd come knocking at her door. She welcomed him in, out of the streets of the shantytown where the hag had made her den.

"Ren the Red! My boy! You have been sorely missed!" she exclaimed, wrapping her rubbery arms around him.

She offered him healing, food, a roof over his head, and protection from Elson Whitmore, Aaron's son, as long as he was willing to part with his blood. Ren didn't dare return to the harbor—stealing away on a boat was now no longer an option to escape. He couldn't walk to the nearest city or take to the roads, because he couldn't drive. And he knew that Whitmore would have his goons watching train stations and bus routes, hoping he might find him there. Besides, he'd never clear a checkpoint with his djinn eyes. The humans would report him to the authorities as an untagged djinn, and Elson would find a way to get him while he was held in custody. Babs was his only choice, and reluctantly he'd returned to her. He'd have to wait in her territory until enough time had passed for Elson to give up his vendetta, and then he could safely make it out of the city.

The ancient crone was infamous amongst the djinn denizens of New Yarllynn. Her ability to mix potions and tonics were second to none, and she had amassed quite the illegal empire. She certainly had enough cronies at her command to deter the millionaire playboy from trying to snatch him, if he ever figured out that Ren was there.

Staring at the blood slowly slipping out of his body made him think of all that he had wasted while traversing through the hillsides in the Rural District, several days earlier.

As the tidal wave of stone and grit had poured down around him, sent by the girl with the annoyingly familiar face, a large chunk of stone had hit his head. Blood poured from the gash on his temple while he fled in the cloud of dust. It trickled down into his eyes, making it difficult to see. Ren had run as best he could, stumbling in the dark, his fire extinguished and his mood more sour than usual. Elson clearly wanted Ren dead and wasn't going to give up the pursuit, until the teen was in a shallow grave. Now that he had inherited his father's empire, the young man had more djinn in his arsenal than any man ought to have. If Ren wasn't careful, the millionaire would get his wish.

I should have killed him when I had the chance, Ren thought bitterly, watching the sanguine liquid seep from his arm, then along the thin pipe and into the cylinder.

He shuddered at the thought, thinking about the smell of burning flesh. How many more people would die in his fire? Aaron, Aileen, Kacey...

That cop popped into his mind, Theodore Amadeo Bronson, Kacey Bronson's little brother. What were the odds that the rookie had happened upon him in his time of need?

Ren grimaced with guilt as his mind drifted to the thought of the officer. His brilliant blue eyes, his wide lush mouth. The crown of ashen hair, creating a disheveled nest of short waves about his head. He looked like a cherub, much the same as his sibling, but with more facial hair.

His beautiful, dead sister.

Ren had met Kacey back at Blue Brook Meadow, the orphanage where he'd grown up. She had joined a peer-to-peer role model program while attending high school and in doing so, visited the orphanage frequently. She was seventeen at the time, and Ren was ten. Kacey talked a lot about going to college and told him all about her family. She was smart, funny, and had a soft spot for the emerald-eyed boy before the fateful change in his appearance. The two of them would spend hours together, along with Aileen, another orphan who lived with him. Most of Ren's evenings were spent in their company, playing board games and reading stories from the Bahriel. Kacey in particular used to enjoy reading stories about the Paragons of Five Points.

She would talk about Theodore all the time; "You remind me so much of my little brother, Tab," she used to say.

"Tab," Ren asked jealously. "What sort of a name is that?"

“It’s his nickname. His real name is Theodore Amadeo Bronson, but I call him Tab for short. One of these days, I’m going to bring him along to meet you.”

That day never came. Blue Brook Meadow wasn’t destined to survive Ren’s stay.

The fire... So much fire.

Ren allowed his memories to haunt him, until Babs returned to the small space.

“It’s good stuff this, little Ren,” she grinned toothlessly, as she poked at the bag, rousing the teen from his reminiscence. “I can make many strengthening potions from your blood.”

“I don’t understand how,” Ren mumbled. “Or why it’s only my blood you’re interested in.”

“Ah! Your blood is not the only blood that interests me,” she huffed. “And I could tell you how, but the knowledge might make your pretty little skull pop!” She made an explosive gesture with her hand.

The black-haired boy shook his head. “It’s always blood and gold. I miss the good old days when I used to be able to buy things with money, like the rest of the world.”

“Ah, but you do not fit into this world, do you?”

“I prefer to think this world doesn’t fit me.”

“Then why concern yourself with its currency? Be pleased that you have so much to offer and be grateful for my hospitality.”

“Hospitality is something you offer to a guest,” Ren corrected irritably. “I’m paying for my board in blood. Don’t speak to me like you’re doing me a favor.”

The haggard witch opened her mouth while her cheeks flamed, as though she were about to retort. Thinking better of it, she clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth and snorted. The rouging of her face trickled down her neck as the old woman manipulated her flesh, pulling the pink hue along her skin. Her elemental domain was over water and her djinniah power had manifested in the most bizarre way. It allowed her to maneuver the liquids of her body, giving her the ability to alter her form for short spaces of time. She couldn’t manipulate the flesh to a point that allowed her to appear like someone else, but she could stretch her skin and veins, which allowed her body to bend into

unnatural positions. Ren suppressed a shudder, trying to ignore the squelching noise that emanated from Barbara's body.

"What would you buy with this money anyway?" Babs asked. "All the millions you had access to while living with Poppa Whitmore didn't save you from these streets, did they? Or his cage! You'd have been better off coming back to me."

"Maybe," Ren huffed. "But it wasn't like he threw me straight into a salt cell. It wasn't all bad. For a long time, I honestly thought Aaron genuinely cared for me. More than I can say about you."

"Ah, so you would rather I lie to you? Pull the wool over your eyes like that mad man?"

"I doubt you could. I doubt I'll ever trust anyone again. He built up my faith in humanity after taking me in from the streets. He made me feel safe... for years. I used to enjoy his company. Aaron would spend hours teaching me about history, religion, warfare, and his other interests. We'd walk and talk for hours, exploring his estate, watching the forest blossom, then die and finally be reborn. He was the nearest thing I've ever had to a father."

"No little Ren. Fathers love their children. He was the nearest to a monster you will ever be."

The young man scowled. "Like you said—at least you're honest. I was an idiot to think he wanted me for no other reason than my company. He had his bastard son for that. That fucking acorn didn't fall far from the tree, did it? I bet Elson is enjoying his father's millions as we speak."

"They were never your millions to begin with! Don't sound so bitter. It is blood money—dirty, cursed money! You mark my words," she grinned deviously, "at least your blood is clean and it is worth more than all the cash in the Whitmore's bank!"

"Can it buy me a ticket to another place? Somewhere quiet?" Ren huffed.

"You know they don't let our kind on public transport, not without a tag in our ears. They have check points before boarding all vehicles; you'll never get on one. Unless you think the D.O.T. will win their little campaign in the very near future and stop the humans from tagging us."

"I hate the D.O.T." Ren spat.

"Djinn Opposed to Tags," Barbara said, adjusting the tube in Ren's arm. "I do not know why you would hate someone who fights for your rights."

“Because Elson-bastard-Whitmore leads them, and he wants me dead.”

“Is that a fact?” Babs’ eyebrow twitched a fraction. “I’m not so sure. But regardless, whoever leads them, I do think them fools. The humans fear us, and that is why they do not let us live as their equals. That is why they tag us in the first place, and make it illegal for us to wander about without their metal chips in our heads! That is why they do not let us work for their government. You ever see a djinn nurse or cop!?”

“Don’t talk crap,” Ren grumbled. “The humans wouldn’t willingly let us be in charge of their wellbeing.”

“Exactly! And how is burning their cities going to convince them not to fear us? D.O.T? Foolish, foolish, fools!”

“I won’t argue with you there,” he stated.

“Ah ha!” The crone clapped her hands. “I know what you need! Shimmerless Lenses,” she purred. “I have a batch coming in soon! Today maybe!”

“You can get them?” Ren asked, his heart skipping a beat.

“There is little beyond my reach, Ren the Red, but they are not cheap.”

The manufacture of tinted contact lenses was strictly illegal in the U.S.A. There were several political debates on the subject, and the laws regarding contact lenses were often revisited. Most contact lenses that were bought legally would make their owners eyes appear to glow at check point lights, like those of a cat in the headlights of a car. However, Shimmerless Lenses, which were illegally imported into the country at great expense, enabled the wearer to pass through check points unhindered. The unlawful little disc flopped over the iris, seamlessly covering the retina and its surrounding colored muscle. Djinn had been wearing them for the last two decades, disguising their goat-like eyes; hiding in plain sight amongst their intolerant neighbors. As far as Ren was aware, the only way to attain the prohibited optic-camouflage in this city was from Whitmore’s cronies, and Ren was deliberately avoiding them. If he could get his hands on a pair, he could maybe board a bus into Mexico, or a plane to Europe. A land free of djinn tagging and away from all that knew him. He could start a new life. Maybe get a job, buy his own place. Maybe, just maybe, find an ounce of happiness in this dark and twisted world.

Bronson sat at his desk trying his damned hardest not to look at the clock, which appeared to be moving in slow motion. His week had been painfully long, and despite his tireless efforts, he couldn't find the djinni kid anywhere. Ren's words cycled through his mind, over and over.

Because she was unfortunate enough to befriend me...

What did the djinni mean? Befriended him how? And why would he think Kacey had burned to death?

After the short yet impressive djinn battle close to the city border, Bronson found that his squad car had been pelted with shards of rock. The framework was dented in numerous places across the hood and trying to explain that away had been problematic at best.

"It's a brand-bastard-new P.P.V!" Chief Shaw fumed, rising from behind her desk.

"I know, Chief," Bronson shrugged, toying with the pink novelty pencil sharpener he'd acquired from her desk.

"What were you doing in the Rural District? How the fuck did you manage to let a goat fall on the car?"

"It was on the high banking. You know, the bit that overhangs the road slightly, near Talston's farm, where there was that big fire a few weeks ago. I guess it managed to get under the fence."

Her dark eyes twitched dangerously. "As a general rule, don't animals shy away from moving vehicles?"

"Generally..."

"And yet you managed to find the only four-legged fucking freak that throws itself at my pristine Ford, like a hooker at a Merc."

"I didn't actively go searching for a suicidal barn yard companion, Chief," Bronson cringed, placing the plastic gadget back on her desk.

"Suicidal?" Shaw threw her hands up in the air. "Suicidal! You claim the animal bounced off the hood, got up and walked away!"

"Actually, I said it sort of... limped away."

"It limped? Are you certain? I'm only asking because I fail to see how super-fucking-nanny-goat could've been damaged in the collision! Surely it didn't need to worry about its mortality, what with its seemingly invulnerable hide! Did it happen to be part dilute?"

“Now you mention it...”

“Do you honestly think I’m going to swallow this bullshit, Theo? I know you’ve been going through some stuff, and this thing with Kacey is still very new, but...” she sighed, biting back her fury, then continued in a slightly calmer tone, “but you’re derailing. I’d hate to see one of my most promising officers booted because he couldn’t deal with the sad facts of life.”

“Real heartwarming, Chief...” Theo tried to vainly suppress the frown that skittered across his features.

“I’m not here to mommy you, rookie, I’m here to ensure you don’t fuck up.”

Bronson nodded, not lifting his gaze to meet hers.

Shaw raked a manicured hand through her feathered, red hair. “Look, you clearly don’t want to tell me what you were doing in the farmlands, and to be honest, I’m not even sure I want to know. Just...” She sat back into the large, black-leather chair behind her crowded desk. “...keep your shit together and don’t bring trouble to my doorstep. Is that clear?”

“Loud and...” Bronson mumbled, standing to leave.

Since his scolding, he’d spent the entire week sneaking through police files and rummaging around Kacey’s apartment. Trying to find the place where his sister’s past overlapped with the powerful djinni kid’s. He summoned up the memory of Ren, battered and bleeding on the ground, a plume of vibrant-red flame, coiling violently away from the teen’s near-unconscious body. Djinn that could conjure and control the element of fire were rare, and those that did barely had enough skill over the element to light the end of a cigarette. Yet there was Ren, belting out an aura like a bonfire, defying all he knew of the elemental beings.

Redirecting his attention to his monitor the aspiring detective went over what he’d discovered so far. The first day he turned up a complete blank until he ventured into Kacey’s apartment. While there, he found a newspaper clipping in a frame on her bedroom wall. The extract was headlined, “Teen Hero Saves Tot From Fire.”

Of course!

The fire at Blue Brook Meadow Orphanage. How could he have forgotten?

The early Victorian house in the suburbs of the city, had burned to the ground almost ten years ago, killing two of the children. His sister had been

hailed as a heroine after braving the inferno in the hope of rescuing its residents. She risked life and limb rushing into the building while it was savaged by fire, emerging minutes later with Thomas Jenkins in her arms.

Powering up Kacey's laptop, Bronson trawled the internet, looking for articles about the incident. Finding a hit straight away, he clicked on the link that led him to the smiling face of Darren Lampard, who was undoubtedly Ren.

Ren is short for Darren then? He didn't lie to me about his name.

The kid had supposedly died in the fire at Blue Brook Meadow Orphanage alongside Aileen Lamb, an eight-year-old girl. In the pixilated picture, the preteen child smiled happily at the camera, his rounded face unmarred by the subsequent horrors life had in store for him. The pupils in his eyes were still circular, the inevitable stretching of their black diameter still yet to occur.

After that, Bronson had researched the name Whitmore, targeting in particular, those with money.

'...another one of Whitmore's lackeys,' the fiery kid had said.

The only Whitmores in the city with enough dough to be able to hire goons, were the late Aaron Whitmore and his son, Elson. Bronson ran a check on both men, but of course there wasn't anything about them in the police database, and they appeared squeaky clean on all accounts. The millionaire nearly tripled his fortune after finding gold ore on several acres of land which had belonged to his ancestors. With it, he had bought his way into the social hierarchy and was spearheading djinn rights movement and charity work.

On the surface, Aaron Whitmore had appeared to be a beacon of hope, spreading the message of unity between the djinn and humans. However, Bronson was beginning to paint a very different picture of the millionaire in his mind. Surely, the man's discovery of gold beneath his land, shortly after the fire and supposed death of Darren Lampard, was too coincidental.

Yes, it was clear to the young officer that he might have stumbled upon something bigger than he had anticipated. His sister's murder appeared to be the tip of a very large iceberg. A fraction of him wanted to tell his colleagues or seek guidance from the Chief. But his gut instinct warned him that to do so would be folly. He'd hijacked a potential suspect in Kacey's murder and in his stupidity had allowed him to escape. He'd lose his job, and at the moment, that was the only thing holding his fragile state together. No, he'd wait until he was sure he'd uncovered something big and had concrete evidence. The next time

he'd see Ren, he'd get what he needed from the kid and if not, he'd bring him into the station and face the music.

Catching his eye, Shaw strode out of her office, looking harassed.

She cupped her mouth with the palm of her hands and hollered into the precinct, "Drop whatever the fuck you're doing! There's some sort of fucking dilute war happening in the shantytowns near the eastern borders! Suit up and sort it, now!"

Chapter Four

It was like a battlefield. Ren wasn't sure exactly what had happened; only that he had been betrayed. Barbara had sent her gnarled minion to collect the faux lenses, and he'd overheard the discussion. Not trusting the woman in the slightest, Ren took it upon himself to follow the familiar to its destination, where he could intercept the lenses and be armed with the tools to rid himself of the city.

The scar-faced girl made her way through the squalor-stricken streets. When she drew near a large stone building, she stopped briefly, checking for observers. The old Bank of New Yarlynn stood defiantly around the other crumbling constructions. A mockery of its prominent beginnings, the building was now a husk. The pallid shell of the pantheon-like structure had been artfully decorated with the words, "DiEAnDRoTDiLuTeS!" across its arch. The weathered red and green graffiti then dripped away from the prejudicial proclamation, twisting down the cracked columns.

Ren hid in the shadow of the scaffolding that had been abandoned against the side of a tall shop on the opposite side of the road. He leaned against its boarded windows, waiting for Scar to make her move. Satisfied that she hadn't been followed, the spindly woman continued, disappearing into the building. Ren nimbly moved across the wide road, not having to worry about traffic in this near-vacant part of town. He cautiously edged along the edifice, seeking a side door to enter by. A few minutes later, he stood in the cavernous hallway of the bank.

Trapped.

Only too late had he deduced that he was meant to overhear the exchange between minion and master. Babs had plotted the entire event, anticipating Ren's reaction to her conversation. In doing so, Ren had been manipulated into a salt circle, which had been drawn and camouflaged across the floor of the bank. He stood helpless, imprisoned by the tiny grains.

"Lebue," he whispered venomously into the silence.

His only reply was a sibilant snigger, passing through crooked teeth, echoing out into the hollow building.

Not long after, Elson appeared with several djinn. He stalked fearlessly into the downtrodden depository, stopping at its center as though he were untouchable.

“Witch!” he yelled, his thunderous voice echoing about the yawning room. “Show yourself.”

Ren glared from his location, out of sight and veiled in shadows from the newcomers.

Babs slithered forward into the bright daylight which bled in through the now-opened door. Her gap-toothed grin was spread across her wrinkled face triumphantly.

“Young Whitmore, so nice to see you again after so many years,” she croaked.

“I highly doubt that,” he replied, adopting an expression of immense boredom.

“What? No pleasantries?” she snapped, banging her cane on the floor.

“Pleasantries are reserved for pleasant situations,” Elson explained, straightening the cuff of his crisp, snowy shirt. “Now, where is my little adopted brother?”

Lebue shook her head. “First things first!”

“Very well.” Elson waved his hand, and the woman to his right opened the briefcase in her possession.

Ren wasn't at all surprised to see yet another blood bag in the case. The red liquid gleamed like a ruby in the dancing beams of golden sunlight.

What is it with Lebue and blood? he mused.

“What do you take me for?” Barbara hissed.

“Does my offering offend you, old one?”

Pointing an accusing, worn-down finger at the collection of newcomers, Babs spat on the floor. “How do I know that is your blood, lamp of Undine?”

Ren paused in his frantic search for a way out of his predicament. *Lamp? That's what that moron at the harbor called me. What does that mean?*

Elson's voice echoed along to him. “You'll have to take my word for it.”

“Your words aren't worth the spit in your mouth! You think I don't hear what the djinn of this city are saying? You think I'm so far out in the slums that I'm beyond the reach of wagging tongues? You're a trickster, little Elson, a liar and a corrupter.”

“I’d stop wagging your tongue if I were you.” Whitmore straightened, taking a more opposing stance.

“Hah!” the elderly woman coughed. “Your endeavor will rain destruction down on us all, one way or another, and I plan to be far away from here by the time that happens! Now, give me the power and the means to do so!”

“Give me my little bastard brother!”

“I shall not.” Babs was losing her composure. “Not until you keep your promise and give me your blood.”

It was Elson’s turn to laugh now; the deep sound was chilling, like listening to thick ice cracking along a frozen lake.

“As you quite rightfully pointed out, my promises aren’t worth a damn.”

With that, the young djinn clicked his fingers, and his men rushed towards the hag. In response, several of the crone’s down-and-outs leapt from their hiding places, barring the path to the old woman. They collided with the men, loosening their elemental abilities in protection of their leader.

The scarred woman flung her hood back as she ducked beneath a punch, revealing a spiky layer of mousey brown hair. Her attacker, one of the bulky humans who had accosted Ren at the harbor, readied a second blow, but the frail woman dashed forth. Sparks of electricity cantered along the length of her arms, silvery flecks of snapping energy jostling away from her skin. As her hands found their mark, a bolt of dazzling-blue light flashed into existence. The bulbous man cried out in pain, his spine arching backwards as his limbs twitched uselessly. He fell to the floor, and a pale wisp of smoke twisted away from his corpse.

A few feet away, another couple was engaged in a deadly display of djinn abilities, the combatants unequally matched. Barbara’s minion seemed to shift into the shadows, almost disappearing from view as he dodged the torrent of blows from Elson’s lackey. Ren was impressed with the elderly man’s ability to manipulate light—he hadn’t seen another flame elemental with enough skill to manifest a power worth boasting about. No doubt Babs had fed the man some of Ren’s blood to bolster his abilities. But this fellow fire djinn was already a master of his craft, bending light and shadow about his body. Ren almost felt sorry for the earth elemental who opposed him. The youngster had turned the tips of his fingers into thorny bits of barb and was clawing frantically at his enemy. The bearded elder caught the hand of the well-groomed goon and twisted his wrist, forcing the mossy talons inward, gutting their owner.

In other places, Lebue's champions tackled Elson's entourage with varying degrees of success. Whitmore watched, his face an expressionless mask. His autumn-colored eyes drank in all that they saw as they scanned the lethal scuffle. He snorted softly, lifting an elegant hand and slowly twisting his palm. Like a conductor before an orchestra, the balding man wiggled his digits. The air in front of them shifted, collecting into a solid mass. Thin shards of transparent ice formed before his fingers. He waved his hand nonchalantly, the dispassionate features of his face never once faltering. The pointed poles of glass-like frost propelled forward at his movement, each one finding their mark. Four of the raggedly dressed djinn fell to the ground, dead, Scarface amongst them. Bolstered by the blow to Lebue's forces, the remaining members of Elson's party pressed their assault.

Babs shuffled backwards, aware that the tables had turned against her. The snide smile she'd worn upon her lips had melted into a sneer of outrage. She clicked at the roof of her mouth while her brain appeared to work speedily through her options. Taking the opportunity to strike while she was distracted, Elson sent several bolts of frozen fluid speeding towards her. Barbara barely managed to dodge the projectiles, twisting her body like a snake into inhuman curves around the glittering spears. She rasped in her throat, the bestial noise filled with venom and defiant outrage. Searching the floor, she found a fallen chunk of brick and kicked it over to Ren. It slid through the circle of salt, deactivating the ethereal wall which held him and his fire prisoner.

Ren was free.

Bronson parked his blue and white Ford a few streets away from the old Bank of New Yarlynn. Several other officers had beaten him to the scene and had left their vehicles hurriedly, but with enough room to evacuate if necessary.

Moments before as they'd piled into their cars at the station, another policeman had jumped into the passenger seat of Bronson's ride. The seasoned cop, an old guy named Cassius, seemed incredibly excited.

"Put your foot down, rookie," he jibed, while they sped through the streets. "If there aren't any dilutes left to shoot when we get there, I'm gonna be pissed."

Bronson did as instructed, hoping to see Ren caught in the fray. If there were any dilutes left to subdue, that one had his name on it.

By the time the two men had arrived, the fighting had spilled out onto the street. Police officers hid behind parked cars and riot shields. There was little they could do to stop a brawl between so many djinn. Shaw crouched behind one of the cars, shouting through a megaphone, trying to restore some semblance of order.

A jet of smokeless, ruby fire flared away from the roof of the building.

There you are.

Bronson broke away from the protection of his fellow police officers, seeking a way up onto the roof. Running up the fire escape of the neighboring building, Bronson's heart beat rapidly in his chest. Reaching the roof, he was surprised to see that no officers had been positioned at a higher vantage point.

Shaw will have them up here soon, I've got to be quick.

Quick to do what? Bronson wasn't sure what plan was formulating in his brain. The confused thought popped out of his mind the second he laid eyes on the flaming djinni, who was fighting for his life on the top of the bank.

The kid was dressed in the same torn clothing that Bronson had seen him wearing the previous week. His long, dark hair twisted and coiled around his face, tugged by the rising heat that enveloped him. Waves of fire danced away from his body, encasing his frame like an aura of flame. The stone about his feet cracked in the heat, and the thin steel rods which helped shape the building sprang up through the floor. He twirled quickly to one side, avoiding a javelin of ice that sought to bury itself in his flesh. A second he melted, sending a pillar of blazing light out to meet the jagged chunk of crystal.

On the opposite side of the structure stood another figure, who panted with exertion. Recognition sprang into Bronson's awareness.

Elson Whitmore.

The man, in his late twenties, was neatly groomed and wearing a three-piece suit of dark gray. His thinning, brown hair had been trimmed into a sleek, little mohawk which ran down the center of his head. Instead of the clear-blue, human eyes Bronson had seen him with in all his pictures, his were the elongated, amber eyes of a djinn. The air around him sparkled, almost as if the man were shedding glitter from his skin. He raised his hands, a trail of twinkling dust following his movement, and a third shaft started to form, like that of a horizontal icicle.

“I will kill you for what you did to my dad,” the playboy heckled. “You will bleed for burning him while you fled with those dirty, lowlife, greedy nobodies. How did you convince them to help you? What lies did you spin?”

Before he had the chance to cast the icicle towards his target, Ren sent his own barrage forth. An orb of wobbling, ruby waves sailed through the air, arching towards its goal like the shot of a flare gun.

“I offered them the same thing your fucking father was stealing from me on a daily basis!” the kid fumed. “If he’d gotten out of my way like I warned, then maybe he’d be here now instead of you. But I’m glad he isn’t, that monster deserved to burn. I only regret that I didn’t roast you too.”

Ren sent another orb off in close pursuit, then another and another. Fire rained down around Whitmore, and his expressionless face twitched with concentration. He released his hold over the hovering weapon and dragged both hands up over his head. A thick sheet of ice followed the movement, rising up from the floor and shielding the millionaire from the downpour. Without hesitation, Ren snatched one of the exposed steel rods from the stone and rushed towards Elson. The metal bar in his hand quickly began to glow, turning red, then orange and finally white.

He thrust the molten pole through the wall of ice, its thin circumference easily piercing the thick sheet. The glistening obstacle hissed in retaliation and steamed at the sizzling touch of the rod. Beyond the barricade, Whitmore echoed the sound, spitting air through his gritted teeth as the burning bar stabbed clean through his leg. Ren pressed his advantage, pushing flame through the small hole, seeking to widen it. In a matter of seconds, the fight would be over, and Ren would be victorious.

Without warning, a third djinn joined the combatants. An elderly djinnayah, cloaked in layer upon layer of filthy robes, leapt from an alcove in the roof, swinging her mahogany cane down towards Ren’s head. Her arms bent fluidly, adding momentum to the blow, snapping towards her target like a catapult being pulled taut. The cane struck the mass of dark hair with a sickening crack, felling the flaming djinni. She slithered around the two men, striking the second with her cane, while he tried to dislodge the metallic protrusion sticking out of his leg. He slumped, dazedly. The older woman knelt before his swaying form, lapping greedily at the wound on his leg. Her face was covered in gore, and she laughed between gargled swallows. Elson regain his composure and kicked at her with his free leg. His face throbbed with fury.

“You dirty, fucking beast!” he bellowed.

The old woman cackled and shifted away from him, towards the roof's edge, closer to Bronson. As she squelched to the very edge of the building she stopped, turning to Whitmore.

“Thank you for your undiluted blessing, Lord of Water,” she grinned, her lips smeared with red liquid.

She lifted her arms up, like an acrobat signaling the start of a show. The robes fell away from her bent body, revealing the ancient gnarled skin beneath. She stood naked, the few strands of gray hair that clung to her skull wafting like smoke about her face.

What the fuck?

He watched in disbelief as the hag's body rippled, her skin bubbling and curdling like a putrid broth. Her bent spine quivered as the plates slosed back to their original setting, straightening her back. The sagging flesh under her arms, around her buttocks and over her bosom tightened, constricting about her bones. Her wrinkled face became taut, smoothing the craggy contours of her face. New snowy hair sprouted from her skull, growing hastily from the top of her head and trailing down her back. Her beak-like nose shrank, and her still-grinning lips parted wider, revealing a perfect row of pristine teeth.

Bronson gasped, as he watched the transformation. The space where the elderly hag had stood was now occupied by a beautiful girl in her late teens. She lithely bowed once, giggling, towards the impaled millionaire.

“I will hunt you down for this you, wretched bitch!” he roared. “No one takes from me! Do you hear?”

In reply, her chuckle turned into a song of maniacal laughing music. The sound spiraled out of her mouth with jubilant insanity.

“Good bye, little Elson,” she sang sweetly. “May your days be few and your hours haunted by the faces of those you've slain while on your crazed father's mission.”

With that she fell away from the roof of the bank, descending swiftly. As she hit the ground, her naked body pooled like a rain drop. It gathered in on itself, recreating her human form, and she briskly retreated from the fighting at the front of the shop.

Elson roared. Tiny flakes of snow flew away from him in all directions, like fatal little throwing stars. Bronson had to duck beneath the wall of the roof to avoid taking a hit to the face.

“This is all your fault!” the hazel-haired man fumed.

Daring to peek over the top of the wall from his hiding place, Bronson saw Elson summon another spear of ice. He clasped hold of the shimmering shaft and jammed it down into Ren's leg. The young djinni didn't stir.

Did that djinniyah kill him?

Bronson grimaced. He wanted revenge for his sister's death, but he wasn't sure Ren was the person to be on the receiving end of it. He cocked his gun and took aim, pointing his pistol at Elson's hand, meaning to maim the man. He pressed the trigger, and a single shot rang out. The bullet whizzed past its mark and ricocheted off the roof, splintering the stone. Elson growled menacingly, trying to dart backward and failing, still pinned in place. He conjured another wall of ice to shield himself from the unseen marksman, leaving Ren on the opposite side of the glittering fortification. A few seconds later the djinni sprinted, in a fashion, from behind his cover and vaulted from the edge of the building, out of Bronson's line of sight.

Taking a leaf from Whitmore's book, Bronson also leapt from his rooftop to that of the New Yarlynn Bank. He landed on the cold slabs, rolling awkwardly. Abandoning caution, he stepped up to Ren and pointed his gun at the teenager's skull.

“I wouldn't do that if I were you,” a female voice stated from behind him.

Bronson reflectively spun around, gun pointing towards the speaker, expecting to find the naked djinniyah. Instead he was surprised to find the heart-faced girl who had dented his car in the brief skirmish with Ren, several days earlier.

“He knows something about my sister's death.” Bronson trembled, feeling his resolve weaken. “I have to take him into custody.”

“No, you don't. You can't,” she replied, narrowing her gray eyes. “He thinks your sister died in the fire at Blue Brook Orphanage, nine years ago. He blames himself for her death.”

“Why does he think that? Who are you?”

She didn't answer.

Bronson squinted at the young djinniyah, recognition ringing through his mind. “Aileen Lamb?”

“That is correct.”

"If you're still alive, and Darren is, who died in the fire at Blue Brook?"

"No one."

Gunfire could be heard on the street below. The police must have found a weakness to exploit in the battle beneath and would be pushing for a speedy end to the fighting.

"We cannot stay here," Aileen said, glancing about the taller buildings surrounding the bank. "It isn't safe for you."

"Why? What isn't safe?"

"Your comrades cannot find you here. They will know it was you who shot at Elson."

"And?"

"And not all of your comrades are allies. Whitmore has spies everywhere, djinn who have disguised themselves as human in order to infiltrate the hierarchy of human society."

"Who are they?"

"Elson's pack of power-hungry djinn."

"Is Elson involved with D.O.T?"

The djinnayah just blinked at him, her pink hair rippling about her pale skin.

"Why should I trust you?" he asked when it became clear she wasn't going to answer.

"Because Kacey trusted me. She was my friend and ally. I want to make the men responsible for her demise suffer equally as much as you."

"Who killed my sister?"

Aileen's patience came to an end. "Not now! Please, come, we need to get away."

"What about him?" Bronson pointed to Ren.

"Leave him." She shook her head. "He is a lamp, he will heal quickly."

"He'll also tell my colleagues that I kidnapped him, and if he's mixed up in this, they'll figure out it was me who shot at Elson regardless."

Aileen considered for a second, then frowned at the scruffy kid who lay bleeding. "You're right. He must come with us. Help me with him."

She strode over to his body and yanked the remnants of the melting, icy spike from his leg. She then unsheathed a tiny blade, which was strapped to her leather belt, and pricked her finger with the tip of the needle-like weapon. Blood dripped from her slender digit into the unconscious teen's wound. Fire flickered about the puncture hungrily, lapping at her vital fluids as they trickled into his flesh. The flow of blood from Ren's injury stopped, and Bronson watched as the wound scabbed over. He shook his head. What else were djinn capable of?

"How in the hell did you do that?"

"So many questions, so little time," she mumbled, flipping Ren onto his back. "Hey, flamer!" she barked, slapping Ren across the face.

His green eyes flickered open, and fire emerged from his skin, protecting its host.

"You again," he spat, pushing away from her.

"I'm not here to fight," she frowned. "My quarrel is not with you this day."

Bronson stepped over towards Ren. "Come on kid, we've got to go. Now."

Ren pushed himself up off the concrete. "And you too! Where's Whitmore?"

"Theo shot at him, and he fled, and now we're in trouble," the djinnayah stated.

"Oh good, everyone knows my name then apparently..." Bronson shrugged, his eyebrows rising into his creased brow.

"You don't work for Elson?" Ren asked, scowling at the girl.

"I do not," she replied.

Ren's eyes narrowed. He froze, the fire surrounding his body flaring brightly, in keeping with his emotion.

"...but I know you from somewhere," he whispered.

Shouts rang out from over the rooftops and a salt-smoke cloud wafted up from the street.

"The police are on their way up," she said, flashing her elongated silvery gaze about. "We need to get up to that roof."

She pointed to the high building on the opposite side of the street.

“There’s no way I can make that jump,” Bronson harrumphed. “I’m human.”

“Me neither,” Ren agreed, “and I’m inhuman.”

“Take your jacket and your shirt off,” she said to Bronson, demonstrating with her unzipped coat, pulling the fabric over her head like a parachute. “I’ll glide you across.”

“And me?” Ren asked, tugging at his shredded T-shirt.

“Here,” said Bronson, tossing him his police jacket.

Unbuttoning his blue shirt, the cop watched as Aileen flung herself from the rooftop. She ascended skyward, lifted by the wind at her command. It pushed into the improvised parachute and carried the delicate djinn gracefully across the street. She landed with catlike precision on the other building, then turned to wave the two of them across.

Theo lifted the fabric of his shirt away from his back, baring his muscular chest. Ren gazed at Bronson’s half-naked form and then away, embarrassed.

Did the kid just check me out?

Aware that now was not the time to dwell on such thoughts, he strode over to the roof’s edge. Ren limped behind him.

“You go first,” Bronson instructed.

Ren’s jaw tightened, he wasn’t fond of taking orders but there wasn’t time to argue. Mimicking Aileen’s pounce, Ren took to the air, Bronson’s jacket held aloft. His thin frame glided promptly over the gap, the rapid wind pushing him over the expanse. He plopped down, grimacing as he landed, but he didn’t topple. Shaking his head, Bronson lunged from the rooftop. Immediately the wind caught under his stretched-out shirt. It propelled him forward but not upward. The older man was considerably heavier than the two djinn kids who had ventured across already.

This is going to get messy.

Aileen’s brow creased as she poured as much elemental energy into her push as she dared. To Bronson’s relief, his advance toward the opposing apartment building slowed as the wind blew him in another direction, towards some scaffolding leaning against a nearby row of shops. The stitching of a sleeve tore, and Bronson gasped as he almost lost his grip on the thin material. He collided with the skeletal frame, and the rotting wood splintered under his

weight. The nerves in his body twitched involuntarily as he grabbed at the metallic binders holding the wobbling construction together. Luckily, they held precariously against his weight and after a few calming breaths he was able to traverse down to the street. Not far away he saw Ren and Aileen slowly land next to his parked squad car.

How does the wind djinniah know which car is mine?

Aside from the two djinn, the street was deserted. Every able-bodied man and woman in the area must have been participating in the showdown outside the bank. Bronson wondered if someone had seen their aerial escape and hoped that such wasn't the case. He advanced towards the two teens, replacing his torn shirt over his cold flesh.

"Come on, let's get out of here," he rumbled, unlocking the vehicle and climbing into the driver's seat.

Aileen did as instructed, climbing in beside him, but Ren hesitated on the sidewalk. Bronson was on the verge of winding down the window to ask if the kid was stupid; before he had chance, Ren snapped the door open and jumped in, slamming it behind him.

The kid was angry. Angry and confused.

Chapter Five

It wasn't true. The djinnayah was lying. Aileen had died that night of the fire, with Kacey Bronson. The night his latent djinni powers had emerged and set Blue Brook Meadow ablaze. Lebeue had told him as much the following day, when she'd found him tear-stricken and wandering the shantytown streets. He was a bad person—he had structured his entire life around being a bad person. He wasn't a killer, not intentionally, but nothing good could ever stem from any of his endeavors.

Ren sat on the back seat of the cop car, scowling into the back of the imposter's head, his mind clustered with questions. Who was she really and why had she adopted Aileen's name? Why did she seem to show up hand in hand with Bronson? Were the two of them together? How had Kacey's little brother managed to save him yet again. And why? The last time they'd met, he'd told the rookie officer that he was the one who had killed his sister. It didn't make sense. What did they want from him?

The vehicle's other occupants sat in the front, equally as broody. All three of them untangling their own thoughts. The Ford slowed slightly in its retreat as it exited the shantytown and entered the more upmarket areas of New Yarlenn. Ren forced his eyes away from the djinnayah and stared out of the window at the suburban street. Leaves fallen from the bare trees littered the pavement. Their autumnal coloring started to work their magic on his turbulent mind.

Ren loved the autumn. While staying at the Whitmore house, before Aaron had turned on him, he would go walking through the acres of woodland they owned. The entire forest would change color from lush green to red, orange, and yellow.

The colors of fire.

For those few short weeks the world was bathed in flames, and he felt like he belonged to it. Aaron would often walk with him, and they'd talk about the fate of the djinn.

"It's all about energy my boy," the graying man would say. "Fire, water, air, lightning, even the earth. They all move, and movement is energy."

Ren would roll his round, green eyes, anticipating the next part of Aaron's little speech. "And energy is another word for power..."

"That's right!"

“And the humans fear us because we are more powerful.”

“Indeed! That is why they tag us, like sheep in a field. That is why they create laws, forbidding us from accumulating more power. Preventing us from climbing their corporate and social ladders.”

“Except us.” Ren would grin smugly. “We’re free-range djinn.”

“Yes, we are. But only because we’re defying their laws. And only because of your abilities. Your power. It pays for our anonymity and our camouflage.”

“I know, and it makes me happy to know I’m doing my bit to fight for our rights.”

“Fight?” Aaron’s eyebrows shot up.

“Sorry,” Ren sighed. “I mean, I’m helping with the struggle. I forget you don’t like that word.”

“Peace is won through peaceful means. If we fight for our rights, then there will be fighting. If we secret djinn into positions of power all over the country and then manipulate law and order from behind the scenes, our efforts will be over with no need for bloodshed.”

“Subterfuge and deception.”

“What of them?” Aaron’s mood seemed to darken.

“They’re all mechanics used in war. Elson says we’re at war with the humans,” Ren explained.

“Elson is hungry for change, now. His youth makes him impatient. He seems to think that we can frighten the humans into accepting us. Of course that will never work. Other men have tried that approach and have failed. We need to learn from their mistakes. I hope time will see my son grow into a more rational man.”

“So we’re not at war?”

“No my boy, we’re at odds with the humans. Not at war.” Aaron brushed his firm fingers through Ren’s charcoal hair. “To say we are at war with the humans, is to say we are at war with ourselves. Never forget Darren, that we are human, in the greatest of senses.”

Bronson stopped the car at a crossing, and Ren drifted away from the memory, back to the present. The lies Aaron Whitmore had told him, in order to keep him sweet and compliant, would haunt him until the day he died.

“You guys will have to get out here, but first we need to talk. I’ve got to take the car back to the station, and my Chief is watching me like a hawk,” the young officer stated. “The pursuit engines all have GPS tracking in them, and she’ll ask why I deviated from the quickest return route to the station, if I drop you off at my door. I’m already going to be on her radar for disappearing halfway through a shootout.”

“As you wish, Theo.” Aileen nodded, opening the passenger door.

“I said, we need to talk first,” Bronson said, clasping his hand gently around her wrist, pulling her back into the squad car. “I want some answers. I won’t bribe you with chocolate this time.”

He looked at Ren through the rearview mirror. His bright-blue eyes were full of intent and desperation. The young djinni felt a pang of pity twist at his stomach. Bronson had saved his life twice now; he owed the officer an explanation, even if the truth would wind up getting him killed.

“Then I’ll answer nicely,” Ren murmured from the back seat.

“My sister’s death,” Bronson breathed. “Were you responsible?”

Ren turned away from his piercing stare, unable to hold his honest gaze.

“Yes,” he whispered.

Aileen shuffled uncomfortably in her seat. “No.”

“She died at Blue Brook along with the real Aileen!” Ren snapped at the younger girl, his temper starting to rise again. “They burned to death in the fire I created when my powers emerged.”

Aileen spun to look at Ren. “Whitmore started that fire, he forced our djinni powers to emerge! He wanted to make it look like we’d both died so he could steal us away! Kacey tried to get us both out, but you got lost in the confusion. We thought Aaron took you there and then.”

“Bullshit!”

“It’s true Ren,” Bronson sighed. “Kacey died a little over a month ago. She was murdered not far from where I first came across you. She didn’t die at Blue Brook. In fact, she managed to save one of the babies. The only two people that were supposed to have died in the fire, are you two.”

Ren shook his head, and he trembled on the seat. “But Lebue said…”

He stared at his hands, and streaks of flame darted between his digits. Bronson felt almost sure the kid was on the verge of tears, but he reined them

in, gritting his teeth. He closed his eyes, sucking in a big lungful of air. He exhaled slowly, repeating the process a couple of times and then lowered his hands.

“I stayed in Aaron Whitmore’s cage because I thought I deserved it for killing Kacey. For killing Aileen. Three years... Three long fucking years before I tried to get out and... and... I didn’t kill her?” His hushed voice was almost a moan. “She wasn’t dead...”

Relief flooded into Ren’s body, washing into every part of his soul, wiping away the guilt and remorse he’d carried around like a ball and chain. He thought that karma had found him at the Whitmore mansion, ensuring that his punishment was inflicted because of his prior sins. But now he could see that he was a victim of circumstance, imprisoned by a cruel villain, greedy to keep his gifts under lock and key.

“Kacey’s blood is not on your hands. That night, Aaron Whitmore was trying to take us away. He was trying to collect the lamps for Carl...” Aileen bit back her words, huffing indignantly.

“What lamps?”

Aileen closed her eyes as a shudder of emotion rippled through her body. “You are Salamander’s lamp.”

“What are you two going on about?” Bronson asked.

“I don’t know,” Ren grimaced. “I’m not sure if she’s fucking batshit or not! I’m so confused right now. I haven’t got a clue what she’s going on about!”

Aileen sighed, shifting her silvery gaze over to Bronson. “Did Kacey ever tell you about the djinn Lords?”

“She never spoke about the djinn, at all, period,” he answered.

“Well, you’ve heard the story about the genie in the lamp?”

“Sure, but I fail to see what that’s got to do with Kacey.”

“Well, Ren is a djinn Lord.” Aileen shrugged. “Or rather he is the lamp within which one of the five elemental Lords are encased.”

“Are you getting all biblical on me now?”

Ren edged forward in his seat. “You’re full of it!”

“You’re saying that he’s thousands of years old?” Bronson arched an eyebrow.

Aileen shook her head. “No, the Lord is passed through the family line, in the blood, from parent to infant. It travels into the firstborn child of each new generation.”

Ren mumbled darkly, “My mum? I have no idea who she was. I find it highly unlikely she was a lamp though.”

“She was, and we knew who she was,” Aileen sighed. “Her name was Mara Lampard. My comrades tried to track her down before you were born, as did Whitmore. She deliberately got pregnant at fourteen, just to get the Lord out of her body and into yours. Then she abandoned you on the steps of St. Darren’s Cathedral, with your name scribbled on your stomach in permanent marker. Lampard. She wanted the whole world to know there was a new Fire Lord in circulation, and her blood was no longer the Holy Grail it used to be. She tried to save herself. I guess she thought you’d make headlines or something, but your sad beginnings never made the press.”

The kid looked stricken. He stared at the djinnayah suspiciously, his face contorting into perplexed lines.

“But in the end she did right by you. Whitmore caught her and killed her for passing along the Lord. With her dying breath, she told Whitmore she’d put you on a boat bound for Asia. It took him ten years to track you down.”

“And you know this happened how? When did my supposed mother tell the tale, if she didn’t live through it?”

“She was my father’s friend. Whitmore caught them together, near the Mexican border, and while your mother was fighting him off, my father managed to escape. He saw what happened to your mum before fleeing though.”

“Well, that was nice of your father. Leaving her to die while he left.”

Aileen fixed Ren with an icy stare. “They both fought! My father died a day later from his injuries, but not before locating help. He managed to find the people I now work for, the people who have raised me and given me a purpose in life. My dad told them where to find us, and they watched over us, both of us, for years. Until Whitmore came along to claim his lamps.”

“Now I’m confused,” Bronson frowned. “So as a lamp, you are the elemental Lord in human guise, or you share your body with the elemental Lord?”

“We share,” Aileen explained, “except it’s not really sharing because the Lords never try to take control. They don’t even make their presence known most of the time.”

Bronson looked to Ren. “Is she telling the truth?”

“I don’t know,” Ren answered. “It would explain a few things but... but... I just don’t know.” The kid’s already pasty skin paled further. “My blood has the power to amplify other djinn abilities, if their affiliation is with the element of fire. I don’t know any other djinn that can do that... That’s why I was at Lebue’s, I was exchanging my blood for protection from Elson and a pair of Shimmerless Lenses. The fucking bitch set me up! If I am a lamp, she must have known about it.”

“Wait a minute,” Bronson’s eye twitched. “That old djinniah woman on the roof of the bank was the infamous Barbara Lebue?”

“The one and only,” Ren rumbled. “Ancient gap-toothed twat.”

“Not anymore. She went all vampire-like on Whitmore’s leg and then transformed. It was like her mortal clock started ticking backwards. One second she’s all bent out of shape and old. The next, she was young and doing cartwheels over the side of the building,” the blond man recalled.

Ren snorted to himself, softly. “Really? Crazy, old bitch was after some of Elson’s blood. Guess she got what she wanted after all...” His dark lashes narrowed. “Elson’s blood...”

“Her arms moved weird, like they were made out of slime or something. Was she a water djinniah?” Bronson quizzed.

Aileen nodded.

“So when she drank Whitmore’s blood, it amplified her bendy skin ability, and she used it to bend her body back through time?”

“Lebue can manipulate the fluid cells of her body, which are nearly all of them,” the djinniah clarified. “She must have replaced the old cells with new ones, using her power somehow. She must have known Whitmore’s blood would give her the power to reverse the aging process.”

Ren cut in, “Whitmore is a lamp as well then?”

“Undine’s lamp, the Lord of Water.”

“And Kacey knew about all this?” Bronson questioned.

Aileen's features turned sympathetic. "She knew."

Ren looked at Aileen. "You're a lamp too, aren't you?"

Aileen closed her eyes again, "Sometimes, djinn Lords can be djinn ladies. In me sleeps the elemental Lord, Sylphid." Aileen bobbed her head. "I'm the lamp Whitmore was trying to capture at the docks the day Kacey was captured. And I'm the one Kacey died protecting."

Bronson ran his hands through his hair. "This is so fucked up."

"I'm sorry Theodore." Aileen's voice trembled. "It's my fault your sister is dead. That is why I've been watching over you. I knew you'd eventually get mixed up in all this, and I owe it to her to keep you safe."

"You've been watching me?" Bronson's tone betrayed the anger that was brewing behind his words.

Aileen blinked, not daring to meet his gaze. Her breathing quickened, and she closed her eyes. Her jaw clamped tightly as she struggled to control her emotions.

"You both need to get out now," the policeman said, his tone almost threatening. "Aileen, if you've been watching me then you know where I live, correct?"

"...I do."

"Take Ren there and wait for me to get home. I'll be back as soon as I've dropped the car off at the station." He turned to the teen in the back seat. "Can I trust you to wait for me there?"

"Sure," Ren huffed. "It'll be safer than stalking the streets of the city."

Bronson pulled his apartment keys out of his pocket and passed them to Aileen. "Keep each other safe."

"We will," she whispered.

"I'm going to need your help to bring down D.O.T. and to see that motherfucker, Whitmore, pay for what he did to Kacey."

Aileen inhaled as though she were about to correct the young officer, but then closed her mouth. She took the keys from Bronson and stepped out of the car. Ren followed her out onto the chilly street, and the two walked off in silence.

Chapter Six

Aileen dropped Ren off at Bronson's apartment as instructed, but then left straight after, stating that she had, "people to inform." She promised to return as soon as possible, but wouldn't disclose where it was she was headed. The short walk had been made mostly in silence, and her presence made him feel uneasy. He didn't trust her, but then again, he couldn't discount her claim that she was Aileen either. She was certainly the right age, and the child he'd known could have easily grown into the pretty, young thing that had led him to Bronson's place. He wanted time to test her memory, to ask her questions and see if her claim was true. But first he wanted to know what secrets she was keeping.

She was guilty until proven innocent.

The moment Ren turned Bronson's key in the lock, barring the way to the world on the outside of the door, he ventured into the sanctuary. As he walked down the hall, he breathed a sigh of relief. None of Elson's mob knew he was there; he was off the grid and out of harm's way for the first time in ages. The thought made him feel quite giddy. Instinctively following his nose, he made his way excitedly into the kitchen. He rummaged through the clean cupboards, noting how shiny and tidy everything was. The gray slate countertop was pristinely maintained. The integrated light-oak cabinets and cream walls were polished to a glossy sheen. The black tiled floor had been recently mopped and a citrus-like smell emanated from the stony grout.

Bronson was clearly a neat freak.

The young djinni drooled with delight as he pulled a packet of sweet popcorn out of a cabinet. He tossed the metallic container into the ceramic sink and inhaled deeply. Closing his eyes, he focused his thoughts inwards, seeking the subconscious place inside his body, where he housed his primal powers. Finding the core of his elemental attributes, he stoked the ethereal embers, sensing them respond to his command. Flames nudged at the barrier of his skin, trying to escape the fleshy prison that held them encased, but he wouldn't allow it. Instead he focused on their licking touch, pushing them through the veins and channels of his body, forcing the fire through his arms. As the writhing heat reached the tips of his fingers, he opened his eyes, focusing on the silvery packet of un-popped corn. A thin stream of radiant fire snaked away from his hands, bathing the deep ceramic sink in a red glow. He watched contentedly as the metallic container gradually grew in size. It hissed and snapped, dancing

around in the cream basin. The sweet smell of sugar filled the kitchen, invading Ren's nostrils.

He grinned wickedly, calming his inner combustion while admiring his handy work. If he chose, he could open the scorching packet and demolish the entirety of its scalding contents, without so much as batting an eyelash.

Such were his gifts.

He controlled and was immune to all forms of heat. Fire, molten rock, light—they all bent to his will and rendered him impervious to their touch. It came in handy when the weather got chilly, or if you needed to heat a tin of stolen beans when you were out on the street. Of course, the downside meant he'd never catch a tan, but when you'd spent the last three years of your life held prisoner in a salt cell in someone's basement, that didn't seem to matter much.

Ren shook his head, rattling the thoughts of his prior life away for the moment. They couldn't have him today; he wouldn't let them drag him down into a pit of despair and worry. Besides, his past life wasn't the dark wretched mess he'd thought it was. Kacey hadn't died at his hands, her death would no longer weigh on his conscience, at least not in the same way it had previously done. And Aileen was not dead either... possibly.

Today is a good day.

Deciding to do things properly, the green-eyed djinni left the packet to cool and nipped back out into the hallway in search of the wash room. He stumbled over some bedding, which had been abandoned on the floor, the pale-yellow fabric smeared with the dirt from his leg. Untangling his foot, he continued down the narrow space until he found the room with the shower in it.

A real shower!

How many months had it been since he'd used a real one? Could it have been a year yet? He turned the faucet, ensuring the water was bitterly cold. He peeled off his stinking undergarments, kicking them from his ankles. They soared through the open space and he focused his power again, burning them in midair, taking great pleasure in watching the thin fabric disintegrate in front of his face. Surely Bronson wouldn't mind if he took a few of his clothes.

He stepped into the cascade of icy liquid, jets of steam streaking away from his flesh as the water boiled at his touch. He groaned in pleasure as the droplets hissed along his skin, bubbling as they trickled along his body. Looking down,

the djinni noticed the muddy color running from his bedraggled form. His black hair, weighted with damp, hung all the way down to his hips.

When did it get this long? Ren wondered, pulling the strands away from his pale hide.

Letting it fall back into place, he cast his goat-like eyes about, seeking soap or something else to lather on his body. A tube of tea-tree body wash hung from the copper piping, which ran up from the tap on the wall. He unscrewed the lid, smelling the crisp, fresh scent of the green gel and allowed it to trickle lazily into his hand. He applied it generously to his skin and long black mane, rubbing swiftly before the soothing fluid evaporated.

After rinsing and repeating several times, he turned off the tap and stepped out of the shower. He didn't bother with the black towel that hung beside the bath, noting that he was already bone-dry. Turning to the mirror above the hand basin, he wiped his palm across its steamy surface, examining the distorted reflection in the foggy glass. He barely recognized the youth staring back at him. The high bones in his cheeks protruded from his face, making him appear gaunt. His eyes had become hollows in his head, circled by dark bruise-like patches. His jet black hair fell down around his ears, framing his features in a veil of shadow.

No wonder Bronson thought I was a junkie, the djinni deliberated.

His appearance irritated him suddenly, and he glanced away, embarrassed.

"Today is a happy day," he reminded himself.

Pushing his self-loathing back into its cage, he again scanned around the bathroom. Lolling off the towel rack was Bronson's electric shaver.

So he chooses to look that scruffy? Ren thought, recalling the light bristles that adorned the policeman's jaw.

Another image of Bronson popped quickly into the teen's head. One of the man shirtless and frowning. The chunky muscles, which were coated with a slight dusting of light hair, on display. The daylight accentuated the brawny proportions of his inviting physique, as he stood half-naked atop the bank.

Willing the image away, Ren plugged the clippers into the socket on the wall and extended their grade to the longest possible setting. He flicked the on switch and brought the gyrating gadget up to his scalp. The blades buzzed methodically, their pitch heightening as they passed through his hair. Long strands of his charcoal locks fell to the floor, curling about his feet.

Once he'd finished, he scooped up the black tresses and burnt them in the sink, wrinkling his nose at the smell. He huffed out a deep breath and then turned his gaze upward, forcing his eyes into the reflection of the mirror. There, staring back from the now clear glass, was a young man. His shaven short hair spiked up around his youthful features, shimmering in the light.

Clean.

His lip was still split from his scuffle with Elson, but the welt on his forehead was gone. Such were the benefits of housing an elemental Lord in your body.

"Am I really a lamp?" he pondered, facing his reflection.

Lebue's potions had probably helped speed up the recovery, as Ren couldn't find any bruising on his pale chest from his beating at the harbor. But was it really the work of a powerful entity sleeping beneath his skin?

He pressed his spindly fingers to his chest delicately, probing the bruising which marked his bony front. The ribs were already healed under the surface. Luckily, djinn mended quicker than humans, and Ren seemed to mend faster than most djinn.

He closed his eyes, casting his awareness inward. As he listened to the workings of his body, he concentrated on finding that second beat. The thrum of a heart that didn't belong to him. The strong rhythmic pulse throbbed suddenly in his ears, as though summoned by command.

"Are you Salamander?" he asked, staring into the misted mirror.

There was no reply of course, but it made Ren feel unexpectedly jubilant. If there was something living inside him, then that meant everything he'd endured, the countless hours he'd spent trapped in a cell, had not been alone. His secret passenger had shared it all, a silent witness of the world in which he lived. In part, Ren wanted to cry, wanted to believe that here, he had finally found somewhere to be safe and protected. It was like he'd been transported into another dimension, where he wasn't a killer, wasn't a monster, wasn't the sad, lonely creature he'd convinced himself he was. He wanted to believe that his troubles were behind him now, and that he could spend the rest of his days unmolested in this small apartment. However, his greater senses told him otherwise. He knew that this reprieve was brief, and that within the next couple of days he'd be fending for himself again.

"No," Ren spat at the reflection. "Today is finally a day to be joyous!"

Shaking his head, Ren again rattled his more dubious thoughts out of his mind.

"I've got popcorn to eat," he snorted to the melancholy teen in the mirror.

Shaw was not happy. She pulled up at the station just in time to catch Bronson sneaking out.

"What the fuck happened to you?" she growled as she jumped out of a squad car.

"I um..." Bronson squirmed, trying to come up with an excuse. "I almost crapped myself, Chief."

Shaw shook her head and clenched her fist. "Why? It's not like it's the first time you've had to engage hostiles in a shootout..."

Bronson cut her off. "No, I mean it. I almost literally crapped in my pants. I'm not well."

"Well, you look fine to me," she harrumphed. "What are you really up to?"

"Up to? I'm about up to here with the runs," he replied, pointing to his neck. "I seriously think I need to go home."

"And I agree. You're full of shit!" Shaw tiptoed to get right up into Bronson's face. "Now turn tail and get back to work, where I can keep my eye on you."

Bronson went to his desk and tried to look busy. His mind kept wandering back to Ren.

What had he been thinking?

He'd left two teenage djinn in his apartment. Total strangers. It wasn't like there was anything worth stealing in his home, at least not anything he couldn't easily replace. But the inhuman kids had every opportunity in the world to run off, and clearly people wanted at least one of them dead. Ren and Aileen were his only evidence to prove Kacey was somehow mixed up with D.O.T. and that Elson Whitmore deserved to rot in prison. Was it possible his sister had a whole other life she'd kept secret from her family? Did she keep secrets from him? And if that was the case, could the djinn kids shed any further light on her murder? Bronson didn't dare to hope. He had seen what the pair were capable of.

Perhaps what he'd read about some djinn being powerful enough to read a man's mind was true. Mayhap, the two young djinnayah had plucked his sister's name from his brain in an attempt to manipulate him. But to what end?

Bronson shook his head, dismissing his train of thought. One thing he knew for certain was that his mind was his own. Djinn might control the elements of the physical world, but they certainly held no dominion over what went on in people's minds, contrary to popular belief.

Again, redirecting his attention to his monitor, the detective went over what he'd discovered so far. Darren Lampard had supposedly died in a fire at Blue Brook Meadow Orphanage, along with Aileen Lamb. Around the same time, Aaron Whitmore, who was nearing bankruptcy, discovered gold on his family's land. The almost ruined man mined the hillside in his estate and that almost tripled his wealth.

Finally, Bronson came across a mention of the Whitmore family in the police files. He'd missed it on his initial sweep, as the file only stated that the murdered men in the case were employees of the Whitmores. The referenced name was Danny Delmar. Mr. Delmar was found burned to death in his car, several miles away from the Whitmore mansion, with two other employees. The police file was still relatively new and under investigation, the crime taking place just under a month ago.

Was Bronson harboring a murderer in his home?

He got up from his desk and turned off the monitor, making his way to fake another attack of diarrhea. He deliberately passed the Chief's office, and as he went by the glass front, she knocked on the window.

"Get lost, Theo," she huffed.

"What's that, Chief Shaw?"

"I said beat it," she waved her hand irritably. "If you're going to keep up this charade because you're that desperate to get into mischief, then do it."

"I'm desperate alright, Chief," he grumbled, acting all offended. "That's what I've been telling you for the last three hours."

Not wanting to look a gift horse in the mouth, Bronson rushed his bogus visit to the bathroom and then hightailed it home. His mind swam with visions of returning to an empty apartment, the only lead he had on his sister's murderer gone. Or worse yet, he could be returning to a burned-out shell, with no trace of the baffling djinni boy and djinnayah girl to be found.

Chapter Seven

Bronson stalked into the apartment, his face flushed with exertion. Ren, who was now wearing a clean green hoodie and baggy jeans, shuffled off the black sofa. He'd been watching the music channels, numbly switching between the seven stations Bronson had on his cable package.

"Everything okay?" he asked, watching the cop survey his home.

Ren had tidied everything away after his exploration of the apartment, leaving it in the same state in which he'd found it. He didn't want to wear out his welcome. He'd even stripped the dirty bedding from the hallway, tossing the smeared sheets into the laundry machine.

"Yeah," the older man answered absently. "Where's Aileen?"

"I don't know. She left the minute I let myself in."

"To go where?"

"She wouldn't say."

"Is she coming back?"

"She promised she would. I think she will. She seems very invested in protecting you."

"You cut your hair, it looks..."

"Short," Ren sighed pleasantly, preventing the cop from finishing his sentence.

Bronson opened his mouth, as though he meant to continue, then changed his mind. "Hey kid, you hungry?"

"Not really." Ren frowned, feeling a little guilty about having consumed half the food in the kitchen.

"I'm in the mood for Chinese," Bronson said, pointing his index finger at his guest.

The teenager shrugged. "Um... okay," he mumbled uncertainly.

"What do you want?" the cop asked, pulling his cell from his pocket.

"I... erm... spring rolls... please."

Bronson nodded and punched some digits into his phone. He spoke hurriedly into the mouth piece, his order a blur of familiar numbers, which Ren couldn't decode.

This guy eats Chinese a lot, the young djinni mused.

"...yeah, yeah," Bronson nodded, speaking to whomever he'd placed his order with. "Oh, and make sure everything is unsalted, will ya?"

He ended the call, placing his cell on a black side table as he kicked off his tan shoes.

"Productive day, I see," he stated, gesturing to the flat screen.

Ren grinned weakly, unable to gauge Bronson's mood. "I borrowed some of your clothes. Is that ok?"

"Yeah that's... good," the detective said, rocking on his heels, offering his own half-assed smile.

"Good," replied Ren.

They stood in awkward silence for a moment, both men staring at the same patch of floor. After about thirty seconds of mute discomfort, Ren decided to fill the void.

"You were expecting me to have burned the building down, right?"

Bronson lifted his gaze sharply, his intelligent blue eyes dark and unsure. "A little."

"Well as you can see, everything is still intact."

"Indeed it is."

Silence again.

Ren got the distinct impression his presence was making the cop feel uncomfortable. Deciding to save the policeman the embarrassment of having to ask him to leave, Ren took the initiative.

"Look," he offered, shuffling into the corridor past the taller man, "maybe I should go."

Bronson didn't respond at first, he simply watched Ren walk toward the exit. As the young djinni placed his hand on the doorknob and twisted, Bronson spoke quickly.

"Did you murder Delmar?"

“Who?”

“Daniel or Danny Delmar, the goon who helped you escape from the Whitmores.”

Ren stiffened. “He’s dead?”

“You sound surprised,” the officer observed.

“I’m not,” Ren grimaced, turning to face Bronson. “How did you know it was him who helped me escape the estate?”

“I heard Elson shouting about your ‘greedy nobodies,’ on the roof of the bank. I figured it was Delmar who helped you get out.” Bronson shrugged. “That, and because you mentioned something in the car, about being in Aaron’s cage. I assume they had you held up somewhere.”

“For a long time,” Ren sighed. “What about Tall Paul and Marcus?”

“Both dead. They died about a month ago. Their remains were found in a burnt-out car, not far from the Whitmore mansion.”

Ren nodded, but his body language didn’t betray his thoughts. He just looked annoyed; the expression was a near-permanent feature on his face.

“And that is what’s wrong with you?” he asked letting his hand fall from the door handle. “You’re wondering if I’m a killer?”

“Are you?”

“I didn’t kill Paul and the other two, if that is what you’re asking me,” he scowled at Bronson’s big toe which poked through a hole in the officer’s navy sock.

Bronson couldn’t trust that what the kid was saying was true. He wanted to, and his gut was telling him to, but his brain pressed him to be cautious. It wanted to know more, wanted to see the evidence.

“What happened with Daniel Delmar?”

“The last time I saw him was when I was fleeing from him. I promised them a handsome reward in gold if they helped me escape. It was actually Tall Paul I finally managed to convince to get me out of there, and he talked the others into helping. They broke me out, but Aaron caught us mid-flight. We fought with him, and I burned my way past him. He was still alive when I left, he must have died not long after. I got into Tall Paul’s car, and we drove away. I got them to pull over in the Rural District. I faked an attack of fire expulsion, because I had

a feeling they had something else in mind for me, and I didn't want to end up at their planned destination. So I turned our getaway car into an immobile golden heap and legged it through a field. I burnt it as I ran, hoping they wouldn't be able to follow me, and I'm guessing by my lack of recapture, that they couldn't."

"Where did that happen?"

"Like I said, in the Rural District, not far from where we were the other night."

"At the old Talston's farm?"

"I'm not sure what it was called, but the field I fled through was full of dry, yellowy wheat."

"That fire a month ago? I had to block the entry road until the blaze had been put under control. It cost the Talston's millions in damages."

Ren's face flushed with embarrassment. "I didn't think about that. Maybe I could turn their out-of-commission tractor into gold or something... They had a huge green thing rusting away near the barn."

"I wouldn't worry about it, I'm sure they were insured," Bronson continued. "What do you think happened to Delmar and the others after you got away?"

"Well they didn't go back to Whitmore's, at least not willingly. Aaron and Elson would kill them for setting me loose, which it sounds like they did."

"I see," Bronson huffed, looking very unconvinced.

"Would you like to drive to the spot where it happened?" Ren emptily suggested, feeling his temper fray further. "I can run you through the event."

"Alright," Bronson answered, surprising the djinni boy.

Ten minutes later the two men were in Bronson's Subaru, driving through the busy city streets, headed for the farmland district. The cool autumn breeze jostled in through Ren's window, which he deliberately left ajar. The crisp jet of air ran across the top of his head, playfully tugging at his short strands of hair.

"I'm sorry," Bronson said, filling the silence that had once again blossomed between them.

"For what?" Ren answered dully.

"For dragging you back out here, knowing that it isn't safe for you."

“You don’t trust me,” the djinni murmured, stifling his annoyance, “and you shouldn’t. We barely know each other.”

“So then, tell me a little more about you.” Bronson pretended to check his rearview mirror, but out of the corner of his eye, Ren caught the officer’s assessing look.

“There isn’t much to say,” Ren replied flatly. “My mother supposedly dumped me in a cathedral, but you know that already. You were there when I found out that little gem earlier today. Anyway, after that I got moved to Blue Brook Meadow, which I burned down after living there for ten years. That’s when my djinn gene emerged, so I went to the shantytowns and that’s where I first met Lebue. She took a shine to me and took my blood in exchange for protection from the other djinn in the slums. However, Aaron eventually turned up in his flashy car and took me away to his palace in the peak district.”

“What happened to you there? What was so terrible that forced you to run away?”

“It wasn’t terrible to start with. Aaron was kind to me, and I was well provided for. Elson was decent enough too. I’d say we were friends even. I knew that Aaron was pressing for djinn equality, and that he was manipulating people in power. I was fine with all of that. But then I got older, and Aaron let us boys see the darker side to his operations. I knew Aaron’s work was illegal, but I didn’t realize he was hurting people, even killing them.” The kid screwed up his mouth, like the words were sticking to his tongue, marring his flesh with distaste. “He didn’t want equality for the djinn, he wanted superiority, and he’d lied to me for years about the nature of his work.”

Bronson put his foot down on the accelerator as they left the confines of the city and emerged in the farming district. “Do you think Aaron was the man behind the formation of D.O.T.?”

“I’m almost sure of it, although I never heard him say as much. Come to think of it, I never saw or heard any hint of D.O.T. until a couple of days after I managed to escape my cell. But it has Elson’s stamp all over it.”

“Your cell?”

“After I realized what was happening with the gold I created, what it was my powers were funding, I refused to do it. I tried to run away.” Ren scowled. “The old bastard caught me, and he locked me away in his basement. The salt cell had been there awhile, and there was bloodstains on the floor, so I know I wasn’t its first occupant.”

“How old were you?”

“Sixteen.”

“And you only managed to break out a handful of weeks ago?” Bronson’s eyebrows shot up.

“Yep,” Ren answered with mocking brightness. “Hence the fact I’m such a cheery person.”

“I...” the cop struggled, “I just can’t get my head around it. It almost sounds too unbelievable.”

“Isn’t that why we’re out here?” Ren scoffed. “To prove I’m not a liar?”

Bronson pulled the car over, coming to a spot that the kid recognized.

“There,” the djinni said. “I remember that gnarled tree.”

He pointed to a misshaped willow, which sprouted at a crooked angle, arching up towards the setting sun. Its branches were almost bare and its naked frame swayed gently in the slight gusts of wind. The tree almost seemed to float on a sea of yellow, being surrounded by wheat, which waved as the wind passed through their stalks. On the opposite side of the road, the field was charred and black. A span of burnt foliage, the size of a stadium, stretched away from them.

“This is where we stopped,” Ren explained, climbing out of the car. “I remember running with that tree to my back.”

“So this is where you turned Tall Paul’s ride into gold?” Bronson asked, stepping away from his vehicle and searching around.

“Yep,” the kid answered, leaning casually on the warm hood of the car. “We got out here, I shazammed the car, and then I ran that way.” He pointed to the farmhouse which was barely visible on the horizon.

Bronson kicked about the dirt track, not sure what it was he was looking for. He explored the area for a good while, and Ren watched, patiently observing. Once or twice, Bronson could have sworn that the kid’s eyes trickled over his body, lingering on his form in appreciation. The thought distracted Bronson, who had struggled to think of anything other than how attractive he found the clean and clipped young man. Ren looked like a completely different person, now that he wasn’t buried under weeks of filth. Every exotic detail enticed Bronson, made his pulse quicken, made his face flush. He shook the lustful

feeling away and returned to the task at hand. That's when he saw something shining in the soot, on the side of the path through which Ren had escaped. The honeyed glimmer flickered in the final rays of the dying day. He walked excitedly towards it, hoping to find some evidence, which would put his fears over Ren's honesty to rest. Sure enough, scattered across the ground was a cluster of golden bullets.

"Gotcha!" he exclaimed.

"Have you?" Ren quizzed, seeming uninterested.

"Golden bullets." Bronson grinned.

"What about them?" Ren raised an eyebrow. "You've seen me pull that trick off before."

"Yes, but these haven't been fired and they're not in their clip."

"Which means what?"

"Firstly, that the ammo clip was emptied onto the floor in a hurry, probably after the user realized that they were useless. Secondly, that the owner wasn't fried while wearing them. They were most likely in the car when you... erm... shazammed it."

"How does that prove I'm innocent?"

"Because," Bronson said sprinting onward a few yards, "here is a bullet that isn't golden and look!" he held the slug up for Ren to examine. "There is a golden residue on the tip. This bullet passed through something golden. Someone shot at your guys, and they hid behind their golden heap for safety. I doubt very much that you're the shooter, and I dare say Aaron's lackeys tracked you to here. I'm betting there was a shootout," Bronson went on excitedly, "not long after you fled your saviors, and they were forcefully taken back to the Whitmore estate, before meeting a grisly end."

"Congratulations Officer Theo, mystery solved! Now can we go home? I don't like this place," Ren sulked.

"Yeah." Bronson smiled. "Let me just get some pictures on my phone."

He took out his cell and snapped a few shots of the bullets, where they lay on the ground. He looked about for other prints of import and any other evidence but came up empty handed. By the time he was finished, the autumn sun had completely sunk from view, and the sky had turned an inky blue.

"Come on kid, let us get you home."

There was no answer.

Bronson spun to look at his vacant Subaru, parked near the wilting willow tree.

“Ren,” he yelled, casting a quick glance about.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” came a distant reply.

Following the sound of the djinni’s voice, Bronson caught a glimpse of the kid stalking through the burnt-out field, heading towards Talston’s farm.

“Hey kid, wait up.”

He ran to catch up to the young man, who walked confidently through the ashen crops.

“What are you up to?” Bronson asked as they neared the edge of the scorched wheat and tiptoed up to the barn.

“Paying my debt,” Ren whispered, eyeing the farm house.

The lights in the large building were out. The farmer and his family were either out or had gone to bed early. Satisfied that they weren’t being spied upon, Ren summoned a small jet of flame, allowing it to arch away from his fingers and to glide along the rusted combine harvester that stood a few feet from the wooden shelter. As the flames licked gently at the wheel-less, condemned machine, its metallic compound shifted. Green paint seared away from the scalding body, and the nighttime air wobbled with the heat around the harvester. Exhaling with pleasure, Ren retracted his plume of amber flame. Bronson placed his hand on the djinni’s shoulder, half-expecting the kid to shrug it off. But he didn’t. The content look on Ren’s face brightened into a smile, and they simply stood there for a few moments, basking in the good deed and the smallest of physical contacts.

“Now I’m hungry,” the kid whispered.

“Aw, fuck! I forgot about the food! Now I’ll have to order Indian!”

Chapter Eight

Several days went by without any sign of Aileen. Not that Ren wanted to complain, he was happy for the first time in a long time. Bronson would go to work in the morning, leaving him to his own devices, which usually involved a lot of trash TV, and then the cop would return in the afternoon. On the second night that Ren stayed with the policeman, he'd tried to cook. He'd seen a recipe on the cooking channel for homemade Beef Wellington. Sadly, the woman on the flat-screen made it appear way easier than it actually was, and the men ended up eating Beef Kebabs, cooked in Ren's fire.

"What were you thinking?" Bronson had laughed. "Have you ever tried to cook before?"

Ren shoved a plate of pita bread across the table to the grinning cop. "Here fill your mouth with that and hopefully words will stop coming out of it."

"Seriously. I'm surprised the smoke alarm wasn't going mental when I got in."

Ren sighed mockingly. "Give it time."

For the next couple of nights the men ordered take-away. They'd sit and chat for hours. Bronson talked about college and life on the force. He opened up about Kacey and his childhood with her. He talked about the death of his mum and dad, about the car accident that claimed them both just after he graduated high school. Ren let Bronson in behind his barriers somewhat too. He described what it was like, growing up in an orphanage, living on the streets and tried to explain about how his powers worked. He enjoyed talking to the cop and found it was easy to do so. But even when they weren't speaking, Ren enjoyed being around Bronson. There was something genuinely kind and warm about the man. Not to mention that he was incredibly attractive. Ren was at the small kitchen table one morning with a bowl of cereal, when Bronson strutted past the door in a towel. He lingered at the frame for a moment, rubbing at his damp hair, the black towel hanging in front of him modestly.

"Turn the coffee pot on would you?" he asked, mopping beads of water away from his moist, muscular chest.

"Turn on what?" Ren asked, forcing himself to meet Bronson's blue eyes and not allow them to wander over his taut flesh.

Bronson grinned. "The coffee, turn it on for me please? I need a brew before I can face the day."

Ren nodded obediently, it was all he could do to stop himself drooling milk all over his clean, gray T-shirt. A couple of nights later the two men were watching a rom-com. Bronson had brought a crate of beer home and was seated, supping happily in his plum sweatpants and a cream tanktop. Ren had to make a conscious effort to keep watching the film and not the policeman, as he absently stroked the back of his head with his large hand. They sat together on the sofa, and he'd spread himself over two of the three cushions, leaving Ren to occupy the third. The film, in which the lead female was a scientist, was far less exciting than the man on the sofa. Unable to find time to date, due to her hectic work schedule, the woman cloned herself and sent out the copy to find a man. Ren found the film frustrating and Bronson had laughed more at his snide remarks, than he did at the film.

"As though she's smart enough to be able to clone herself, but too stupid to see that her cute lab assistant is totally in love with her!"

"Some people are like that," Bronson chuckled. "Academically smart but zero common sense. Besides you're hardly one to comment, not with your total lack of being able to judge people."

The cop poked at Ren's rib with his toe, and the djinni gently batted his foot away. "What can I say? Obviously the characters I've come across are better at acting than she is."

Bronson was making a habit of breaching Ren's personal space. The quick, playful poke here and there, a nudge with his hip. Before the start of the film, Ren had been the first to claim his spot on the sofa. Bronson appeared a half minute later and brushed his hand through the djinni's dark hair, ruffling the short strands roughly under his palm. If it had been anyone else, Ren would have found it intrusive, and it would have angered him. But he just didn't feel that way with Bronson, in fact if anything, he egged it on. He wanted the muscular blond cop to make fun of him and to tease him. He wanted Bronson to poke and prod.

On the last evening in Bronson's apartment, when the cop returned home from work, he looked stressed.

"I need a beer. Do you want a drink?"

"Beer sounds good," Ren replied, pressing his luck.

“Beer sounds like something you drink when you’re twenty-one...”

“Oh, really? So you’ve only been allowed to drink it for a few months then?”

“Three years, I’ll have you know.”

“Fine. I’ll have a soda then please, grandpa,” Ren grumbled, following him into the kitchen.

A few minutes later they were sat in the sitting room, both sipping from their beer bottles. Bronson eyed the teenage boy disapprovingly.

Ren lifted his glass like he was giving a toast. “Look on the bright side. This is probably the least offensive illegal thing you’ve done so far this month.”

Bronson snorted and barely suppressed the smirk that sprang to his lips.

“I’ve got a feeling, it’s going to get worse before it gets better on that front,” he responded, swirling the cool bubbling liquid around in its container.

He seemed suddenly sad, and he sighed lightly.

“Ren...,” he started softly. “I think it’s time we gave up on waiting for Aileen to come to us. It’s time we started to look for her.”

Ren closed his eyes. “I agree.”

“Do you have any idea where to start?”

“No. All she said was that she had to inform some people. Who do you think she works for?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been trying to figure that out too.”

“We could always ask Elson, I bet he’d know. He seems to know about everything. And when we’re done asking him, then we could throttle him.”

“Oh, yeah! Excuse me, Mr. Whitmore, would you mind telling us where the pink-haired lamp lives? Oh and please don’t kill us where we stand!” Bronson mocked.

“Do you think she’s really a lamp? Do you believe there is such a thing?”

“As farfetched as it sounds, all the evidence seems to point towards it being true. But the real question is, do you?”

Ren pursed his lips a little. “I think I do.”

“And do you think you are the lamp of fire?”

“...Yes.”

“Did Whitmore know what you were?”

“He must have, but only because he was a lamp to the elemental Lord of Water, before it transferred into Elson that is.”

“Elson Whitmore?” Bronson frowned. “Do you really believe my sister died at his hand?”

“Yes,” Ren nodded slowly. “And if not by his own hand, then certainly under his command.”

A hush settled in the room as the both of them took a big swig from their drinks. Ren purred involuntarily as the bitter taste trickled down his mouth.

He sighed, finishing off his beer and cracking open another bottle. “Elson Whitmore, the leader of D.O.T. and the lamp of the Lord of Water. It seems almost poetic that he’s become my archnemesi!”

“Fire and ice,” Bronson nodded.

“I still can’t wrap my head around the fact that I’m a lamp. I mean, if I shared my body with someone else, surely I could speak to them, inside my head or something.”

“Have you read that somewhere?”

“No, I just thought that might be the case.”

“Does it bother you?”

“No, not really. Then again, yes,” Ren huffed. “I don’t mind sharing my body with this entity, it’s not like its intruding on my life or anything. But I don’t like that everyone seems to be after a piece of me because of it.”

“Well, at least most people won’t recognize you with your hair short. I can’t believe how much better looking you are now you’re not hiding behind that black mass.” Bronson smiled.

“Are you saying I was ugly before?” Ren frowned jovially.

“No!” protested the cop, waving his arms defensively. “But let’s be honest, that dirty-urchin look really wasn’t doing you any favors. While you’ve been here, you’ve gained a bit of size too, and you look healthier for it. I like it.”

“I think it’s just because I’m happy here.” Ren smirked. “Happy looks good on me.”

“Good, I’m glad I make you happy.”

“What makes you think it’s you making me happy and not the endless supply of takeaway?” Ren jested.

As if to accentuate his point, the doorbell sounded and Bronson got up from the couch.

He grabbed his wallet from the side table. “To be continued,” he threatened and walked out of the sitting room, leaving Ren to crack open his third bottle.

The tantalizing smell of spices wafted in through the open door, and Ren lusted to taste the oriental food.

When Bronson returned with a red plastic bag in his hand, he snorted indignantly. “Slow down there kid, you’re going to drink me dry.”

“Sorry.” Ren grinned. “I just like the taste, and I didn’t think I would.”

“What?” Bronson froze, his face becoming serious.

“This is the first time I’ve ever properly drunk alcohol.”

“So you’re telling me, that through all your time as a vagrant and while rubbing shoulders with hired goons, you’ve never once had a beer?”

“I’ve had a glass of wine every once in a blue moon. You know, during special occasions at the Whitmore mansion and stuff, before my incarceration.”

“A glass?”

“Yeah. I’ve never been drunk before.”

“Okay. Don’t take this the wrong way, but if you’re going to experiment with alcohol, I’d rather you did it in any place other than in my home. God only knows how flammable you are while you’re under the influence.”

Ren chuckled softly as Bronson plated up the takeaway. It wasn’t until after Ren had divulged that this was the first time he’d seriously partaken in drinking, that Bronson noted how flushed the kid’s cheeks were. The hue of his skin was a complete contrast to his emerald-colored eyes. The officer’s stare lingered on his young companion, noting how pleasant the vagabond’s smile was. In fact, since returning to his apartment, he couldn’t help but note how pleasant everything about Ren was, now that he had been cleaned up. The high cheek bones in his impish face, his full pinkish lips, his unblemished porcelain skin. The slight slant to his eyes, in which his elongated irises shone like

emeralds in sunlight. The djinni seemed to exude a radiance that had escaped the older man's attention before.

"You should smile more often," Bronson offered, the words popping out of his mouth before he was even conscious of saying them.

The blush on the young man's face brightened, and he looked shyly away, the smile fading from his lips. "I've gone such a long time without having anything to smile about."

"And now?"

"For now, everything feels fuzzy and distant. I feel like I'm hovering about my life without actually being in it. I sort of feel like I'm having a day off from myself. Is that what beer does to you?"

"No, not always."

"Shame."

Ren pushed himself up off the rug and crossed the small space to the rounded table and sat opposite Bronson. He took a sample of food from each container, no more than a couple of forkfuls and placed them systematically on his plate. He took care not to let the different portions overlap, spacing them out around the ceramic plate.

"You worried about cross contamination?" Bronson asked, examining Ren's selection.

"I just want to taste them all individually, without mixing them up. Everything will taste the same if I do."

"Fair point. I never really thought about it before. I just heap everything into one giant concoction."

"Maybe I'll try that after I've tasted everything in its pure form."

"Pure form?"

"Undiluted."

"Overrated," Bronson scoffed pleasantly. "I like things better when they're diluted."

Ren's lips parted, mirroring Bronson's grin. "Like me?"

The beer was undoubtedly affecting his thought process, and the lack of food throughout the day probably wasn't helping him think straight either.

Against his more cautious nature, the officer nodded. "Like you."

"Why? The first day you saw me, when I was in the back seat of your squad car, you didn't look overly enthusiastic to be sharing my company."

"Maybe not when I first saw you. But now that I've gotten to know you a little better, then sure. Besides, that night was the first time in my whole life I'd ever broken the law. I was actually shitting my pants the entire time."

Ren laughed. "You're such a pussy!"

"Shut up," Bronson jibed, tossing a prawn at the djinni's head.

Ren dodged out of its way and flicked a curried bit of rice at Bronson's face. The grain found its mark and stuck to the older man's cheek.

"Oh, *Oh!*" Bronson said, rising from the table. "This means war."

He dipped his fork into his curry, ensuring there was a generous dollop trapped between the prongs. Ren leapt from his chair and ran into the sitting room, placing the sofa, at its center, between the two of them. Bronson, clearly an expert at tackling opponents to the ground, ignored the obstacle altogether. Instead of going around, as the kid had anticipated, he went over. He forced Ren to the floor, the djinni reduced to a giggling mess as they descended.

"Apologize," Bronson demanded, straddling the young man's chest, pinning him under his ass.

"You started it," Ren blustered, trying to wriggle out from under the policeman.

"Apologize, or this is going in your ear." He waved the fork, which had dripped most of its contents during the chase, like a deadly weapon.

"Better in my ear than in your mouth," the djinni goaded. "I think you've had one Chinese takeaway too many, you heavy bastard."

Bronson wiggled his backside, jiggling his captive about on the floor. Ren's face started to turn an impossible shade of red and his excited expression was suddenly wiped away.

"Bronson, get off," he gasped, pushing more forcefully against his assailant.

Seeing that the humor had drained from Ren's face, Bronson did as instructed.

The djinni boy jumped up and backed away. He trembled, and a spurt of orange flame blossomed on his right shoulder.

“Oh, Lords,” he breathed, patting the flame down.

“What’s wrong?” Bronson asked, rising to his feet.

“I don’t know.” Ren’s green eyes were wide with panic. “My fire, it’s surging out of control. I need to get out of here!”

Pain seemed to rip through Ren, and he clawed at his chest with his bony fingers. He closed his eyes, defending them from the sting of tears that threatened.

“Aileen...” the djinni boy choked. “There was so much fire...”

“Ren what is happening to you?” Bronson hesitated.

“This happened at Blue Brook,” he barked. “This is how the orphanage burned down. This surge of power.”

The black-haired kid sprang into action, thrusting himself out into to the hall. Bronson gave chase, following as close as he dared. Angrily turning the knob, Ren yanked the door open and stalked out into the hall. A flicker of ruby flame shot up his thigh, the first warning sign of the inferno to come. He quelled it, gritting his teeth and yanked it back inside his body. He hit the stairs, breaking into a run, his skinny legs jumping the steps two at a time. He headed up, not down. It was late in the afternoon, and the streets would be full of people.

As he emerged on the roof of Bronson’s apartment building, he exhaled, his elemental fury jarring past its fleshy prison. A jet of crimson flame, like that from a flare gun, shot out of his mouth, rising skyward towards the darkening autumn sky. It hastily fizzled into nothing, unable to sustain itself without his physical form as a catalyst. Bronson watched as the glowing sphere faded away from the young man who staggered across the rooftop. Frantically, Ren scanned the space about him, looking for the safest point to stand. A small metallic water tank on the top of the opposite apartment building caught his eye. The djinni broke into an unsteady jog, easily clearing the gap between the buildings as he leapt through the air.

Ren hissed in protest against his injured leg, still tender from the fight earlier that week. Ignoring the pain, the djinni limped across to the short water tower. Bronson was not far behind him, landing on the gravelly roof a few feet away. Ren hobbled to the legs of the silvery frame, which were no taller than he was, and the tank which sat above them was even smaller. He clambered up the steel structure, his face full of relief that he’d managed to reach somewhere he could burn with minimal concern for the environment around him.

He gasped at the cool air, readying to let his inner fire rage, when a hand grabbed at his foot. He looked down to see Bronson on the base of the water tower, his frown was dark and foreshadowing.

“You idiot,” Ren growled.

Bronson ignored the feral tone of the boy's comment. “Look kid, just calm down. Get it under control.”

“I'm about to go nuclear,” Ren spat, shuffling back down the lid of the tower and helping Bronson up onto the tank.

Sparks of glowing heat crackled around his shoulders.

“What does that mean?” Bronson asked, catching the crazed look in Ren's stare.

“Hold me!” Ren placed his palm on Bronson's cheek and snaked his other arm around the policeman's back.

He untucked the older man's shirt, shoving his hand up his naked spine and digging his spindly fingers into Bronson's flesh. He couldn't contain it anymore; the blinding conflagration that quaked inside his frame came howling out of its cage. They were surrounded in a cocoon of blood-red flames. The rippling, searing waves of ruby stretched outward and upward, away from the men at its core.

Bronson yelled, a guttural death-scream, surely this meant the end of him. He tried to push away from the teenager, but the young djinni's vicelike grip held him in place.

“I said, hold me Theo!” Ren shouted over the crackling and hissing heat. “You're safe as long as you don't break contact with me. Skin to skin.”

Bronson nodded, apparently unable to make his tongue move. He clawed at the back of the djinni's neck with his large strong hands, pulling their foreheads together. Ren could feel the man's terrified heart vibrating in his chest, while he gasped raggedly at the warm air. The two of them sat for several minutes, locked in their imposed embrace. Waiting for the blazing storm to pass.

The fire died away around them, passing as though it had never been. Bronson's hands were shaking as the air around him seemed to buzz with electricity.

“You can let go now,” the djinni kid mumbled, sounding annoyed.

The officer did as he was instructed, releasing the young man from his grip and sliding back away from the elemental creature, off the golden patch of water tank on which they sat.

"Why am I alive?" he whispered, glancing over the unmarred flesh of his bare arms.

"I don't know how it works," the kid confessed, sighing, "but I don't burn whatever I'm touching while I use my powers. That's why my clothes don't go up in smoke when I go postal. It's almost like my heat-immunity spreads into them."

"How?"

"And again with the, 'I don't know,'" Ren repeated.

"I thought..." Bronson began, but then bit his sentence short.

"I'm sorry too, I didn't mean to scare you." Ren's expression was perplexed. "I thought I'd mastered controlling my power, but it looks like I was mistaken. I've not gone off like that for years."

"What caused it then?"

Ren's cheeks flamed, and he looked bashfully away. "I think... I think you shouldn't mount me like that anymore."

Bronson stared, taking a second to understand what the kid was trying to say. "Oh, I... I didn't mean to... I didn't think..."

"It's fine," the djinni mumbled, embarrassed. "I just... I've not felt this way for probably a decade... And the beer... I just forgot myself."

"How so?" Bronson quizzed, trying to blink the dazzling lights out of his vision.

"I let myself be happy, truly happy," the young man stated. "I've not felt like that since I was a kid, a real kid, at Blue Brook."

"Blue Brook?" Bronson gave the djinni a sympathetic stare.

"I didn't know I was a djinni." Ren's brows arched miserably as he gazed into the distance over the roof tops. "I went to bed a normal ten-year-old child, and when I woke up, I was in agony, and everything was on fire. I tried to save Aileen, but the ceiling of her room had caved in before I reached it. I got myself downstairs. I don't know how I managed it because the smoke was blindingly thick."

“But your fire doesn’t make smoke,” Bronson pointed out, recollecting his senses.

“Yeah,” Ren huffed, “but when other things are burnt by it, they smoke.”

“You were lucky you didn’t die from the fumes then.”

A third voice joined their conversation. “That wasn’t luck, that was me fanning the smoke away from your head.”

“Aileen,” Ren looked past Bronson, toward the girl who now stood at the edge of the roof. “Is it really you? I mean the real you from Blue Brook?”

“Yes Renren, it really is me,” she huffed quietly. “Or did you forget that I was the one to give you your nickname?”

“I didn’t kill you?” Ren shuddered.

Aileen’s violet eyes narrowed, and she looked away. “No, but the innocent girl you once knew is gone, and I am what remains. A tool, a weapon, an agent of our Lord.”

Bronson rubbed at the back of his hands. “Oh good, more secrets and cryptic speeches.”

“Come with me now, and all will become clear,” Aileen whispered, her hushed voice carried through the air.

“Where?” Ren asked.

“I cannot say.” Aileen shook her head, her shoulder-length pink tresses swaying in the setting sun. “But you must come. It isn’t safe here, and we’re being watched.”

“By who?” Bronson cast his gaze about. “Whitmore’s men?”

“Yes.” Aileen nodded. “They were the ones who put the blood into the food you just ate. It caused Ren’s powers to spike. They meant to kill you, Theo.”

“That’s what made me lose control?” Ren stared at his hands, unsure.

“It is. It’s also what forced our powers to emerge when we were children at Blue Brook. That is how Whitmore started the fire.”

“So it had nothing to do with my...” Ren stopped, huffing shyly.

“Elson’s blood?” Bronson asked.

“No, not Elson.” Aileen grimaced. “Charlotte Galampier’s blood.”

“Charlotte, as in the Lightning Lady, summoner of The War Weasel?”

“Yes.”

“The same djinnayah from World War II? The one who almost destroyed Turin with her giant primal? That Charlotte Galampier?” Bronson shook his head disbelievingly.

“Charlotte is alive and is guiding Elson. She is the driving force behind his master plan.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Because Kacey told me so. After Blue Brook, she took me to a haven, where others like Kacey and myself reside.” Aileen looked Bronson straight in the eye. “Her finding the two of us at Blue Brook, eight years ago, was no accident.”

Bronson screwed up his face. “You’re saying she was sent.”

It was all connected; Ren, Aileen, Kacey, Whitmore, Blue Brook Meadow and the lightning primal which wiped out half of Italy during the Second World War. Somehow they’d all woven themselves into a complex web. He had to untangle the past; he had to make his sister’s killer pay.

“Decide on my honesty after you’ve met with the others,” Aileen offered, “but for now, come with me.”

“What do you think?” Ren asked, turning to the older man with his sharp eyes.

“I don’t like it, but we’re not safe here.”

Ren turned to Aileen. “Does Bronson have time to go back to his place and get another gun? Assuming he has more than one of course...”

Bronson felt for the pistol at his waist, confused,, and pulled it out of the holster. It glimmered in the bright sun, the usual steel gleam gone, replaced with a golden tint.

“Motherfucker,” the detective mumbled under his breath.

Chapter Nine

They arrived at the docks, and stood outside of S.S. Shipments. They had taken a long detour, successfully shaking off the djinnayah that was tailing the small party. Aileen kept testing the wind for the scent of the tracker and after an hour of leading her in circles, deemed it safe to continue on to their true destination.

“Why are we here?” Bronson asked, glaring at the leaning construction.

“This is my home,” Aileen replied, moving forward.

They made their way into the wooden shack, and descended the spiral staircase that led to the shipping company's basement.

“How can you possibly live here? We had men crawling all over this area for weeks.” Bronson scratched at the back of his head irritably.

Aileen didn't answer; instead she tapped on a copper pipe, which led into the ground and away from the small space. The rusted metal echoed in the empty basement, the djinnayah's rhythmic tapping sounding suspiciously like Morse code.

Ren looked over his shoulder at the puzzled officer and shrugged, sharing his annoyed expression.

The ground vibrated suddenly, the slight juddering of the earth beneath their feet caused Ren to jump back. He landed close to Bronson, who reflexively placed his hand on the young man's shoulder, pulling them into a defensive huddle. As Ren relented to Bronson's pull, the officer slipped his arm around the djinni's torso, encasing him in a protective hug. Ren's stomach tingled as his back collided with Bronson's chest. The slight compressive feeling in his gut was completely alien to him and made him feel giddy. His usual urge to wriggle away from close contact was gone, and he was left with this exhilarating new sense. Aileen glanced over their stance, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

Around the copper pipe, the dusty floor began to move, twisting like sand falling through the upper part of an hour glass. It swirled away, revealing a manhole-sized gap in the floor, under which a rusted ladder leaned against a curved brick wall.

“What is this place?” Ren asked, reluctantly stepping away from Bronson's strong grip, moving closer to investigate the hole.

“The Judson River flows out to the ocean through a system of caves under the harbor. My boss managed to wall a few of those caves off, creating a space for us to live in secret, untagged.”

“There are untagged djinn down there?” Bronson asked.

“Yes, there are.” Aileen nodded. “But there are also humans down there, if that makes you feel any better?”

“Not really,” Bronson mumbled, as he watched Aileen jump into the cylinder.

“Looks like we’re climbing.” Ren nudged Bronson in the rib with his elbow. “Age before beauty.”

Bronson scoffed, “So the slight gap in our age is only applicable when it suits you, eh?”

Ren smiled and shrugged again, more dramatically this time.

The two men descended the ladder, Ren at the top. When they were a decent way down, the hole above their heads closed. The dirt rolling back into its original setting, seamlessly disguising the minute gap. The shaft down which they climbed, was poorly lit by crudely fitted bulbs, which were exposed from their casing. A bundle of thick cable wiring had been screwed to the wall alongside the ladder, and Ren tried his best to avoid touching the fatal-looking electrical plait as he moved.

Aileen waited patiently at the bottom, and as Bronson helped Ren off the ladder she turned about-face and marched off along the narrow stone cylinder into which they’d descended. The same sloppy wiring hung from the ceiling, and at irregular intervals a bulb was twisted into the cable. Somewhere water dripped into a puddle, the sound reverberating down the tunnel.

“Did Kacey come down here?”

“Yes, she came down here a lot,” Aileen answered. “She was on her way back here from a mission when Elson’s djinn followed her. They knew she worked for us and wanted to know where I was. They made her sit on the desk up there and wait for Elson. When he arrived, she lied to him, told him she’d deliberately led them to a dead end.”

“Why didn’t anyone try to help her?”

“It was in the middle of the night, and no one knew she was there, except for me. I happened across them not long after Whitmore showed up. I couldn’t

get in here to call for back up, and I couldn't take Elson and ten of his men out alone. If they captured me, it would ruin all of our hard work, and so many other people would die. They killed Kacey, while I watched, helplessly." Aileen's voice faltered, the young girl's pain still fresh.

"What do you mean, many other people would die?"

"My boss will explain everything, we're almost there," she said, wiping at her face.

"How far?" Bronson whispered, tiring of half-answers, and feeling angered to learn of his sister's true demise.

"Just around this corner," Aileen answered.

Sure enough, they turned the upcoming bend and came face to face with a sheet of stone.

A dead end.

Ren brushed his hand against the rough surface of the barrier which prevented them from moving on. "This is another door," he stated, "like the one upstairs."

Aileen nodded and thumped her clenched fist against the wall, a new rhythm this time, but definitely some sort of code.

She had barely finished when, again, the ground began to vibrate and the wall seemed to flow away like liquid. The stone rippled away, shifting like a curtain on a stage, revealing the next scene which was to play out.

Beyond the wall was a cavernous dome. The large rounded space was brightly illuminated with electrical light, the density of which caused Ren to squint his eyes. Through his narrowed lashes, he could see clusters of color against the dark rock. Deep crevices, at various heights along the wall, created shadowy pockets, which were brightly decorated with fabric and furniture. Most notably, however, were the faces of the people, those nearest the door, observing the newcomers. Some of them held tools in their hands, having apparently stopped working on their tasks to see who was entering their sanctuary while others loitered, chatting or playing cards, seeming unhurried in the huge dome of stone.

"What is this place?" Ren mused, more to himself than his company.

"A natural cave that was carved out by the Judson River thousands of years ago. Since then, the land above us has been domesticated, and the settlers of

New Yarlynn built a man-made watercourse for the river to run along. This place dried out, and our leader fortified the stone to ensure it was safe.”

“Your leader,” Bronson said, “when do we get to meet them? You said all would be explained once we reached your hideout.”

Aileen nodded. “Follow me.”

The men started to move again, guided through the center of the cave. All eyes were on them until they arrived at one of the colorful pockets that adorned the walls.

“How many people live down here?” Ren asked, glancing about.

“Normally, not very many,” the neon-haired djinn explained. “Most live above, in the city, only a few of us choose to live down here. But since Kacey’s murder, we’ve been on lockdown, and all of our agents in the city have been forced to seek shelter here.”

“How many people know of this place?”

“Several djinn and maybe twice as many humans. We’re just shy of thirty members.”

“Members?” Bronson was becoming irritated by Aileen’s continuous string of cryptic responses.

“Yes,” she said, stopping at the shadowy recess and waving her hand like an usher in a cinema.

At her signal both men walked into the niche. Inside the lights were dimmer, and they cast jagged shadows along the craggy wall. On the right side of the high-ceilinged pocket was a flat screen TV. The image on the screen was frozen, and although Ren recognized the paused console game, he couldn’t remember its name. Tapestries of thick, green cloth gently cascaded down the wall on the opposite side. Stitched into the weathered fabric were olive-colored trees stretching towards a cyan sun. The pattern was repeated over all the material and on every tapestry, in varying forms. At the center of the room was a large, egg-shaped boulder, on which moss and soft, tiny purple flowers grew. It sat atop more stone, balancing precariously on the arched slab, which disappeared beneath the earth.

Tired of being kept in the dark, Ren scoffed into the empty room. “Where is your leader?”

“I’m here,” came a hushed, yet deep voice from behind the oval rock.

The whispered words reverberated through the tall recess, despite the low volume in which they were spoken. There was something not natural about them, something artificial, like wind being blown through pond reeds. They made Ren tense, the muscles in his leg readying to respond should they have need. The voice was distinctly not human.

“Why are you hiding behind that rock?” Bronson asked, his irritated tone matching that of Ren.

“I’m not hiding, one of flesh,” the voice responded. “I sit in plain view.”

At that, the boulder in the middle of the room trembled slightly on its perch, tilting slowly to one side. The monumental rock rotated slowly, and unease trickled through Ren as he realized what it was he gazed upon.

The craggy shape was in fact alive, its oval curves perfectly proportioned to create a giant human head. The thick, willowy vines, that clung to the top of the stone was a mane of leafy hair. As the boulder continued to spin, an eye came into view. The glistening marble sclera shifted in its socket, and an iris, the color of sand, searched the space behind it, coming to rest on Ren.

“Greetings, little lamp,” the great being welcomed him over its shoulder. “And greetings to you as well, brother of Kacey Bronson.”

“What the fuck are you?” Bronson asked, taking an alarmed step back.

“Aileen, would you be so kind as to turn up the lights?” the creature requested. “Let us allow our guests a better look at me.”

Aileen did as instructed, flicking a switch near the entrance to the cave. Lights above their heads flickered into life, buzzing in disgruntled protest at being woken from their slumber. The twisting shadows were expelled from the cave, and the stony being at its center blinked at its guests.

“Forgive the darkness,” it offered. “The glow from the bulbs reflects off the monitor, and it makes it difficult to see what is happening in my game.”

It shrugged its craggy shoulders, and the ground beneath their feet rumbled. The thing was buried in the floor up to its armpits, leaving its arms, shoulders, and face visible to the newcomers. Judging by the size of what could be seen above the cave’s sandy base, the creature would have struggled to fit inside its home, had it fully emerged from the floor. Its head alone was as high as Bronson, and if it stretched out its arms, the appendages would have easily

cleared the length of the alcove in which they stood. The face of the creature appeared remarkably human, except for the fact it only had one eye in the center of its forehead.

“You’re a primal,” Bronson stated, now able to clearly see the elemental entity.

“Not just any primal.” Its gritty, gray face shifted in expression, showing a row of pristine porcelain teeth as it smiled.

“Golem,” the kid whispered at his side. “You’re the Lord of Earth. A genie out of the lamp.”

Golem nodded once in concurrence. “That I am, Ren Lampard. And in you sleeps my sibling, Salamander.”

“So I’ve recently been led to believe,” Ren huffed, rocking casually on his feet.

“It is fact,” Golem assured. “As with Aileen, within whom sleeps Sylphid, Lord of the Wind.”

Aileen flexed an eyebrow at Bronson, who turned around to stare at the small woman.

“What does all of this have to do with Kacey?” the officer asked. “What is all of this?”

“All of this is what keeps the world balanced,” Golem answered, gesturing to the roof with his slate fingers. “We are a contingent, tied to an organization that has gone by many names throughout the centuries. Its most modern incarnation is D.O.T.”

“Terrorists?” Bronson gasped, unable to mask the disgust in his voice.

He looked to Ren who seemed unaffected by the news, the djinni shifting his weight nonchalantly from one foot to the other. The eyes within his frowning face, kept wandering along the size of the stone giant before them.

“Why did you allow me to think that Elson’s troop were D.O.T?” the policeman groused to Aileen.

“Would you have trusted me had I been honest?”

Bronson scoffed, “So you omit truth in order to be trusted? Are you the ones responsible for burning down the Galleries of Justice? And murdered the judge?”

“Baxter worked for Elson. He was one of the Whitmore’s djinn plants. He got wind of Elson’s master plan and contacted us. He couldn’t go to the authorities. Only Elson knows who he has in his pocket.”

“So what happened?”

Golem sighed slowly. “What was described as an execution, was in fact an extraction turned sour. We needed information about Elson Whitmore’s plans to destroy your city, and Hugo Baxter was our only certain link. He fought alongside our agents, as they tried to get him to safety, and died on the steps of your Galleries of Justice. If in our attempt to help the judge, we have been labeled terrorists by human society, then so be it. That is our cross to bear for working towards the greater good.”

“I fail to see any good in what happened at the Galleries! Do you know how many people died in that fire?”

Aileen grunted behind him. “We didn’t start the fire. That was Elson’s handy work. He was trying to cover his own ass, burning any evidence that might link him to Baxter. In fact, if anything we risked our own lives trying to save as many from the burning building as we could. We lost two of our own! We tore walls down so people could escape, floated employees to safety out of windows...”

“As is our duty!” Golem stated proudly.

“The fire is on Whitmore then? Not the D.O.T?” Bronson clenched his fists. “How can you expect us to believe you?”

“Perhaps if you knew our original title, it may hold some weight within your thoughts and allow you to perceive us from a different vantage point.”

“The Paragons of Five Points,” Ren declared.

“Charged by God, to keep the peace between the djinn and the humans,” affirmed the elemental Lord.

“A task we’re failing miserably at,” Aileen chipped in sulkily.

“As in the knights from the Holy Bahriel?” Bronson tried to shake the incredulous look from his features.

“More or less,” Aileen answered, “except we don’t wear shiny armor anymore or carry broadswords.”

“You’ve been alive since the creation of the world?”

Golem twisted softly. "No, Theodore Bronson, I have not. Nothing is eternal, not even we elemental Lords. Though it is true our lives can span over thousands of years, eventually we die."

"But the Bahriel says that God made you immortal..." Ren wondered aloud.

"The holy scripture of the people in your world has altered form many times, since its origination. Much of what is written within its pages transpired a countless age before the first Bahriel was created. Not even I know what is fact and what is fiction within its pages. I can't even say with certainty that there is a God," the colossal creature sounded sad.

"If the last five Lords are not immortal then, how come you're all still around now?" Ren quizzed.

"When we die, the ancient energy in our bodies escapes. It searches for a fitting conduit which allows the power to bleed into an elemental source, and a new primal is born." Golem pointed to the tapestries on the wall, "The first Golem, tasked with keeping the balance, took the form of an oak tree, infusing the power of the elemental Lord with wood."

"So the Salamander in me," Ren mused darkly, "isn't the raging Lord of Fire that had to be subdued in the story in the Bahriel?"

"No young lamp. That primal died eons ago. Your Salamander drew in the burning light from a star, and its fire is that of the night sky."

Bronson cut in, "As fascinating as this history lesson is, I'm still not sure what this has to do with Kacey's death. Or how she managed to get herself mixed up in all this."

Golem stared at Bronson, narrowing his sagely eye. "As your companion so astutely pointed out earlier, I am currently untethered to a human host. A genie out of its lamp. I have been in such a state since the Second World War after the Italian scientists, running project Sguinzagliare, tore us from our human habitats."

"Saggy-liar, what?" Ren bewildered.

"Project Sguinzagliare," Golem corrected. "A project headed by the Italians, who sought to extract the power of the elemental Lords and harness it. With such power, they would have been able to create weapons of destruction, the likes of which have yet to be invented."

"They cocked it up of course," Aileen grunted. "Science and the supernatural shouldn't be mixed."

“That is not entirely true,” Golem countered. “They failed to extract our power, but they managed to extract two of us from our human counterparts.”

“You and the War Weasel?” Bronson squinted, unsure.

“Yes. Me and Raiju. During the war, Raiju’s lamp was a woman named Carlote, and her family had carried the Lord over many a generation. The Italians sniffed out the lamps and rounded them up, along with their next of kin. We elemental Lords seem to gravitate towards each other, our paths through life overlapping constantly. Most of our lamps were living in Italy or a neighboring country at the time. They experimented on our hosts, forcing them to swap blood. It didn’t take them long to figure out that our blood empowered other djinn, and that it caused short, yet massive spikes in power, when our lamps were forced to swap blood with each other. After a few months, all of Carlote’s family was dead, lost to cruel experimentation. Our lamps decided to take their revenge on the scientists, and when the opportunity presented itself, they all tried to swap blood. Carlote was the first to consume the blood. My lamp, Amadeo, went next. Before the remaining lamps had a chance to exchange their vital fluids, Carlote went into a seizure. Moments later, Raiju emerged from her body, and he was furious. I barely managed to escape his rage with my lamp and the other hosts. We fled Europe and settled here in America. Deliberately spacing ourselves out along the land mass, for all the good it has done. Several decades later, our ancestors have still managed to accumulate in one city.”

“What happened to your lamp?” Bronson asked, the color in his face paling.

“He had several children, mostly sons, and I never remerged our bodies. He did not want his children to grow up in a world where they wouldn’t be accepted for having additional gifts. I honored his wishes—it is difficult not to do so. You must understand, that everything our lamps see and feel, filters through to us. It is hard not to love a person completely, when you know them completely. I loved my lamp so deeply that I chose to sacrifice my own longevity for his happiness.”

Ren folded his arms and frowned. “Your longevity?”

“That is what I said, little lamp. You see, primals share a similar life span to humans and djinn, when not embedded in a host’s body. I am old now, and my life force is dwindling. I fear, I am not long for this world.”

“Why not reattach yourself to another human then? Create another lamp?”

“Not all humans are hospitable. Some will reject my presence, and I risk killing them if that is the case. I do not wish to have innocent blood on my hands this near to death. I know we primals are thought to be soulless creatures, but if that is not the case, when I die, I want my soul to be welcomed in Heaven.”

“That’s... that’s why I’m here, isn’t it?” Bronson breathed, his round eyes glazing over. “That is why Kacey got mixed up in all of this. Amadeo... Your last lamp was named Amadeo.”

“That is correct, fleshling.”

“I’m... My...” Bronson wobbled on the sand. “Amadeo was my grandfather’s name... and... I remember... my granddad saying that we have Italian roots... Amadeo... my ancestor... was... he was your lamp, wasn’t he?”

Golem’s granite head nodded slowly.

“Kacey was the firstborn child of my father, who was the firstborn child of his parents.”

“As was your grandfather,” Golem stated.

“So now that she is dead... I’m next in line? I’m your lamp?”

“You are the purest descendent in the line of my lamps and therefore the most compatible human to house my entity,” Golem explained. “Your blood is the most undiluted.”

“Undiluted,” Bronson whispered, his voice sounding haunted.

“During Raiju’s rampage through Italy, he depleted his power reserves, and I assumed he died not long after. Instead he returned to his lamp, and Carlote escaped Europe. Raiju has slept inside his lamp, storing his power, waiting to unleash his wrath upon the humans. He and Carlote press for djinn superiority. They want to enslave mankind; they want to upset the balance.”

“Then why not go to stop them in your current form? Surely, you’re more powerful in that form?” Ren stated.

“I can kill Carlote and Elson too, but their deaths won’t quell Raiju’s lust for vengeance. He will simply carry it into the next befitting lamp. It is time for a new Raiju. The current Lord of Lightning and his vengeful nature must die. In order to kill him, he must once again be forced from Carlote’s body.”

“She must consume the blood of the other four lamps, like she did in Italy?” Bronson’s heart started to race. “And you’re made of stone.”

“I do not bleed, fleshling. Not as you humans do.”

“So you need my blood. You need me to become your lamp, to become a djinni.”

“This is bullshit,” Ren snapped. “Come on, Theo, we’re leaving.”

The kid wrapped his fingers around the officer’s hand and started to lead him away from the primal Lord.

“I’m afraid we can’t let you do that,” Aileen pushed herself away from the wall, adopting an aggressive stance. “Bronson will become Golem’s lamp, one way or the other.”

“We’re not out in the open here, you breezy bitch. Not enough space to get the wind beneath your wings,” Ren snarled.

“Not a lot of oxygen to feed your fire either,” she retorted, her tone matching his. “Let’s tussle and see who runs out of air first.”

Not waiting to be told twice, Ren conjured up a ball of flame into the palm of his hand.

“Stop!” Bronson called, squeezing Ren’s fingers. He turned back to the primal. “You said something about Elson wanting to destroy the city. What did you mean by that?”

“Hugo Baxter didn’t give us a lot of information before his untimely demise. But what he did say was that Carlotte has figured out a way to unleash Raiju without having to consume the blood of the other lamps. She is planning to unleash him in the city and from there, move across the country, taking control of the human-run nation. She plans to start a race war.”

“When?”

“That she hasn’t already has surprised me.”

“What are you planning to do about it? What would happen to me if I were to become your lamp?”

“We thought it best to go on the offensive. Attack her at the Whitmore mansion and force her to drink the blood of all the lamps before she unleashes her primal in the city. Once Raiju is out of her body, he can be killed. Carlotte knows this, and that is why she has been trying to track, trap, or kill the lamps that are not under her sway.”

Ren turned with his angry eyes towards Bronson. “You can’t seriously be thinking about letting this happen!”

“I am... and it should.”

“But you’ll be a djinn, a dilute!” Ren shot back. “You don’t understand what that’s going to be like for you! And who’s to say they’re even telling us the truth?”

“Because it all fits perfectly into place. And Kacey... She wouldn’t have trusted these people if they were anything other than... good. Besides, being a djinni won’t be any different for me than it is for you, and I don’t see anything wrong with you. In fact, I admire you, and I trust you.” Bronson smiled sadly. “If there is anyone who can teach me how to be a djinni, then it’s you, and there isn’t anyone else I want for the job.”

“But Bronson, it’ll be the end of your life. You can’t be a cop and a djinni! You can’t!”

“And I can’t protect you or avenge my sister as a human. Let me do this without a fight, Ren. Let me choose my own destiny.” The resolve in Bronson’s voice was final.

Ren hissed out a breath and his usual expression of irritation melted away into a vision of protective concern. His emerald eyes held the officer’s for a moment, and Bronson felt like they were back in his apartment. That energy that connected them, flaring into life, drawing them together. Ren nodded, slowly, unwillingly. The djinni wouldn’t wish his life onto another, but he wouldn’t deny his companion the right to choose his own existence either.

Bronson turned back to Golem. “Do it.”

Chapter Ten

The stone giant reached out to the policeman and scooped him up off the floor. Bronson wobbled in his palm, as Golem brought his other hand in close, pointing his slate fingers at the officer's head. Transparent, glittering, green vines snaked away from the tips of Golem's fingers and crept towards the tiny man in his hand.

"This is going to hurt, fleshling, but it won't take long." His tan-colored eye flicked quickly over to Aileen, who looked consumed with grief, and whispered a final time. "When I rebond I will fall back into my primal sleep. Before I go, know that I thank you, Aileen Lamb, for all you have done."

With that he unleashed his power along the wiggling vines, and they tore forward, assailing Bronson's face. Ren stood aghast as thorns sprouted from the stems and clawed at the cop's face, burrowing into his flesh. Bronson wailed, a throaty howl of pain that echoed out of the alcove and into the cavernous space beyond. People appeared at the entrance to Golem's home, alarmed by the screams emanating from within. The shining vines coiled around Bronson and, despite their transparency, the policeman disappeared under their density.

"He's killing him!" Ren yelled above Bronson's cries. "Make it stop!"

Aileen shook her head, unable to pull her eyes away from the spinning mass of mossy color. Golem's body began to freeze, the slight movements which hinted at life evaporating, deserting his frame. The spark of power that had filled the giant with energy was gone, leaving a statue in its wake.

Bronson's song of agony intensified, the rising pitch of his voice breaking into heaving gasps. He levitated away from the palm of Golem's body, lifted by the jade whirlwind of sparkling light. And then abruptly, everything went quiet, and the twinkling energy was gone. Gently, Bronson descended down onto the sandy floor, a few feet away from Ren. His eyes were closed, his torn flesh was mended. His limp body crumpled into a heap as it lowered down from the air. Ren leapt forth, pouncing protectively on the body of his companion.

"Bronson!" the djinni said, shaking the cop's shoulder firmly. "Bronson, come on!"

The man in his grasp, who was panting raggedly, didn't respond.

"Theodore!" Ren snapped, his tone urgent.

Bronson's eyes shot open, and he grabbed hold of Ren. "I thought I was going to die..." he stated through gasps of air.

Ren folded into the cop, and relief washed over him like a wave of fresh cold water. It made him shake, and he choked out a laugh in spite of himself.

Bronson pulled himself up to meet the kneeling djinni. He pressed his warm strong hands against the back of Ren's head, bringing their foreheads together. He held them there, face to face, eyes closed.

"I thought I was going to die," he repeated.

"Well you didn't, you're fine..." Ren purred, stroking his hand through Bronson's ashen, curly hair. "Stop being a pussy..."

"I wasn't scared of dying." Bronson pulled away slightly, cupping Ren's cheek with his warm palm. "I was scared that I wouldn't... That I'd never... Never get the opportunity to do this."

He leaned forward, pressing his lips onto Ren's mouth. Ren froze, his limbs going rigid. How could this be happening? How could this beautiful, kind-hearted man want to kiss him? He sank into Bronson's frame, falling against the officer. He kissed back, fiercely, prying the older man's mouth open with his tongue. He wrapped his lanky arms around Bronson's broad shoulders, pulling them tighter together. Ren was hungry for this kiss, for this closeness. He felt his embers stir in his gut and felt the heat spreading through his body.

Let it come.

Bronson pulled away and opened his eyes. They were changed; his pupils were stretched along the diameter of his irises which were no longer a brilliant blue. The sapphire sky had been replaced by a rich purple hue, the same color as the dahlias that grew on Golem's head.

"Don't stop," Ren urged as flames engulfed them.

Bronson smiled, his heart thumping in his chest. Ren wanted to be showered in his kisses, he wanted Bronson's lips on his skin. The world beyond the fire, which danced around them in blinding amber ripples, fell away. It left the two of them together, the sole entities in their burning bubble. Bronson kissed Ren again, and then again and again. They held each other, entangled, flesh to flesh.

After a time that was too short and yet seemed to span an age, Ren's fire died away. As the flames tittered to nothing, the cave came back into view, as did the faces of the crowd, who had come to witness the birth of a new lamp.

Aileen stepped forth from amongst them, her expression barely masking the turbulent emotions that gripped at her soul.

“Can you feel him in you?” she quavered.

Bronson stood up, brushing the grit away from his legs. He stood still and closed his eyes, not really sure what he was doing. Listening to the rhythm of his body, Bronson searched for notable changes. At first he couldn't feel anything, but then he heard it. The thrum of a second heartbeat, the power of the sleeping giant in his body. Every pulse forced energy through him, filling his limbs with strength, making him feel indestructible.

“I can feel him,” Bronson grinned.

“Good,” Aileen whispered in a strangled voice. “Now—not that I want to get between you pair of lusty lads, but time is of the essence. Let's test your abilities and see what you're capable of. I want to be on the offensive by first light, before Carlote unleashes her wrath, and the city becomes a battle field.”

Bronson strode cautiously away from Ren. “How does this work then?”

“It's different for all of us,” Ren explained. “It just depends on how your djinn powers have manifested.”

“They usually kick in subconsciously when you're under threat,” Aileen offered, scooping a stone up off the floor.

She tossed it towards Bronson, aiding the projectile by pushing it with a twisting breeze.

Bronson yelped and flung his arms up around his head. As he did so, his muscles tensed, and he felt a shift in his physical form. The stone bounced off his forearms, harmlessly falling to the floor. It didn't hurt, didn't even tickle.

“That was awesome,” Ren laughed.

“Yeah... truly...” Bronson grumbled, not sounding quite as confident. “What happened?”

Aileen smiled softly, tears shining in her silvery stare, “Oh he has given you a gift to be truly proud of.”

Chapter Eleven

The sun rose lazily over the upmarket, Peak District, shedding its dim light over the Whitmore estate. Ren glared at the massive mansion, a shadowy silhouette blotting out the rays of the new day. The unremarkable, rectangular building was four stories high and as long as a soccer field. Around the perimeter of the red brick manor, neatly pruned bushes grew. Their leaves and cream flowers were still in full bloom, despite the fact it was late autumn. Along the front wall were large, white arched windows that were arranged in symmetrical intervals. A huge granite fountain, with a statue of Neptune at its center, sloshed away in the courtyard. The merman rode a wave, proudly brandishing a trident with golden prongs.

Ren scowled at the weapon, and the golden glint that reflected the sun. The trident had been stainless steel until he'd worked his magic on the damned thing.

He stood with the other members of D.O.T., hidden inside the thick forest that grew close to the massive construction, waiting for Aileen's signal. He shuddered and tried to quiet the tiny voice in his head that told him to flee. This place was a place of nightmares, and it would haunt his dreams until the day he died. But he wouldn't let it haunt his waking moments too, he had to end this here and not live in fear of being tracked down by Elson's goons.

Bronson, who was standing behind him, placed his hand on Ren's shoulder. "You alright?"

Ren brushed his cheek along the policeman's fingers. "Ask me again when we both live through this," he purred.

The large weather vane on the roof, which was shaped like an old galleon ship, started to spin rapidly.

Aileen had secured an entrance: it was time.

The small force of twenty-three men and women crept quickly forward, trying to stay hidden behind trees and the other monuments that adorned the vast yard. At the side of the building was the entrance that led into the CCTV room.

Aileen had been monitoring the estate, with Kacey, for months and had memorized the shift patterns of the men who manned it. When Ren and

Bronson made it to the wall of the mansion, Bronson wrinkled his face with distaste at the two corpses on the floor. Fresh blood seeped from their slit throats, and he had to look away.

“Did you have to kill them?” he grumbled quietly in Aileen’s ear.

Aileen sighed. “That one—” She pointed to a bald middle-aged man. “—set fire to a car while three men were trapped inside. I saw him do it with my own eyes, and he enjoyed it. That one... well... that one kicked a cat.”

“A cat?”

“I like cats...”

“I don’t like to kill unnecessarily,” Bronson grimaced.

“I don’t relish in the killing either.” she shot him an angered look. “But here everyone knows what Elson is up to. They’re planning to level the city and then move onto the next. Do you think they care about your life, or the lives of those countless innocents in New Yarlynn? What did you think we came here to do?”

Ren tugged at Bronson’s shoulder. “She’s right. Don’t get yourself killed trying to spare the lives of these monsters. A lot of people are going to die here today, don’t be one of them.”

“I know,” he sighed. “I just... I don’t like it.”

“Let’s find Elson and Carlote. If we cut the head off the snake, the body will be easier to subdue,” Aileen offered. “Maybe that way, some of these actual terrorists will live to see another day, hopefully under lock and key.”

She looked over her shoulder, addressing the party of people who crowded into the little room. “Jon, Morgs, Pete, you three ready?”

The three paragons nodded, their faces determined.

“Don’t let anyone in,” Aileen ordered.

“Good luck,” Morgan saluted jovially, as she left the small room with the two men, returning to the outside. That morning, the mousey-haired djinnyah had swallowed a hefty draught of Bronson’s blood, as had all the other djinn who were kin to the element of earth. Each member of the troop had also been armed with a small capsule of blood, mixed from the three lamps.

“Let’s go,” Aileen sighed. “Remember stay alive, kill—or disarm—as many as you can. And if you see Carlote, get that capsule of blood in her body! Take Elson’s blood if the opportunity presents itself.”

They left the room, silently creeping through the corridor that led to the kitchens. Meanwhile outside, Morgan was working her mojo on the plants around the estate. Her power to manipulate the growth and animation of vegetation had increased a thousandfold after drinking Bronson's life essence. The elder woman dug her hands into the fertile soil, her eyes rolling up into the back of her head. The bushes around the mansion twitched, coming to life. With a flurry of movement they stretched upward, their thick branches encompassing the mansion. They crawled along the wall, digging into the stone, covering the windows. Within a matter of minutes the entire building was cocooned in a layer of solid greenery.

Inside, the small group of paragons had made it to the main hall without incident. However, when they arrived at the lavishly decorated space, they became entangled with several of Whitmore's djinn. Gunfire broke out, the humans with D.O.T. and those djinn with melee-only fighting skills firing their weapons.

"This is where we branch off!" Aileen shouted over the noise.

The gunfire was simply a diversion, a tactic used to draw the majority of the mansion staff into the fighting. Ren had sketched a map of the inside of the mansion from memory for the paragons to study. The spot they had chosen for the fight was the easiest to defend and the best place to retreat from if things were looking really bad.

The lamps however had another mission: to kill Rajju and to bring Elson to justice.

"Where do we go from here?" the wind djinnayah asked.

"To Elson's room or what used to be Aaron's room. I'm guessing he'll have moved into the master bedroom after his father died." Ren spoke rapidly, leading them away from the fighting towards another staircase at the back of the mansion.

They met several djinn while en route. The men dispatched one; Ren burning away the fog that snaked away from his navel allowing Bronson to find the man's face, which he swiftly punched. He felt his opponent's nose break from the force, the fragile cartilage shattering from the blow. The djinni toppled to the floor, broken but still alive. A few rooms later they came across a pair of scantily-clad twins. The women grinned wickedly; the only difference in their appearance was the style of their blond hair. The one with pigtails shimmered out of existence suddenly, blinking back into reality behind Aileen. She jabbed

at the small lamp, narrowly missing a kidney as Aileen twirled from the attack. The second girl, who wore two thick plaits on one side of her head, clapped her hands, and a blinding light emanated from her palms. The flash stunned Ren, who tried vainly to blink away the stars that danced in his vision. Pigtailed popped into the open space next to him, holding her blade high. Bronson caught her by the wrist, preventing her from driving the dagger into Ren's head. He squeezed as hard as possible, feeling the bones in her wrist crumple. She squealed in agony and lashed out with her free appendages. Running to her sister's defense, Plaits' skin flickered with explosive bursts of brightness. Aileen snatched the girl from the air, wrapping her legs around her throat. She constricted her thighs, starving the flaxen djinnyah of oxygen. When she passed out, Aileen pushed her away, as did Bronson with his captive, who was also out cold. Finally, in the corridor outside the master bedroom, djinn guards were waiting to greet the intruders. There were five of them, and they all stood cockily awaiting their rivals.

"We don't have time to tread lightly here," Aileen said, shooting Bronson a stony glance.

The officer's nod was barely perceptible, but it was all Aileen needed. She breathed in deeply, and then unleashed a scream that was so piercing, it cause the walls to tremble. Glass shattered as pictures fell from their fixtures. Furniture was thrown through the air, the wood shattering as it bounced along the corridor. The djinn caught in the whirlwind that spun fatally down the corridor, were uprooted and thrown around like rag dolls. They collided with the far wall, the heaviest breaking through the plasterboard and into the room beyond. Ren wondered if any of them could have survived such a blow, but didn't have time to dwell on the thought as Aileen rushed forward. He also wondered what he was capable of, now that he had the blood of three lamps coursing through his veins. Thinking about the loss of control at Bronson's apartment, he quivered. Carlote's potent blood had been stronger than the three of them combined and had caused his fire to lash out beyond his influence. How strong was the Lightning Lady?

The pink-haired djinnyah kicked the double doors, which scarcely held to their hinges. They fell inwards, revealing the room beyond. Inside two figures sat on the four-poster bed that was in the middle of the spacious room. Ren instantly recognized the disinterested face of Elson Whitmore but the woman... he would have remembered her face had he ever seen it before.

Her ginger hair was pulled up into a tight bun above her ancient, wrinkled forehead. Her eyes were golden, and almost invisible beneath the lids that

sagged around her sockets. Her nose was hooked, and her chin bled into her chest, the liver-spotted skin hanging from her skull. Whoever nicknamed Barbara Lebue "The Witch" had clearly never seen the woman hidden away at the Whitmore estate.

She stood, rising from the bed in one strong movement that belied her age. She inhaled deeply, every movement displaying the immeasurable amount of vitality she possessed.

"Judging by the cage you've created around our home, and the incredibly rude racket you've made since arriving, I'd wager you three indulged in a little blood-swapping this morning," the crone spoke, her voice a pleasant chirp.

"Apparently, it's all the rage," Ren replied smugly. "You should know, Carlotte."

"Oh we do, small fire!" the elderly woman hummed. "In fact, we and our protégé here partook just a moment ago. We gave him some of our blood, and we even had some of your blood stored for just such an occasion." She shrugged sweetly, her girlish movements seeming monstrous on the wizened creature. "Now all he needs is some blood from the Sylphid and the Golem! We, on the other hand, have no need of blood-swapping. You see we have been free of each other for years."

"Like Baxter said," Aileen snapped.

"That's right, once out of the lamp, always out of a lamp," Carlotte laughed.

"But Raiju's been dormant for years." Aileen shook her head incredulously.

"Or so you were led to believe," the haggard woman beamed. "If Golem thought we could have been separated without the need to drink more lamp blood, he would have marched over here and killed us both. That would have ruined our plans! Spoiled our years of planning! You see, we need Golem's blood. We needed him inside a body, rebound to a lamp. And if he'd killed Carlotte before our plans had come to fruition, Raiju would have been trapped inside the next lamp. He would have had to start again. Influencing a new host can be difficult and time consuming. It would have taken too long."

"You tricked us," Bronson spat. "You knew Golem would bond with one of us in an attempt to force Raiju from your body. You knew Golem would do anything to prevent another genocide."

"We did! *And now he sleeps within your frame, new lamp! I can see his power coursing through your veins!* All we had to do was wait and keep

hidden. Long enough for him to think us trapped together. Long enough for him to come to the conclusion, that the only way to separate us was with more of his lamp's blood. Then we had silly, stupid Hugo leak the paragons some half-truths."

"Why?" Ren snapped, feeling his fury rushing through his veins.

"You see, Undine was old, the oldest amongst us, and I knew the Lord's time was coming to an end. When Elson was born, so too was a new Undine, the last one dying as the primal power escaped Aaron's body. Since then we've been schooling Elson and his elemental Lord in how awful the world is, and how it desperately needs to be... redecorated. We wanted to teach you too, little Ren, but your Salamander would never have allowed it and would have made its presence known in your mind."

"You plan to unleash the new Undine and get it on your side? You orchestrated everything, you knew we'd come for you. We walked right into your trap." Aileen was aghast.

"Exactly!" Carlotte clapped her hands gleefully like a child. "And now all five lamps are together again, it's time you all donated your blood to our Elson!"

"Not necessarily all of you," Elson corrected. "We have Salamander blood to spare. Daz is supposed to be rotting in the ground somewhere. An error I'll rectify momentarily."

Ren glowed dangerously, his fire seeping through his skin. "You know I hate that fucking name. It's Ren now!"

"You can't stop us," Carlotte interrupted, giggled maniacally. "We have penetrated human leadership at all levels, and while we and the Undine rage through the country, our agents will sow seeds of confusion amongst the country's hierarchy. By the time they've been weeded out and some semblance of coherent thought can be made, we'll have amassed an army of djinn and torn down their major defenses. We'll have left humans devastated while bolstering our own strength, and then we will take our rightful place as the superior race!"

Ren yawned dramatically. "I'm bored," and then he flared into life.

The moment Ren's aura of flame fully encased him, Carlotte shot forth. Her skin crackled with sparks of electricity, and streaks of lightning darted away from her wrinkled skin. She collided with Aileen, carrying the small djinniah

out into the corridor, through the brick wall, past the barrier of branches and out into the yard. The bushes shivered, hurriedly growing back around the hole that the women had made, clotting like a thick green scab.

Elson attacked first, using the distraction to his advantage. He rolled off the bed, backing away towards the ensuite bathroom. With his arm outstretched, he pelted the men with a barrage of sharp little icicles. Ren met his attack with a sheet of fire, which encompassed him and Bronson. The tiny jagged stars melted as they passed through the flame, hissing away to nothingness. While Ren busied himself with the projectiles, Elson punched his hand through the thin wall which separated the two rooms. He clasped hold of the pipe beyond the plaster and yanked at the copper tube. Water gushed from the hole, rushing out onto the floor, spraying over the bed. Elson plucked the water from the air, creating a large, twinkling sphere the size of a wrecking ball, and sent it careening towards the men. The ball was only meant to divert the men's attention as he manipulated the flow of the water, forcing the forming puddle around the room, avoiding Ren's wall of flame. The globe of ice crossed through Ren's blazing barrier and batted the young djinn in the chest, knocking the wind from his lungs. Ren spat fire from his mouth as he coughed, the smokeless jet striking the bed. It blossomed into a brilliant burning wheel, searing the wall and snatching at the drapes by the window. Seeking to end the fight swiftly, Elson crafted the water behind them into a row of deadly spikes and sent them outward, towards his adversaries. Bronson caught the rippling motion of the water just in time and threw himself in front of Ren, wrapping his arms around the thin flaming entity. His skin burned for a brief second, and he hissed through his teeth at the pain, but then he forced his body to change. Making it shift form, altering the compound of his flesh, like he had while practicing through the night, time and time again.

The perilous points of ice shattered as they collided with Bronson's new body, falling harmlessly to the floor.

"What the fuck is this?" Elson demanded, glaring at Bronson.

The cop could only imagine what the millionaire was thinking as he gazed upon the two of them. One man entombed in fire, waves of amber and crimson wobbling away from his frame. The other, a human-shaped diamond, translucently reflecting the light of the ruby red inferno. His hide was impenetrable, immune to the effects of heat and cold. The perfect ability to safeguard his skin when caught between the feuding lamps. Golem's presence in his body had awakened his dormant djinn powers; he was a fortress of unreachable magnitude.

Perfect.

“This is a little thing I like to call payback,” Bronson growled, releasing his hold on his companion and charging toward his enemy.

Elson flung his hands towards the ceiling, and the water coiled up around the jeweled man's ankles. It solidified, pinning Bronson to the spot. Grunting at the futility of Elson's effort, Bronson brought his powerful fist down, slamming it into the ice around his feet. The floorboards shattered, the wood splintering beneath his blow, the ice bursting into a spray of glimmering dust. He fell forward as the floor gave way, blindly grasping with his arms to find a hold. He caught the leg of the burning bed, his strong hands clamping like a vice into the dark oak. Dangling between two floors, he cursed himself for not testing the full extent of his newfound strength before now. Below his swinging feet, the fighting in the entrance hall was still in full swing. The three-floor drop made Bronson's stomach twist, and he forced his eyes away from the battle beneath.

Elson laughed darkly, whipping the water into a jagged, jumble of frost. He hovered the mass over Bronson's struggling form, as the trapped man slowly tried to hoist himself out of the hole. It dripped on his head, struggling to maintain its shape in the heat from the fire that had now claimed half the room.

Like a comet, Ren sprang through the air, tackling the spinning block like a football player, skewering his shoulder on a frozen point.

“You'll never best me on your own, either of you,” Elson raged. “Cowards!”

“I spent three years of my life on my own, thanks to you,” Ren replied through gritted teeth. “I don't ever want to be on my own again! I'd rather die a coward, in the company of those I care about, than by myself, like you're about to!”

Deep-rooted fury boiled over the cusp of the kid's emotions, and his fire flourished like never before. The force of the heat expelled from his flesh caused him to levitate off the ground. He hovered over Bronson, at the center of a blinding blue flame, the rippling fire fanning out in all directions, laying waste to all that it touched. Ren cried out, his voice an overlapping mix of anguish and ecstasy.

Not to be outdone Elson's seething howl rose to join that of his adversary, a barrage of glassy shards flying in all directions. The water around his feet swirled up around his body protectively, like an arctic whirlpool, defending its master from Ren's horrific heat.

The two of them were at a stalemate, neither one seeming to hold the upper hand. Bronson had to get out of his hole; he had to be the deciding factor in this fight. He pulled at the bed leg, and it snapped off its frame, causing him to slide down further. He dug his diamond fingers into the floorboards, piercing the wood, holding him in position. That's when he saw it. An electrical cable running the length of the room between their floor and the one below. He yanked at the yellow cord, snapping it as it came away from the fittings. Sparks of electricity jarred from the exposed copper, bouncing off his shining flesh harmlessly. He slammed it down into the water that trickled away from its master, unable to retain its icy position against Ren's blistering heat. It crackled, and the end of the cable detonated with astonishing velocity.

Elson jolted in his turbine-like torrent, coughing out choked ragged air that escaped his lips in bloodied bubbles. He fell to the floor, no longer protected by his watery shield, and a tsunami of flame swept over him. The millionaire vanished beneath the blanket of sapphire and ruby.

"Ren!" Bronson called, struggling to keep his hold.

The young djinni was oblivious, lost in the release of his primal power. His eyes were glassy, filled with boiling tears, and his smile was one of pure bliss.

"Ren! I'm slipping!" the older man tried again. "...Darren!"

The black-haired boy shook his head. "Beautiful," he gasped.

"Come on, Ren, sort yourself out! I don't know if I'll survive a fall like this!"

A tear of molten fire trickled down the kid's face. "It's so beautiful... Theodore. It's so... peaceful."

"Ren, please! I'm shitting myself here! I don't want to die yet!"

"Bron... son..." Ren's emerald irises seemed to refocus, and he slowly scanned the room. When his gaze fell upon Bronson he blinked, screwing his face into a ball. His hands hastened up to his face, and he rubbed at his eyes, forcing whatever vision had taken him away, out of his mind. As he slowly lowered himself to the floor, he reined in his fire then strode urgently over to his comrade. The room was a smoking, burning remnant of its former self. Everything was bathed in an orange illumination, and the smoke was thick and deadly. Ren knelt before the hole, coughing, and hugged his arms around Bronson's neck, the embrace as much in affection as it was an attempt to pull the crystal entity from the floor.

“Get me out, get me out!” Bronson pressed, kicking his feet into the air.

Ren pulled with all his might, and Bronson clawed at the floor, dragging himself in small steps from the gap in the wood.

When he was out up to his waist, he started to tremble, adrenaline pulsing through his body. He felt disorientated and had to scan the room to find the double doors through which they needed to escape. He saw the charred remains of what had once been Elson Whitmore, lying on his back, under the exposed piping in the wall. The flow of liquid had ceased, and the water around his unmoving body had gone, evaporated into nothingness.

Bronson scrambled the rest of the way out, helped by Ren, who tried vainly to find a decent grasp of his smooth flesh. His shirt had been burned clean away, and what remained of his charred, tattered pants barely covered his legs. One of his boots had come loose and had fallen into the melee in the hall, the other a smoldering wreck.

“We need to find Aileen!” Ren yelled over the popping and hissing of the flames.

Bronson nodded, promptly pulling himself to his feet and letting Ren guide him out of the room. They made it to the door, where they were able to suck in a breath of cleaner air. Before they could make their escape however, something struck Bronson on the back, deflecting off his bare glassy skin.

He turned to see Elson, sprawled out along his belly. The madman had rolled onto his front, biting into his charred skin and used the only moisture left in his room for one final attempt to kill the other lamps. His blood. Unable to suppress his fury with the man who had imprisoned and abused Ren, planned to start a war that would kill thousands, and murdered his sister, Bronson turned and stalked across the room. Elson was spent, unable to move, unable to defend himself. Bronson placed a large, opaque foot on the monster's head.

“This is for Kacey,” he growled, pressing down with all his weight.

Elson's skull shattered under the pressure of his foot. Gore spilled out across the wood and matted between Bronson's toes. One day, this image might come back to haunt him, but right in that moment he felt a great pressure lift from his shoulders. His sister was avenged, and Ren was free to live his life without constantly looking over his shoulder.

“Bronson,” Ren urged delicately, his voice almost lost amongst the roar of the fire.

Bronson backed away from the dead man and went to meet his companion at the door. They fled down the corridor, retracing their steps from earlier. Ren seemed hampered and grimaced.

“Are you hurt?” Bronson asked, giving the kid a quick once-over.

“That fucking idiot stabbed me in the back with his own blood,” Ren chuckled, humorlessly.

“Let me see,” Bronson said, coming to a stop by the stairs.

“No need,” Ren smiled. “It’s already healing. Lamp blood helps us heal quicker, remember? Elson just refueled me, his own blood repairing the damage of his attack. I’ve the blood of four lamps in my system now.”

Bronson sighed with relief.

“What happened to taking prisoners?” Ren met his gaze, concerned. “I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“Some bugs just need to be squashed.” Bronson frowned. “If he had lived, he’d have found a way to avenge himself. Too many lives were at stake.”

Ren nodded, pressing his bloodied palm to Bronson’s cheek.

Bronson gently pushed his hand away. “We need to be outside, now. Rajju can’t be allowed to escape.”

Without further hesitation, both men fled from the upper floor and down into the battle below them.

The fight was not over yet.

Chapter Twelve

Morgan was a quivering mess when they found her outside the CCTV room. Pete was dead, tendrils of gray smoke curling away from his broken body. The human's gun was a few feet away from where he lay in Morgan's arms. Jon was nowhere to be seen. Morgan knelt, rocking the lifeless corpse of her fellow paragon, tears streaking down her face.

"Please..." she sobbed as the men appeared at the exit. "Tell me we're winning."

Bronson bobbed his head, his crystalline face full of empathy. "It looks like we've had a couple of casualties inside. We've lost a few. But we're kicking their asses. I don't think they banked on us topping our djinn up with lamp blood."

The news didn't seem to effect the mousey-haired woman's mood, but she thanked them regardless.

"What happened here?" Bronson asked.

"Some staff showed up not long after we entered the building, but they didn't enter through the gate of the estate. They saw the bushes and fled," Morgan explained, trying to compose herself. "The police showed up about three minutes ago, and they've been dealing with that woman ever since. Is that Carlote?"

"Red hair, looks like she's about two hundred years old?" Ren asked.

Morgan nodded.

"Yeah, that's her. She shoved through a wall, taking Aileen was with her. Have you seen Aileen?"

"I felt them tear through the blockade, near the top. Aileen was out front, near the fountain. Pete tried to help. He shot at that witch but she... she..." Morgan broke out into another sob.

Bronson tugged on Ren's arm, leading them away. "Get yourself to safety," he said to the weeping woman. "There's no point in holding the mansion anymore."

They made their way to the front of the building. The sun had fully emerged, and the early morning sky had turned pale blue. In the light of day,

the men could clearly see the scene unfolding before them. Carlotte was levitating several meters above the ground, just in front of the merman fountain. A ring of electrical energy pulsated around her, arching out in waves of silver jagged energy. Armed police had made a barrier with their cars, one of which had been flipped on its side, and were shooting at the floating crone. Behind that, farther down the road, were a fire truck and an ambulance.

Shaw's voice carried over the megaphone, "Get me those salt-grenades! I mean now!"

Bronson cursed, "Shit, Carlotte's going to kill them all."

"Not if we can stop her," Ren stated. "We need to fight. If Raiju thinks Carlotte is in danger, he'll come out. He won't risk losing his lamp. I'll distract grandma. You go convince that pack of morons to back up."

"No!" Bronson lunged to grab the other djinni, but he was too slow.

Ren ran from the wall, his fiery aura combusting about him. Bronson ran after him. As they passed the towering bushes a hand shot out and grabbed Bronson, tripping him mid-run. Ren didn't notice, he was too focused on the task before him.

As he neared the back of the hovering woman, she pressed her fingers to her lips and puckered them. She giggled like an infant as she blew a kiss to the attacking police unit. Thick forks of lightning streaked away from her fingers, ricocheting off the ground. It tore the grass from its roots where it traveled, leaving deep gorges in the earth. The bolts raced along the yard, cracking like a giant's whip at the cops when it reached the estate's wrought iron gates. The metal sang as the streaks of pearlescent energy passed through their conductive bars. The tendrils of jittery light struck a car, knocking it into an ambulance at the back of the procession. Men leapt from the vehicle's path, some landing safely, others caught in the spray of volts that danced away from their ride.

"Oi, coffin-dodger!" he yelled above the shooting, sending a flaming vine up to assault the old woman.

She evaded it, gliding backward from the strand of fire, spinning in the air.

She looked down, her grinning face twitched with confusion. "Where is our Elson?"

"Mostly up there." Ren pointed to the blazing roof of the Whitmore building.

Charlotte trembled, and her nostrils flared, her features shifting into one of outrage.

“Mostly?” she demanded, sounding like a child on the verge of a tantrum.

“Well, there might be some of his brain left on Bronson’s sole, but I’m not really sure.”

The electrical discharge around her body increased, and she moaned like a mad beast. The deep, throaty noise rose in pitch. She tore at her hair and shook her head violently. Ren sent a spiral of incinerating heat skyward, encompassing the crone.

She wailed like a banshee, lost from view. “Not my family! Not my family!”

She chanted the words over and over, oblivious to the gunfire, unaffected by Ren’s flames.

Snap!

The sound blotted out all other noise. It seemed to bend the very air itself. A terrifying wave of power exploded outwards from within Ren’s revolving inferno. It snuffed out the fire, knocking Ren backwards onto the ground. The invisible wave washed over the gathering of police men, sending them flying in a similar manner, silencing their guns. Charlotte fell to the floor, a convulsing bulk of nerves. Her mouth gaped open, and from it a gray cloud poured out into the yard. It quickly gathered in volume, taking on an enormous form. It started to solidify, and bolts of silver electricity skittered along the length of its flesh. Glaucous fur sprouted from the pale skin, covering the creature from head to paw. It stood on two legs, and from its rear sprouted a bushy tail that curled into the air. Its forearms were more like a monkey’s, and its hands were furless and distinctly human in appearance. Lips pulled back into a snarl, revealing the creature’s sharp teeth, hidden in its rodent-like face.

Raiju. The War Weasel.

“Why do you rise against us, paragon people? Why do you not want what we want?” the primal demanded.

Ren didn’t answer, he was too terrified. The elemental Lord was half the size of the mansion. Had Golem been this big? He struck at the primal with his fire, backing quickly away towards the smoldering structure. Raiju hissed as Ren’s flames singed his fur. The beast swiped at the djinni with his clawed

hand, swatting him away like he was a fly. The blow hit Ren full force, knocking him along the grass. He grimaced as he scraped along the soil, gripping at the dirt to slow his recoil. Before he had the chance to find his feet, Raiju was on him, snatching him up from the floor. The giant weasel grasped him clumsily, crushing him between its fingers. The creature's skin blistered against his fire, but it didn't drop him, didn't even hint that it was in pain.

"Why do you kill the ones we love?" it raged.

"Death begets death," Ren choked from between its fingers.

"We was not the one to cast the first stone though, was we?" Raiju's grip tightened.

"You blame the sins of a generation long past on this modern world! The humans made peace with each other, they prosper!"

"The humans, yes, but what about djinn? How do your kind fare in this new world?"

"And whose fault is that? Who was the one who gave them a reason to fear us?"

"They should fear us!"

"No," a third, welcomed, voice broke into the conversation. "You should fear us!" Aileen called out.

A searing pain flared through Ren's shoulder. He looked back to see the hilt of a dagger protruding from his flesh. He moaned, as the pain seeped into his body, causing his nerves to spasm and jar against each other.

This must be what burning feels like he mused darkly, descending into blackness as the pain overrode his mind.

A soothing, calm voice from somewhere within his conscience echoed out in answer, "*Do not worry, my radiant Ren, I will aid you from here on.*"

"*Salamander?*"

"*Yes, my radiance.*"

A rib popped as Raiju squeezed harder.

"*Let me out. Let me help you,*" the voice was sweet, feminine, and made Ren want to cry.

"*Yes, cry. Scream. Roar. Let me out.*"

Ren did as instructed, parting his lips. He took a deep breath, ignoring the pain that went stabbing along his lungs. Pushing with all the force he could muster, he let loose a bellow of feral rage.

Bronson found Aileen hiding in the bushes. As he and Ren had run past, she grabbed at his leg and toppled the large man. He helped her out from under the foliage, noting that she was bleeding profusely from a gash along her arm.

"The arm I can cope with." She grimaced, as he hoisted her up over his shoulder. "The leg... not so much."

In her hand was a bloodied dagger, the short blade no longer than her littlest finger. She hooked her arm around his neck, taking care not to drop the knife that she held in her hand.

Bronson looked down, screwing up his face at the sight of the bone that jutted out of the young girl's flesh.

"My blood..." Bronson started.

"Is still in my system," Aileen reminded him. "It won't help me anymore than it already is."

"Then we need to get you to that ambulance..." Before he had time to finish talking, one of the police cars took flight, sailing through the air and went crashing into the paramedics' vehicle. "Or not..."

"Bronson, I'll live," Aileen snapped, biting back the pain. "At least I will if she dies and doesn't kill us all." She flashed the dagger at him. "I jabbed her with it before she bested me. I smeared her blood on my wound, it wasn't much but it's already healing."

"Good," Bronson nodded. "Then you wait here, and I'll go help Ren."

He started to lower her to the floor when a fantastic explosion of imperceptible energy crashed into them. Bronson fell backwards, twisting Aileen's body so she landed on him with her back and not her damaged limbs.

"What the fuck?" he demanded, scrambling out from under the djinnyah and rising to his feet.

Aileen rolled up onto her good arm. "Raiju and Carlote's tether just broke! The genie is out of its lamp!"

True to her words, an azure, stoat-like creature manifested from a cloud of smoke in front of them. Its pearl-like eyes fixed Ren with a venomous stare and

it swiped at the kid with enough force to knock a bus across twenty lanes of traffic.

“Reeeeennnn!” Bronson roared, rushing forward to protect the fiery kid.

“Wait!” Aileen called. “I can help!”

“Quickly!” Bronson urged, stopping mid-run.

“All I need is some of Elson’s blood, and Sylphid will be set free.”

Bronson glanced down at his bare, translucent foot. The gore was gone, lost while trampling through the mansion and out into the yard.

“Tell me you had enough sense to take some blood from him while he was still alive?” Aileen’s eyes widened with disbelief.

“Ren... sort of fried him,” Bronson speedily explained. “But he’s got Elson’s blood in his system.”

Aileen sighed with relief. “And I’ve got some of Carlote’s blood left on the penknife.”

Bronson glanced worriedly over to Ren, who was now in Raiju’s grip, his fire diminished.

“I’ll throw it, you direct it.” Bronson said, picking her up off the floor and taking the knife from her hand.

“You’re going to have to be fairly accurate,” Aileen warned.

“And you’re going to have to nudge his fire out of the way. Only other djinn abilities seem to be able to penetrate his flames. If a bullet can’t do it, then a thrown dagger has got no chance.”

“No pressure,” she grumbled, holding her good arm out in front of her, readily.

Bronson drew back his arm then flung it forth, releasing his hold on the blade as his arm reached the full velocity of its movement. The small knife twisted toward the little man in the primal’s hand, guided by Aileen’s wind. As it approached its target, Aileen opened out her fingers, and a gap in Ren’s flame expanded around the djinni, exposing its fleshy core.

The dagger embedded itself in Ren’s shoulder blade, and he cast an infuriated look behind.

“Come on,” Aileen willed. “Work!”

Bronson's lungs thrashed against his ribcage as he stared at Ren in the monster's clutches. At that exact moment he knew, without doubt, that if Ren were to die, he'd be broken beyond repair. He knew that the kid he'd found at the harbor no more than two weeks prior, had stolen a part of him.

He was falling in love with Ren Lampard, if he hadn't already.

Snap!

A second burst of energy sent shock waves across the yard. It caused the primal to drop the djinni boy in its hands. As Bronson toppled backward, he heard Ren scream, the sound unnatural and deep. From his mouth, a jet of gilded, sparkling smoke shot out into the air. It twisted inward, back towards itself, gathering its parts together.

"Salamander," Aileen breathed excitedly.

As the smoke's density increased, Bronson could see molten flesh taking form. As with the primal before, fur, the color of gold, pressed its way into existence. It covered the elemental Lord, which stood on four legs, its feathery tail swishing in a feline manner. Salamander's head, now fully formed, resembled that of a lynx, with two large, ruby tufts of hair sticking up from its pointed ears. Across its forelegs was a long, crimson and amber plumage, which created two large wings out of the elemental Lord's front appendages. The feathers travelled along the primal's slender back and fanned out along its tail.

It glowered at the other giant being before it, narrowing its jade, cat-like eyes.

"You dare harm my radiance?" it hissed, standing over Ren protectively.

"We dare harm that lamp!" Raiju bared its teeth. "We dare kill it!"

Salamander lunged forward, claws out in front, ripping into Raiju's shoulder. Silvery clouds sprayed from the wound, drifting away into the morning sky. The rodent-like primal yelped in protest, then sank its teeth into its rival's leg. It buzzed with energy as bolts of lightning danced away from its form, causing its fur to stand on end. Salamander growled and pushed the two of them into a roll, away from the mansion and towards what little of the police force hadn't fled from their post.

Seizing the opportunity, Bronson sprinted towards Ren who was slowly crawling backwards, away from the wrestling titans.

“Ren, oh God, Ren!” Bronson chastised as he sank down beside the kid. “What the fuck were you thinking, running off alone?”

Ren glowered at the older man. “You stabbed me with a knife! I think that merits forgiveness for anything I did prior to that! In fact I think...”

The rest of his sentence was lost to Bronson’s kiss. The officer placed his rough, trembling lips on Ren’s face. The fiery djinni kissed back, before reluctantly pushing away.

“We have to get clear of here, it’s not safe.” Ren winced, shrugging his shoulder uncomfortably.

“We can’t,” Aileen interjected, hobbling toward the men. The bone in her leg had reassumed its rightful position, but the gash along her flesh was still open. “We need to ensure that Raiju dies, and if we can’t kill him then we have to kill Carlote.”

“Where is she?” Bronson asked, casting his amethyst eyes about.

A squeal of pain emanated from the two primals as Raiju kicked viciously at Salamander’s underbelly. The golden lynx had the weasel pinned to the ground, a clawed paw digging into the rodent’s neck. Raiju wrapped its ape-like fingers around the feline’s throat and clamped on, again lashing out with its hind legs. Salamander relinquished its pin and tried to reposition itself above its prey, away from its scraping feet. Raiju didn’t give it the opportunity. The moment the giant feathered cat shifted its weight, the twisting rodent pounced up off the ground. It rammed its forehead into Salamander’s muzzle, ethereal smoke splattering from the wound. The feline yowled and shook its head, backing rapidly away. Raiju stood, hunching its shoulders, readying an attack. Something about the weasel’s feet exploded, and a thick black smoke rose from the ground. Raiju hissed at the rising cloud. Then it happened again and again. The primal spied the line of police cars, noting that they were throwing grenades at him, laced with finely powdered salt.

“Do you insects never learn new tricks?” it spat across the yard.

Raiju turned from Salamander and the wall of smoke that separated them, scanning the yard for his lamp. Carlote was slouched beneath the merman fountain, her back to the stone circle, ragged gasps of air animating her form. The lightning elemental darted towards its fallen ally, crushing trees underfoot as it ran. Salamander followed, its furious eyes full of wickedness. Reaching the fountain, the rodent bent to claim its prize, retreat clearly its intent. A

monstrous gust of sandy wind assaulted the primal, forcing it to squint and clasp its humanoid fingers about its face. Aileen crouched below the wall, on the opposite side of the fountain. From her outstretched arms, a gale of spinning air bolstered forward with the speed of a hurricane. The whirlwind ripped pieces from the masonry of the fountain, hurling chunks of brick at the War Weasel. Bronson, who had climbed up behind the massive merman, gripped at the sodden statue for fear of being yanked from its frame. Salamander pounced, digging its claws into the forearms of its victim, leaving Raiju wide open. Bronson seized the moment, pulling his clenched fist back, testing his new-found power to its limit. He punched the golden trident in Neptune's hand, and it took off like a rocket. The force of the blow echoed out across the yard, filtering into the forest at its edge. The trident flew forward, slamming into Raiju's face, piercing the Lord of Lightning's eye.

The weasel didn't scream, it didn't call out, it didn't make a sound. It convulsed twice in Salamander's strong grip and then burst into a cloud of shimmering silver. The twinkling mist spread out, dissolving in the cool rays of sun. Shimmering energy from the deceased primal congealed, hovering in the air before darting off to search for a new conduit, which would birth a new Lord of Lightning. The golden trident fell to the floor, clattering as it landed. The hilt of the weapon pointed towards the haggard woman, who sat unmoving against the shattered wall. Water sprayed thinly from the broken brick, casting a rainbow of colors about her body. Aileen limped around to the front of the fountain and nudged the crone's leg with her boot.

Dead.

"Is it over?" Ren asked from his position under the merman's tail.

"Yes," Aileen sighed deeply, relief lightening her face.

"It will be when we're away from here," Bronson said, crawling down what remained of the wet sculpture. "Look." He nodded his head towards the police who were peeping from behind the three remaining squad cars.

A familiar voice sounded out over a megaphone. "Djinn, the national guard will be arriving shortly! Call off your primal; we do not want further bloodshed!"

"Shaw," Bronson chuckled. "Ballsy little boss."

Aileen cupped her hands to her mouth, projecting her voice with her djinniah powers. "Nor do we! But those we fought would have had your streets running in rivers of it. We came to put them to rest. We are not your enemy!"

“Then will you prove it, and allow us to take you into custody?”

Aileen snorted. “Not very likely,” she said quietly to the djinn at her side.

Salamander crouched, its muzzle close to Ren. “I will hold them at their place, my radiance. When you are safely away, I will return to you.”

“Don’t hurt them,” Ren said, stroking the fur around its nose.

“As you wish.”

“Come on,” Bronson urged. “Your primal won’t put Shaw off for long. I imagine she’d take it one-on-one in a fight.”

“I have a name, lamp of earth,” Salamander stated, swishing its tail.

“Sorry,” Bronson grinned. “Salamander. Just don’t frighten them too much. Some of them are my friends.”

“I do as my radiant one commands,” the Lord of Fire purred, sitting down.

With that the three djinn ran for the forest and to the waterway through which they entered during the shadow of early morning.

Epilogue

Snow littered the ground, the winter's first dusting, sheeting all in glimmering white. Ren stood in his black T-shirt, which was getting a little too tight for him to wear, watching the sea gulls bob on the ocean. If Bronson kept feeding him the way he was, he'd be as big as Salamander before Christmas arrived. As if summoned by the mere thought, the ex-police officer emerged from the door of S.S. Shipments.

"You ready?" Ren asked, eager to return to Bronson's apartment.

"Yeah," the older man replied, dithering in his thick duffle coat.

"You know if you just gem up, the cold wouldn't bother you..."

"I know, but I don't like the weird looks we get off the neighbors when I do that. You know how tetchy they've been since Raiju and Salamander ended up all over the news. They're more afraid of us now than ever."

"They are not to be blamed," the primal spoke in his mind, *"I did look magnificently ferocious, did I not?"*

"You are magnificent," Ren smiled, then spoke to his partner, "That is why you joined the paragons. You and Aileen... between the two of you, you will move mountains."

Bronson sniggered. "You know, I bet I physically could move a mountain."

"I've no doubt," the kid chuckled, walking off into the snow.

"What's the hurry anyway?"

Ren stopped and looked over his shoulder. "You just bet me you could make the earth move. And I've decided, today is my birthday, so you've got to do that thing you promised to do!"

"At what point in time did you decide today was your birthday? Not that I'm arguing of course."

"The day they found me in St. Darren's was the day of the first winter snow. Since no one can say for sure when exactly I was born, I've decided that my birthday is going to be on the day it snows for the first time each winter."

"Erm.. What happens if it doesn't snow?"

"Then my birthday will be on New Year's Eve... why do you always overthink everything?"

“Force of habit,” he chirped, swiftly catching up to his lover. “So no more terrible teens? Although, I do feel bad for not getting you a present.”

“Theo,” Ren purred, as the tall man wrapped his bulky arm around his shoulder. “you’ve given me all I’ve ever wanted and more.”

“Except for that thing...”

“Except for that thing,” Ren grinned.

“Are you sure you want to try it at the apartment? I’ll be surprised if you manage to not go nuclear, and we can’t afford to buy another bed.”

“Yes, it’s such a shame we don’t have the necessary components to make our own gold. Imagine how much easier life would be...”

“You know how I feel about that,” Bronson growled playfully into Ren’s ear.

“Argh!” Ren slouched mockingly. “You suck the fun out of everything!”

“Well if you don’t want me to suck...”

“No! Forget I said anything,” he said, picking up the pace.

They walked briskly out of the harbor, huddled together.

A singular, contented entity.

Tied together by bonds of blood.

An unguarded, undeniable, and most unlikely love.

The End

Author Bio

When I write, I aspire to create a light-hearted, yet immersive experience for my readers. I try to incorporate a lot of what I like into my stories, in the hope that you, the reader, will enjoy it too.

I'm an eager writer from Nottinghamshire, or at least I'd like to be (I'm still working on it). I'm the oldest of four, rather eccentric siblings, whom I love dearly. Throughout my childhood, our bedtime ritual usually ended with our dad or mum reading us a story from our Ladybird Book Collection. Our favorites were the Puddle Lane series and from them stemmed our obsession with all things magical and supernatural.

From a very young age, I've read fantasy and horror stories, marveling at the words artfully adorning the pages. My first love affair was with a book written by L. J. Smith. Her Night World series blew my turbulent teenage mind away and I couldn't read enough of her work. Following on from that, I've fallen in love with many other authors including, Anne Rice, James Clemens and Trudi Canavan. I find their writing to be both inspiring and enthralling.

I'm also a massive geek and will happily spend hours playing on RPG console games. Some of the most content moments in my life have involved me being tucked away in my bedroom, with a bar of Dairy Milk Chocolate in one hand and my Playstation pad in the other. I've lost hours without end to the likes of Final Fantasy, Suikoden, Zelda, The Secret of Mana and Breath of Fire. These story-driven RPGs have had such a profound effect on my creative psyche that I'd rate the creators of these influential computer games on par with some of the world's current leading authors.

I've always wanted to publish my own stories but I've been too chicken to try. Eventually a great friend told me, 'Don't be a maybe-er, the maybe-er's only aspiration is to grow up and become a what-if. Get your story out there, grow a pair.'

On my thirty-second birthday (in January 2014) I took her advice and decided to self-publish.

I truly hope you enjoy my work and that, if only to a small degree, I can inspire you in the same way my favorite authors inspired me.

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