

Loving Djinni

The cover art depicts a scene in a library. A man with short brown hair, wearing a white turtleneck sweater over a plaid shirt, sits in a white armchair with a wooden base, reading an open book. He is looking up at a man standing over him. The standing man, the djinni, has dark, wavy hair and is wearing a red sleeveless vest over a blue long-sleeved shirt and blue trousers. He has a gold armband on his right arm and a necklace. He is leaning forward, looking down at the man reading. In the foreground, a glowing golden djinni lamp sits on a white surface. The background shows a bookshelf filled with books and a window with a view of a city.

25-page
reading
sample!

BERYLL & OSIRIS BRACKHAUS

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Loving Djinni

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CHAPTER ONE

“No! For fuck's sake! No!”

David dropped his clipboard and rushed to block the guy with the angle grinder.

“You are not cutting apart this mural! This is a two-thousand year old Ptolemaic fresco! The inox lacquer isn't even dry yet. What are you thinking?”

He was facing a short, swarthy Arab worker in dust-covered jeans and T-shirt who looked at David with a blank, mildly bored expression, noisily chewing his gum. The heavy-duty angle grinder in his hands was just as swarthy and grimy as its owner, but its diamond cutting blade was sparkling new.

“Don't you have something else to do?” David gestured at the rest of the tomb and the milling workers. “We still need to catalogue tons of small items, and I am sure the wrapping crew will be grateful for every assistance.”

For a second, it seemed as if the worker considered just shouldering David aside. But then he set down his tool and yelled something in Arabic. David could only make out the name of the foreman, Mustafa, and something like ‘idiot’, ‘obstinate’ and ‘cut his balls off’. He must have understood that wrong, surely.

Why on earth did Egyptian Arabic have to be so different from classic Arabic? David had been so sure being fluent in Classical Arabic would allow him to wing his way through Modern Egyptian. But it had proven a lot more difficult than that, like most things on this entirely ill-conceived adventure.

Mustafa appeared from somewhere deeper inside the tomb, looked at David and the worker and rolled his little black eyes. He was a lot cleaner than his men, but just as swarthy, with a rakish neckerchief tucked into the collar of his shirt to keep the dust out.

“What is problem?” His English was heavily accented, but at least he spoke something other than modern Egyptian.

David pointed at the mural behind him. It depicted two women tending to a flower garden, an exquisitely beautiful and life-like piece.

"You can't have the men cut apart the walls yet. The protective lacquer isn't dry yet, if you cut them now, the damage could be catastrophic."

"Catastrophic?" Mustafa poked at the wall with his dirty fingers, feeling along to check if the lacquer they had generously sprayed on first-thing was still sticky. "What is most bad that can happen?"

"Apart from you leaving fingerprints on the priceless murals of a Ptolemaic tomb?" David almost yelled with indignation. But throwing a hissy fit wouldn't save the artwork, only convincing Mustafa would. "If you take an angle grinder to the walls now, the seams will frazzle. You might lose up to half an additional inch of artwork. And when taking them down, you might even crack an entire panel. You can't risk that!"

Thoughtfully, Mustafa wiped his hand across the wall once more, forcing David to swallow a pained wince.

"I say is dry enough." Mustafa nodded towards the worker. "We cut now."

"No!" Desperate, David stepped in front of the wall, his arms spread wide. "I will not allow that!"

Mustafa froze for a second, then grabbed David by the arm and pulled him away with such force that he stumbled. The sudden outburst of violence caught David completely by surprise, and he struggled to get back on his feet.

"What the fuck, Mustafa? I thought we were thieves, not vandals!" He turned around, only to find the foreman weighing a solid two-by-four in his hands like a club.

The grim, determined expression of his foreman made it quite clear what he was about to do.

"You talk, talk, talk. So much trouble. We find other buyer."

As he raised his makeshift club, David had the shred of common sense to turn around and run. But he didn't get far.

The two-by-four hit him square in the back and made his knees go out from under him. The second strike hit him in the back of the head.

The last thing he remembered was the sound of a diesel-powered angle grinder starting up.

David woke at the rumbling sound of several tons of shifting sand and gravel. Dust and small stones were raining down on him, shaken loose from the ceiling.

For a heartbeat, he was filled with outrage. Ancient sites like this were meant to be treated with reverence and care, he thought. What the hell were those ham-fisted thugs doing now?!

Mustafa had clubbed him down, he suddenly remembered. The very same man he had hired to help him excavate this site.

The sound of shifting sand repeated, only more muffled this time. The air was stifling, filled with dust and diesel exhaust. But apart from the ever-softening sound of shifting sand, it was quiet. Way too quiet.

They were resealing the tomb! Those fucking bastards were burying the tomb with the same excavator they had used to unearth it mere hours ago, sealing it with him still inside.

David sat up in the total darkness that surrounded him and tried to get back his senses. The dusty air made him cough and his head complained about the sudden motion with a searing bolt of pain. He found a blood-encrusted lump at the base of his head. How long had he been knocked out? Quite a while apparently, if they were already done looting the place and resealing it. Why hadn't they just shot him? Then again, maybe that was against their honor. Or maybe they thought it was funny.

Fuck!

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

This was the 21st century! People were not supposed to be buried alive in Egyptian graves anymore!

Well, people were not supposed to loot them anymore, either.

For a moment, he considered banging his head against something hard, but his head hurt enough already. What on earth had he been thinking to enter into a deal with some shady-looking Arab 'businessmen'? Granted, they had seemed trustworthy enough to excavate and clean out a previously unknown Ptolemaic tomb somewhere in the Egyptian desert north of Port Said. For a semi-legal arts dealer like him, that had seemed good enough. And it wasn't as if he had many options from which to choose. Or much experience in this regard. But this tomb had sounded almost too good to be true. Nothing too important, no gilded royalty, but good enough to be worth something. Real antiques of this period were rare enough – made legal by his papers, they would have been worth millions.

Fuck!

Blinking helplessly into the darkness, David decided he had to do something. He couldn't just sit there and wait until he died of dehydration or asphyxiation. First, he needed light. When he'd entered the tomb, he had been carrying a small LED flashlight. A quick search of his pockets made him sigh in relief. He still had it.

Switching on the tiny device, David scanned the room, hoping that he would be able to find something useful. But Mustafa and his men had done a thorough job. He began a quick search of the other chambers of the tomb. They had taken everything but the dust. He really had been unconscious for long while.

He shouldn't have been surprised, though, David told himself. He was so far out of his comfort zone that the outcome should have been clear the moment he had boarded the plane to Cairo. He hadn't come here for the treasures, or the thrill of an easy art theft, at least not primarily so. Despite his slightly criminal leanings, he had always played it as safe as possible. He was used to sitting between books and easels. He worked from home, preferably in his pajamas, and it had always turned out well for him. No, the reason he had taken such stupid risks had a name and a handsome, smirking face.

Stanley's face.

The tall spectre of his ex rose in his mind's eye, telling him how boring he was, that he never took any risks, that he was a pathetic nerd and nothing like a real, red-blooded man like Stanley. That he was just a mousy historian and no match for him.

So when Luigi, David's main contact for questionable finds in Northern Africa, had called and mentioned this new, illegal dig site, he had hopped on the first plane to Egypt. Luigi didn't even have to resort to his oily charms to convince him, and had been mildly miffed because of it. But he just had to check out this site for himself. His life was adventure-filled, and dangerous and exciting even if Stanley didn't see it. So maybe by going to Egypt and getting his hands dirty, David could make him see. Make him understand.

Make him come back.

On his way from Cairo to Port Said, David had even bought a ridiculous brown fedora that he thought made him look like Indiana Jones.

The hat was missing, now, he noticed in silent defeat. Maybe Mustafa had taken a liking to it. David realized his smartphone was missing as well. Not that he would have had any service here in the desert, buried under tons of sand and rock, but maybe rescue crews could have located it. If there were any rescue crews.

Probably not. David had taken great care to make sure no one knew where he was going.

Oh, he had pictured it all – how he would return to New York City with his haul of priceless, unrecorded antiques, how he would meet Stanley at one of those classy, informal sales parties where people talked in hushed tones no louder than the tinkle of the ice-cubes in their glasses, how he would casually drop some hints on how he had acquired his new merchandise. How Stanley would be so impressed. How Stanley would see that he wasn't boring after all. How their eyes would meet for a long, long moment before Stanley would smile and ask David if they could hook up again.

In his fantasy, he had declined haughtily, but who was he kidding? Of course he would have fallen all over himself to be with Stanley again.

He was so fucking pathetic.

And everything had looked so good in the beginning. Yes, he had taken a gamble with this tomb, by coming here in person, by hooking up with Mustafa and his shady crew. But the moment he had stepped inside, he had known that he had hit the motherlode. He was pretty sure it was a tomb of some middle-class official of the Ptolemaic dynasty, roughly from the beginning of the Common Era. It didn't hold any particular riches, but that wasn't what he had been after anyway.

His business was art, of any kind, of any age. Preferably old, unknown and cheaply acquired. He would be able to forge the papers that turned them into cheap contemporary copies for the customs officials and then other papers to make them legal again, ready for resale at stupendous prices. The content of this tomb would have been perfect – nice enough to bring in money, not so flashy as to draw too much attention. It would have made him a fortune.

Instead, he was now stuck under tons of sand in the middle of nowhere.

On his search for something useful, David reached the entrance room. Sand and gravel had spilled through the broken door and filled half the room. He couldn't hear any more sounds from the workers outside. He was well and truly sealed in.

Thoughtfully, David stared at the wall of sand in the small cone of light in front of him. Merely looking at all the dust in the air made him cough again.

Great, probably he would choke on some kind of toxic spores before he found out whether the oxygen would last long enough for him to die of thirst.

How could he have been so stupid not to see that he was the entirely expendable part of their plan? Once he had checked the tomb and declared it was the genuine article, they didn't need him anymore. When he started annoying them more than his expertise was worth, he had sealed his own fate.

Continuing his tour, David noted what a truly comprehensive job they had done of stripping the place of any valuables. All murals had been professionally dismantled, cut into portable slices and hauled off site. Despite his concerns, it looked as though they had managed to do so without any major losses. In the chamber with the flower garden mural, the diesel exhaust was still strong enough to cause another coughing fit.

Fuck.

The tomb had been build when Egypt had already been a Roman province under the last line of Pharaohs. Untouched graves of that period were rare, and even though it wasn't a royal tomb, David would have given his left arm for the chance to study it. There was so much they could learn about that period from a complete set of burial offerings. And if he managed to find out who had been buried here all those years ago, it would tie all that together. The find of the century. Even all the money he could have earned would mostly have been a nice side benefit to him.

But there really was no point in lamenting the loss now, was there? He had thoroughly fucked this one up, and now he had much more pressing problems. Like how to survive the next few days. And get out of this very thoroughly sealed tomb. And then back to civilization. Through the unforgiving desert. On foot. With no provisions or water.

Why was he still lying to himself? There was pretty much no chance he was going to get out of this alive.

David's flashlight began to flicker.

Great, just great. So he wouldn't even see anything when he died. Fucking cheap piece of shit.

In the dying light of his lamp, he noticed a dark heap in one of the corners. Probably the remnants of one of the chests that had not survived the centuries, filled with rotted cloth or parchment. Carelessly turning over the mouldy remnants, he mused about what on Earth he thought he could find in this garbage pile that would be of any use to him. But then, his foot turned over some dark, crumbling layers of dirt and revealed a dull metal gleam.

Intrigued, he crouched down, brushed away the dust and then blinked in surprise. It was an old-fashioned, brass oil lamp, probably Middle Eastern, and from around 1,000 BCE, judging by its ornaments and archaic Hebrew decoration. That thing had been a thousand years old already when it had been buried in this tomb! For a moment, David wondered if it would take another thousand years for someone else to stumble across his corpse.

But considering the fading light of his torch, that oil lamp might prove a blessing. It felt heavy enough to contain some oil even after all this time. David quickly patted down his pockets again and found his lighter. Maybe he hadn't really thought this whole expedition through, but at least he had packed some useful things.

The wick stubbornly refused to catch fire. Probably too crusted over, too dirty.

He put down his pathetically flickering flashlight and tried to get rid of some of the ancient grime that encrusted the lamp's nozzle, trying to free the wick, using his jacket's sleeve to scrub off the worst.

When he heard the hissing sound, at first, he thought more sand was falling into the tomb, its structure weakened by the damage his traitorous collaborators had done to the walls.

But with the last light of his torch, David saw fine mist emerging from the lamp. It built up to a dense cloud, hovering in the air in front of him. What the fuck?

The mist coalesced into the shape of a square-jawed Roman legionnaire, roughly David's age, who stared at him grimly, his arms imperiously crossed over his chest. The batteries of in David's flashlight finally died and complete darkness engulfed him.

Great, David thought with a hysterical fit of the giggles.

Hallucinogenic spores!

He wasn't just going to die, he was going to go mad first.

Being stuck in a lamp was boring.

Being stuck in a lamp because somebody in the family had a bad sense of humour and didn't pick his enemies carefully was annoying. Playing pranks on humans was fine as long as you didn't pick one who happened to be the most powerful and most vengeful magician of his time.

Having your magic stripped away to a bare minimum by some bearded freak who thought he had some sort of divine mandate to rule the Earth was infuriating.

Being enslaved to grant wishes to any human getting hold of your lamp was degrading.

But being stuck in a lamp for Heaven knows how long with nothing happening whatsoever was beyond all that.

If djinn were able to die of boredom, Sharu would have died ages ago. Hell, if djinn were able to die at all, he would have killed himself!

Alas, that was no route of escape. So he had endured and paced the confines of his ugly little lamp endlessly. Not that there was much space to walk on with virtually no flat ground inside. Couldn't old beard-face Shlomo at least have stuck him inside a bottle so he could look out? At least then, Sharu would have known where he was. But no, bottles were reserved for female djinn. As if he really needed another reason to hate the bastard any more than he already did.

He was stuck inside his lamp as soon as he had granted the third and last wish of his latest master. No way to find out what happened to his master afterwards, no way to know what happened to his lamp. He could be part of a treasure hoard in some temple for all he knew! Or his lamp could be sitting at the bottom of the ocean, never to be found again.

Considering how incredibly stupid that last bitch who had owned his lamp had been, that last option wouldn't even be so improbable.

He had been forced to grant wishes to some of the most disgusting, vile, moronic mortals Humanity had to offer over the course of his cursed servitude, but that last one had been truly outstanding.

Sharu hated his mortal slavers.

He hated being stuck inside a lamp.

He hated....

And then, suddenly, the lamp was moved and for a single moment all he felt was an all-encompassing love for the finder.

That silly notion only lasted for a heartbeat, of course.

Sharu silently vowed that he would take bloody vengeance on the poor mortal fool who had stumbled across his lamp. After all, someone would have to suffer for what felt like an eternity locked up in the damned scrap of metal. That someone would surely make a wish that could be twisted into something horrible. Something horrible that would carry Sharu through whatever indignities would be heaped upon him next.

It only took a moment and there was a scratching and scrubbing of the lamp, and immediately the irresistible force of the curse called him outside. Being basically liquefied to pour out through the lamp's nozzle was always strange.

Sharu rose out of his lamp and stretched happily. What a wonderful feeling to be free at last! Well, sort of free at least. Rolling his shoulders, he worked out the kinks that always formed from walking hunched over around a low-ceiling lamp. Not that he actually was physically in there, but that's what it felt like to him.

There was a young man holding the lamp, gaping at him with the typical, slack-jawed expression that told Sharu his new master hadn't known it was a magic lamp he was holding. Just great. That usually meant a heap of inane questions on top of their particularly ludicrous wishes. Next thing, the light went out and they were left in pitch black darkness. At least to mortal eyes.

Sharu looked around curiously and noted that they were in some sort of underground room. Dusty, hot, empty. Apparently some sort of tomb, but scraped clean of everything remotely valuable. Had they actually buried his lamp with that bitch?

So his finder probably was some sort of grave robber. A shudder ran down Sharu's spine. He hated doing business with those. Mortals in general were annoying enough, but grave robbers usually managed to combine the all negative traits of humans in one person. They were ungrateful, unimaginative, greedy, filthy, leering ... well, no point in dwelling on it, he'd find out soon enough.

Time to get down to business. First thing with a new master – take on a shape that will please him. While the curse did not permit Sharu to actually look into the mind of his master, it very much still forced him to serve as well as he possibly could. Since the curse picked the look, taking on a new form didn't require any actual mind-reading and was thus not only possible, but expected of him. More often than not, it led to results that surprised Sharu. And usually, not in a pleasant way.

He changed, curiously studied himself and silently congratulated himself on being found by a master with at least a modicum of taste. His new body had dark bronze skin, lean limbs, dark, tousled hair and large dark brown eyes. Very healthy, Sharu noted, and muscled like a young athlete. He guessed he looked somewhere in his late teens. Very nice, all together. At least his new owner wasn't looking for a father figure, then. Sharu hated those arrangements.

As for clothing, he was wearing nothing but a pair of loose, blue pants that were tied around his hips with a cloth belt. Weird.

Next, he took a closer look at the new owner of his lamp. The man looked like an ordinary northern barbarian. Short blonde hair, blue eyes, average body. Could have been worse. His attire was strange, but then again, that much had to be expected. His new master was pretty far south for one of his kind. That was ... Sharu quickly cast out his senses and confirmed that he was still in what he had known as Egypt. Yes, pretty far south.

A painful burn on his lower arms reminded him that he was stalling.

Curse those damned bracers! They were the physical representation of the curse that crippled his existence. As much as he hated being stuck in a lamp, it was the bracers that he hated most. He hated them so passionately because they reminded him every second of how helpless his situation actually was.

So, better get the show on the road before he was really punished, Sharu decided with a forced smile. Maybe his new master would at least take the lamp somewhere interesting.

“What is your wish, Master?” Sharu intoned the time-honored question.

When his new master dropped the lamp in shock, Sharu smiled in genuine pleasure.

A smug voice spoke to David in an unintelligible language.

He almost screamed, but he managed to suppress that. He merely dropped the lamp and scrambled backwards, away from it. There was no one else in this tomb but him! There couldn't be!

Most definitely, there was no legionnaire materializing from a lamp.

Gods, he was going completely nuts, David thought. At least it would surely shorten his suffering. He tried to breathe evenly.

Once more, someone spoke.

David almost screamed again. He could have sworn the voice was speaking the most flawless Classical Egyptian he had ever heard. Not that he had ever actually heard someone speak Classical Egyptian. No person living today ever had. But this was what it must have sounded like, he was sure. It sounded so fucking real.

In a weak attempt to convince his rebelling senses that none of this was actually happening, David managed to fumble out his zippo again and light it with trembling fingers – only to stare into the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen on a young man.

Big, brown eyes in a classical face, politely smiling at him with a slightly mocking air. What little else David could see of his hallucination was just as handsome and even came with midnight blue pantaloons and intricately carved bronze bracers on his forearms.

This time, David screamed out loud, dropped his lighter and scrambled backwards until his back hit a wall.

Again, the voice spoke. This time, David had no chance but to clearly identify the language as Classical Latin, and that was a language he actually understood.

"What is your wish, Master?" the voice asked. And what a nice voice it was – sensual and manly.

David couldn't help but giggle hysterically, holding his aching head with both hands. Here he was, buried alive in a god-forsaken tomb, hallucinating about a cute male djinni with a sexy voice.

Gods, he was such a hormone-driven burn-out.

Wait a minute. Hadn't that pantaloon-wearing djinni looked like a Roman legionnaire when he had first emerged from that lamp? Apparently, his subconscious considered this hallucination a work in progress.

"I'm waiting, Master."

Again, the djinni spoke, the distinct impatience in his tone making him seem even more real.

Shaking his head, David came to the conclusion that if he was going to die here, mad as a hatter, he could at least try to treat his new imaginary friend more politely.

"You don't happen to speak English, by any chance?" he asked, surprised by the hollow sound of his own voice in the empty room. His spoken Latin wasn't up to snuff and since this was his hallucination, surely it would be accommodating.

For a long moment, there was no sound but the gentle settling of stones over the entrance and David almost hoped that reason had won out. Maybe he wasn't entirely raving mad.

"Of course I do, Master." This time, the sultry voice spoke flawless English. "What is your wish, Master?"

"Yes, dear illusion, isn't that the question?" David snickered with desperate humour. "What could I possibly wish for in this hopeless situation?"

"I'm no illusion, Master," the sexy voice corrected him. There was clear annoyance in the cute djinni's voice, making him even more believable.

Of course David refused to fall for that trick. The moment he accepted that there was an actual fucking djinni in here with him, granting him a wish, he'd be well and truly out of his mind.

"Sure, you are totally real."

He closed his eyes and rubbed them violently. That was no help at all since it was still pitch dark when he opened them again. His imagination supplied the look of disdain that surely had appeared on the djinni's face by now.

This was just madness.

"So what could I wish for, alone in this place except for you...," David mused, humouring his hallucination. There had to be a reason why his subconscious was providing him with this deliciously pretty boy. "Actually, are you into men?"

"If you wish so, Master." Now the djinni sounded as if he was smirking.

Once more David considered banging his head against some convenient hard surface. He wasn't just raving mad, he was also a hormone-driven wreck, fantasising about sexy and very available boy-djinn. He hated his life.

"Master?" his relentless hallucination prompted again.

And what if this was real? If there truly was a djinni in this tomb with him and he was only a wish away from getting out of this hopeless situation alive? His mental health was really in a very bad place if he was even considering this. But what did he have to lose?

He'd die here whether he tried or not.

"I want to be home, djinni," David stated with as much authority as he could muster. "I want to be back in my loft in New York City."

Yeah, he was definitely completely mad.

"Is that your wish, Master?" The djinn asked, annoyingly polite.

"Fucking yes! Is that too difficult for you?" David growled in the general direction of his hallucination.

"Of course not." The djinni actually huffed with indignation. "Your wish be granted, Master."

And then, all of a sudden, light flooded the place. His place. His airy Manhattan loft in bright midday sunlight. When David realised he was sitting on the large couch, pillows around him as if he had never left, he couldn't believe it.

He just blacked out.

CHAPTER TWO

Tsk. Too difficult. Who did he think he was talking to, some third-grade lemur?

Sharu looked down at his new master with equal parts condescension and curiosity. The man was lying on some sort of divan with a high back, obviously unconscious. For a northern barbarian, he really was a disappointing specimen. No bulging muscles, no exotic blue tattoos, no long, luscious hair in elaborate braids. Just some ordinary guy with boringly short hair and an average face. He wouldn't have fetched much on a slave market, Sharu decided. Farm work stock, maybe.

Also, outright hysterics and then fainting when your wish was granted – that was new. Sharu had seen a range of reactions from new masters, but this one was so strange he couldn't even say if he felt appalled or amused. What an odd man. Maybe the bad air in the tomb was to blame for his master's reaction.

Since his new master was in no state to utter further wishes or order him back inside the lamp, Sharu decided to have a look around. After all, he might very well get sent back into his prison as soon as the man woke up. So he'd better make the best of his brief freedom.

Not that there was very much he could actually do. Sharu snarled. That awful curse had reduced his magic to mere simple tricks, all his true potential locked away for the sole purpose of granting those three wishes. The curse also ensured he couldn't do anything to harm his master – apart from twisting the meaning of his wishes as far as possible, of course. But one didn't need magic to fool a human, really.

Sharu looked down at the mortal with unbridled loathing. The bastard had managed to phrase his first wish in a way that was pretty much impossible to turn into something horrible. Always the problem with the small, simple wishes.

However, the fool had wasted a full wish on getting back home. Surely it would be easy to coax him into a lot more stupid choices for his remaining two wishes.

Curiously he turned his attention to his surroundings and blinked. His new master didn't look like much, but he sure had one splendid home. The ceiling was as high as that of the greatest palaces he had seen and the room was large enough to hold a modest royal audience. It was filled with all the luxuries a king could wish for and then some Sharu didn't even recognize. Apparently, grave robbing had turned into a much more profitable business while he had been stuck in that accursed lamp.

The lamp was now sitting on a low table in front of his master. As so often before, Sharu felt the burning urge to kick it. Not that he could, of course. No touching of his own lamp. Sharu instead hissed at it angrily. How long had he been stuck in that thing anyway?

He started to wander around the hall – it could not really be called a room at that size – and looked at his master's belongings. There were many items Sharu couldn't make sense of at first – like the sculpture of a large, smooth rectangle that was prominently displayed in the sitting area. It took him a touch of magic to realize that he was looking at highly advanced technological devices. The various lamps that dotted the place were activated by something called 'electricity' and would give a bright light without any smoke or fire hazard. Amazing. Sharu spent an entire minute doing nothing but switch a tall lamp in the corner of the room on and off. There definitely was something to be said for being able to grasp the workings of any thing merely by looking at it for a while.

The device he liked best of all his master's stuff was the big cooling box at the rear of what had to be the kitchen. Sharu took out a bottle of brown liquid, hoping it would be alcoholic. It turned out to be sparkling and impossibly sweet, but he drank it anyway. Nothing like a cool drink after an eternity in a lamp.

Patting some imaginary dust off his silly wide pants, Sharu continued his survey of the place, only to end up standing in front of floor-to-ceiling windows.

It took him a moment to comprehend that they weren't just gaps in the wall but filled with impossibly large, clear glass sheets. Sharu took another sip of his drink and shook his head. Mortals were dumb beasts, but they sure managed to come up with the most amazing stuff given enough time.

The windows looked out over an abyss. Or what seemed to be an abyss at first glance. Looking far, far down Sharu realised his master's home was in a mind-bogglingly high building and far below was a street bustling with mortals. All the gods, they must have multiplied like rats!

Across the abyss – street – there was an even higher building and Sharu could make out more people walking about behind the windows of that tower. He let his senses sweep out a little and realised that this was a town made up of many of these high towers and countless smaller buildings.

It reminded him of the continuous debate over whether humanity posed a serious threat and should be eradicated altogether or only a mild annoyance and too amusing to kill off. Back then, he had been in the 'keep them around' camp. That had been before Shlomo and the curse, obviously. After he had been bound, he would gleefully have slaughtered every single one of the accursed monkeys, but he had never managed to cajole even his stupidest masters into wishing for the end of the world.

Judging from what he was seeing, now it was too late. If this city was an example of how far mortals had evolved, he doubted that, even unshackled, he would have been able to muster the magic to destroy them and still have a living Earth afterwards.

What was it his master had called this place? New York City? And why new? What had happened to the old one?

As if his thoughts of the man had woken him up, a low moan came from the divan. Sharu silently cursed him. He would have enjoyed having a look around a while longer. But duty called.

He went back to the mortal and watched as he slowly sat up, staring at Sharu with wonder and a good bit of appreciation.

"You are really real," he concluded, not very intelligently.

"Yes, Master."

How could a man with so many riches be so dense? Maybe he was some sort of useless prince who had inherited all of this without ever actually having to do anything. And just as the curse demanded, he added another time-honored question. "What is your second wish, Master?"

When David regained his senses this time, he first hoped that all of the last few days' events had been nothing but a very bad nightmare. Preferably including the messy breakup with Stanley. He really had to stop popping down everything some vague acquaintance handed him at a party just to feel like he belonged with the cool kids.

But then, after staring at his dirty shoes and his somewhat run-down off-white suit for a long moment, he realized that it was all true.

Mustafa, the tomb, being clubbed down with a two-by-four. And, of course, the djinni. The djinni had to be real, too. How else had he escaped the hopeless situation of being buried alive and gotten back to his very own loft?

Before David had had a chance to sufficiently gather his wits to feel prepared for another encounter with the wish-granting spirit, he appeared. Standing in the middle of the lounge, still wearing those ridiculous pantaloons and bronze bracers, his curly dark hair shiny as silk, a slightly sneering smirk on his perfect lips, and his arms crossed in front of his sculpted chest. Dear god, he was illegally sexy. Literally illegal since he looked like he was barely eighteen. David had welcomed his share of pretty boys in his apartment. But this one definitely topped every single conquest Stanley had ever brought home to share with David.

The only thing out of place on him was the soda bottle in his hand, which made the whole thing all the more credible.

The djinni looked slightly bored. Then again, this was probably just another work day for him. Grant a wish? Sure, no problem, dude.

"You're really real," David stuttered.

"Yes, Master." His sneer turned even more condescending. "What is your second wish, Master?"

"My second...."

David felt dumbfounded. The djinni was real. Just as real as the throbbing pain in his head. As real as the familiar, stylish but hard couch he was sitting on. If this was still a hallucination, his subconscious deserved an Oscar for set design. Was there even an Oscar for set design?

David valiantly fought down the urge to giggle hysterically.

"How did you do that?"

"How did I do what, Master?"

"Get us back here?"

"Magic, Master?" Now the djinni definitely was frowning as he took another sip of his coke.

Of course. Magic. How else would a djinni grant a wish? It was all so obvious and simple. And made no sense whatsoever. David opened his mouth to argue that magic wasn't real and then snapped it shut again.

Reality seemed to disagree with him.

Gods, he'd have to call Marcella to tell her that she would have to clean the place regularly again, now that he had returned so much sooner than he had expected to. He'd also have to get some fresh groceries. What did djinn eat anyway? Did they even eat?

"Fuck," he muttered.

"Master?" The djinni was still standing in front of the couch, idly nursing his bottle, looking as flawless as if he had just dropped out of some Arabian fashion magazine.

"Most of my luggage is still in Cairo. And it'll take some effort to get it back," David replied. "Really should have thought of that."

"Don't you look at me like that, Master." The djinni once again showed that fine sneer that made him look happy about David's misery. "I'm here to grant you three wishes, not to give you advice on how to spend them wisely."

It sounded like a phrase he had used many, many times already. Wasn't there some sort of Arabian fairy tale warning never to trust a djinni? There had to be a reason they were confined to bottles in the first place, after all. Or a lamp, in this case.

"You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?"

"Doing what, Master?" Apparently, faking innocence was not one of the djinni's strengths. He sounded outright gleeful.

"Trying to trick people into making stupid wishes," David grumbled. "And stop calling me Master."

It felt seriously weird to be addressed like that, like David was some sort of slave owner or BDSM dom, which he definitely wasn't.

"Is that a wish, Master?"

There it was again – that smug smile around his sensual lips that made him look almost venomous.

"No! For Heavens sake!"

Definitely not a nice djinni, David decided, no matter how cute he looked and no matter that he had already saved David's life.

The djinni just stared at him blankly, again folding his arms in front of his chest in the classical pose. Still, the coke bottle greatly detracted from the image he was probably aiming for. As did the fine trail of dark hair that started in the middle of his six-pack and disappeared into his pantaloons.

Exasperated, David threw up his arms. He left the couch, the lounge and the annoying djinni behind and instead went into his changing room. He had to get rid of the dusty clothes and he needed a long, hot shower. And maybe then he would be ready to come up with a plan on how to deal with this unexpected new flatmate of his.

He was definitely going to take his time on using his next two wishes more wisely than the first one. That meant he would be stuck with the djinni for a while.

His life had taken a sudden, radical turn to the adventurous. That was what he had set out to do, of course. He just hadn't expected anything as weird as this.

Now that was definitely a new low. Sharu could think back a long, long time, but never before had any master just turned his back on him and left. They had been arguing, asking stupid questions, asking intelligent questions, commands, ranting about life's cruelty in general and particular, trying to charm him into more wishes. But he'd definitely never been just 'left behind' like that, ignored without another glance.

It was humiliating in an entirely new way. Sharu silently fumed.

He could already see that this was one of those types who would consider his next wish carefully. And then probably would make it without thinking, out of the blue. Been there, done that.

It could take some time, though. Obviously, he'd be stuck with this complicated mortal for a while. Well, there certainly were worse places to be stuck. In a lamp for example. As long as his new master didn't explicitly order him back into the accursed thing, he was allowed to stay outside to his heart's content. Considering the advances the mortals had made in developing their civilisation and science, that seemed like the far more entertaining option.

Sharu sat down on his master's high-backed divan and turned on the ... TV ... television. While this new English the mortals now spoke was clearly a language with some roots in Latin, they had kept some Greek words as well. It was always a bit weird to pick up the names of things out of nowhere, but it sure was useful. He conjured a bottle of cool beer for himself – at least that much he was still allowed to do – grant himself some tiny little wishes – propped his feet up onto his master's low table and started to flip through the ... channels with genuine interest.

Mortals had always fascinated Sharu, even before old fuck-face Shlomo had banished him into a lamp. They were so short-lived and still managed to be so complicated in so little time. Back when they had only started out building settlements, he had spent decades watching them, playing a prank here or unexpectedly aiding them there, fascinated by their unpredictable reactions. At the time, he had considered them harmless entertainment. Maybe he had even liked them. They had been kind of adorable in their clumsy eagerness to conquer everything.

He would never have believed that, given enough time, they would do exactly that.

Now a million new things clamored for his attention in the various news programs, advertisements, movies, series and reality shows.

Still his thoughts kept returning to his new master. What would he wish for? Certainly not riches. Those he had lots of. Maybe a woman? He seemed to live alone in his vast apartment.

Then he remembered what his master had asked in that tomb. If he wished for a lover, it would be a male one. Well, he wouldn't be the first to heap that wish on him, the downside of the whole seduce-to-confuse approach. But then again, there had been uglier ones than him.

Where was he anyway? He had been gone for a while. Sharu turned his attention to his new master and noticed the sound of running water, accompanied by a feeling of deep relief. Whatever his master was doing, he was sure enjoying it.

Showering, Sharu's magical senses supplied. His master was standing under hot, running water, washing off the desert grime and feeling good.

Sharu sighed. A bath would have been really nice. He might be an immortal spirit and not as tightly bound to his physical form as mortals were, but his body was still a part of him. And it was literally ages ago that he had taken care of his body. It felt like dust had seeped into every pore.

Actually, why sit here and suffer when there was such a brilliant, mortal invention as a shower in easy reach?

Sharu rose and followed his master into the deeper reaches of his palace. Gold and marble seemed to have fallen out of fashion. Everything looked bright and clean and airy. There was so much light inside this place, both through the giant windows and from the countless electrical lights, that it felt more like a forest than a house. Several walls were covered by giant paintings depicting what appeared to be modern day heroes, the names of their greatest battles displayed in garish letters. No murals, though, only walls that were either covered in pale white plaster or showed the original red brickwork. Humans were such a startling race.

He found his master standing inside a glass cubicle with running water. The shower. It sure looked like it would feel awesome to have that much warm water rain down on you.

Through the curling steam, Sharu got a good look at his new master's body. Apart from the fact that he was a bit on the skinny side, he wasn't so bad. At least there were no scars, disfigurements or signs of sickness. And he was blond.

One of the few mortals he still had somewhat fond memories of had been a blonde barbarian slave. He had served the same master as Sharu and had strangled said master in a fit of rage, making sure the bastard didn't get a chance to utter any more wishes. Watching that man die had been a rare pleasure. Of course the barbarian had then immediately grabbed the lamp and in quick succession made all of his three wishes – truly moronic wishes involving wine, women and war. It hadn't ended well. Sharu still liked blonds.

His new master wasn't doing much with that exotic feature, but it was exotic nonetheless.

In his experience, humans liked being surprised by attractive djinn in their baths, considering it very sensual. They were a lot more malleable then. At least Sharu could be sure his new master found him attractive. The idea of climbing right into that shower with him sounded better and better. As did charming that second wish right out of the dumb mortal and getting a good hot shower in the process.

Soundlessly, Sharu made his pantaloons disappear, opened the door to the cubicle and stepped right in.

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