

**Dark Oasis**



JENNY SCHWARTZ

## Dark Oasis

• Perth

## Dark Oasis

# Contents

Foreword	1
1. Chapter One	3
2. Chapter Two	9
3. Chapter Three	17
4. Chapter Four	23
5. Chapter Five	29
6. Chapter Six	35
7. Chapter Seven	41
8. Epilogue	47
About the Author	49



# Foreword

If you enjoy “Dark Oasis” – unedited though it is – please consider reading my commercially published fiction. You’ll find the complete list and links at my website.

<http://authorjennyschwartz.com/>

Happy reading!



# 1. Chapter One

Alexa stretched out on a cloud and hummed the chorus from last night's performance of Elysian Stars. It was going to be a good day. One of her favorite charges was getting married. Kimi had earned her happiness, caring for elderly parents, and then, training as a teacher when they died.

After Kimi's wedding, Alexa decided she would pop down to Dubai. A certain hotel groundskeeper would, with a little more encouragement, administer a very salutary lesson to a spoiled princess. Alexa would have to contain the damage.

"Remember to turn the cameras off," she noted. "Maybe add hot chilies to the dinner menu?" If the princess's father was dealing with heartburn, he'd be less inclined to indulge his daughter's tantrums, especially if there was no evidence to support her claims of a spanking. After all, what groundskeeper (except the older brother of seven sisters) would dare to spank a princess? "That'll teach her."

Princess-details dealt with, Alexa considered personal plans. Dubai was awfully close to Oman, where she'd last seen Theron.

Anticipation sparkled through her veins. She could drop in on him. His crazy sense of humor would be a perfect end to the day.

She sat up and crossed her legs under her as the sun quit thinking about rising and simply burst over the horizon to blast the world in gold.

The cloud beneath her glimmered with the warm yellows and reds of new beginnings.

The emotion she felt was unexpected, but the more she thought of Theron's situation, the more she respected him. Cursed to serve humanity till freed by a human's wish, he'd found a way to survive with dignity and without bitterness.

"And he makes me laugh." He provoked and teased and... she missed him. He'd become a friend and since he wasn't free to visit her, she'd visit him.

Decision made, she leapt up—and forgot to retain her lightened corporeal form. Both feet tore through the cloud and she tumbled in disarray through the clear, cold upper atmosphere.

"Idiot." She concentrated and rematerialized in her chambers in heaven. A quick bath, then she'd pin up her blonde hair and work out the intricacies of the kimono she'd chosen for Kimi's wedding. Kimi wouldn't see her, but Alexa liked to make the effort. She had a tendency—according to the Guardian Council—to become too emotionally involved in her charges' lives.

"Phooey to them." She chose a cherry blossom soap and lathered up.

The blue kimono, with its intricately embroidered pattern of dragons, felt awkward when she put it on, but two hours later, when Kimi smiled at her new husband, Alexa forgot all about her own discomfort. "Bless you, sweetie. Be happy."

She left the wedding party celebrating and popped back to heaven to shed the kimono and shrug into her familiar, comfortable clothes: Raw silk shirt, tailored trousers, boots and her hair tied back in a ponytail.

"Just in time." She hitched herself onto a high concrete fence and contemplated the drama in the small courtyard garden. She checked quickly. Yup, the hose was prominently coiled, temptingly near the princess who was fast working herself into a state as Yusef ignored her and continued raking. "Four, three, two, one."

The princess squirted Yusef with the hose.

Alexa grinned and slammed a noise containment spell around the courtyard as Yusef spanked and the princess shrieked. The two of them

needed to learn that money and social class were less important than the indefinable rightness of being together.

To Alexa's surprise and satisfaction, the princess didn't run tattling to daddy. She glared at Yusef, muttered something about "I'll get you" and walked inside rubbing her bottom.

Yusef whistled and went back to raking.

Next year they would both get a surprise if things stayed on track. Yusef would have his PhD in History and he'd be the princess's tutor in her first year at university.

"Changes, changes." Life was forever changing. There was joy for the asking, if you had the courage to reach for it.

Alexa flew down to Oman. She concentrated, trying to find Theron, but he was a djinni. It wasn't like she could just call up his location on the angelic register. She scouted out from the market in northern Oman where she'd last seen him, and finally, tracked him to another market on the edge of the Empty Quarter Desert.

"Ugh." Her shudder wasn't for the desert. It had rules. Respect them and you lived.

No, the problem lay deeper in Dhofar, higher in the mountains, on the boundary of the Khareef, the local monsoon. The dark oasis was the one place she'd been defeated. It was owned by a dark mage, a clever, ruthless man whose only son was Alexa's charge.

"Sadiq." Alexa sighed. Thirty one years old and behaving like a tabloid journalist's notion of a playboy sheikh. He was on the Riviera at the moment, probably racing boats or cars or anything else that let him risk his life at high speed.

When the boy was born, it hadn't been too bad. Then Abbas, his father, was still learning what it meant to be a dark mage. The mage had rejected angelic guardianship for himself, but he hadn't warded his home against the angels. Alexa had visited to check on Sadiq. But as the years passed and Abbas grew confident both in his dark magic and in the control he wielded over the oasis that had been his wife's dowry, he set wards to keep angels from his home, from the town, and finally, from the whole oasis.

For Sadiq, escape from the blight came through his father's disinterest. When his mother died, he'd been sent to boarding school, and then, to

## 6 Dark Oasis

university. He only rarely and briefly visited the oasis. Still, Alexa would have given a lot to be able to accompany him into that hellhole. With each visit, she feared he'd not return.

"Enough." She shook off the memories. Dhofar was a pleasant region, cooler than the arid north of Oman, with fishing and agriculture and a friendly, melting pot of peoples. The African, and particularly, Zanzibarian influence was clear, as was the Indian. Theron would have fun amusing the locals.

She couldn't be bothered changing costume or disguising her blonde hair, so she stayed invisible to humans and simply walked into the market. The old suq smelled of frankincense. Dhofar had always been famous for the resin. Omanis used it to scent their clothes and burned it to keep away mosquitoes. They even drank the incense-infused water.

A goat, thoughtfully chewing someone's lost scarf, dropped it to maa-aa a panicked bleat before head-butting Alexa's knee in its panicked departure.

She rubbed the knee and looked around for an irate, scarfless man in hot pursuit. Instead, she saw Abbas.

"Out here?" She didn't believe it. The dark mage never left his stronghold. He had money and power enough that anything he wanted was brought to him. People included.

The stench of dark magic rolled towards her, dampening the crowd's happy chatter. They wouldn't smell it—the copper of blood and the hellish brimstone—but on an unconscious level it made them uncomfortable.

"Smart goat." Their sensitivity to evil was one of the reasons goats were so often sacrificed. Dark mages didn't like animals spooking the oblivious humans.

The strength of the dark magic stench suggested Abbas had increased his personal wards for this rare venture beyond his territory.

*Times like these, I regret the Guardian Council. A rain of fire on Abbas's unkempt head or a lightning strike would save the world a lot of—*

"Merde!"

Only one thing would be worth Abbas leaving his dark oasis. There was only one thing he wouldn't trust another to acquire for him: A djinni bottle.

*Theron, you idiot.* She pushed through the crowd, bumping and bruising people who couldn't see her and so gave their neighbors dirty looks.

She thought of all the attention Theron had drawn. The Omanis were natural storytellers. They would have told of the amazing conjuror and his djinni act. They'd have smoked their skinny cigarettes and embellished tales of his hilarious tricks.

Only Abbas, with his knowledge of magic and myth, would have believed the stories. If he'd studied the old legends he'd know of Solomon's curse and the power of the djinn. A dark mage in command of a djinni was a recipe for disaster. Look what had happened to the Hanging Gardens of Babylon—it was a wasteland, now.

She reached the center of the crowd and the small space where Theron performed. The bottle was there with the false smoke djinni billowing from it. Nearby sat the street mutt she'd seen before. It scratched an ear and looked bored—dogs were nowhere near as sensitive as goats to dark magic.

"Thunder and storms," she swore. Abbas was crossing the space and reaching for Theron's bottle. "Theron!"

She ran three steps and kicked at Abbas. Hitting his wards felt like slamming into a concrete barrier.

His hand closed convulsively on the bottle. He fumbled for the stopper beside it.

"Look after Mutt," Theron said beside her. "He likes cheese."

She reached for him, but Abbas pushed the stopper into the bottle and Theron vanished.

"Hey, mister, you can't take—" The boy's voice cut out as Abbas glared at him.

Belatedly aware of danger, the crowd backed away. Abbas was one of those anomalies smart people worked around. His hair and beard were grey and straggly, but his clothes were rich and elaborate. Rich men made their own rules.

Abbas walked to his car and the crowd parted for him.

"I can take him." The wards might protect him, but she could booby-trap the road. Or there was always a meteorite strike.

"No."

## 8 Dark Oasis

She glanced around and saw Michael, a senior member of the Guardian Council.

“We have rules for a reason,” he said.

“That bastard has Theron.”

“Rules, Alexa.” Michael vanished.

Rules, rules, rules. Free will, the laws of physics, non-interference. She knew why they existed. Humans had to command their own world, achieve salvation or damnation through their own choices.

And the worse the human, the more an angel had to follow the rules. Because if she bent them, then the balance in the universe meant demons could bend them, too.

“There are times I hate being a grown up.” The dog nudged her hand. She looked down at it. “You should have bitten Abbas.”

The dog yipped.

“Yeah. I expect he would have tasted bad. Come on.” The dog couldn’t accompany her to heaven, but then, she wasn’t going to heaven yet. Not till she had a plan for convincing the Guardian Council to let her take out Abbas. “We’re not leaving Theron with that bastard.”

## 2. Chapter Two

“No,” Michael said.

The other six members of the Guardian Council echoed him.

Alexa looked at the notes spread out before her, gathering her self control. She understood their point of view, but she didn't accept it. She would force them to see that Theron couldn't be left in Abbas's possession. As a djinni, his powers were simply too strong for a dark mage to be allowed to command them.

“Guardian Alexa, your petition is dismissed.”

“One nova strike,” she said. “It wouldn't even have to kill Abbas, just break the wards on his home long enough for me to extract Theron.”

“You are dismissed.” Michael stood.

Her training held. She clamped her mouth closed on furious words and picked up her papers. She nodded in the briefest display of respect and walked out.

Heaven was as peaceful and joyous as ever. From the opera forum came a glorious chorus of angelic voices. Sun shone on green spring grass starred with apple blossom petals.

She scowled at the useless papers in her arms and used a touch of magic to turn them into butterflies which whirled up in a rainbow cloud before vanishing.

And there went her plans for freeing Theron.

She'd known her petition for a nova strike would be a difficult sell. The prohibition against evil entering a home or soul without invitation was one of humanity's strongest protections. Breaching it in reverse—an angel invading a dark mage's home when he had specifically barred them—could provide a sliver of opportunity for a demon to trespass. And demons were swift at sniffing opportunity.

If she were fair, she'd admit the Guardian Council had no choice but to rule as they had. But she didn't want to be fair. Her guts twisted when she thought of Theron under Abbas's control.

She'd hurt whenever Sadiq had been lost to her within his father's wardings. But that loss was nothing to the cold fear—and anger—that raged within her at the thought of Theron losing his laughter, tortured and despairing, in service to a dark mage.

Worst of all was her own helplessness.

She returned to her chamber and shed the uniform of a guardian: The short tunic, high lacing sandals and sword belt that the Roman legions had copied from the angelic legion. Her wings vanished as she reached for her everyday clothes.

Dressed, she consulted the Angelic Record for which of her charges needed her.

"Sadiq." His name leapt out. "What have you done?" She translocated immediately.

Hospitals were familiar ground for guardian angels.

Sadiq lay in a pristinely white bed in a private room. His eyes were shut. Bandages covered his various scrapes and the chart at the end of his bed indicated severe bruising and two cracked ribs.

He'd survived this crash, but one day his recklessness would catch up with him.

"All I want is for you to be happy," she said. "To grow and love and realize all that potential you're squandering." Her fists clenched. "Abbas has ruined too many lives."

She remembered Sadiq at four, happy and loving.

Abbas really was a monster. He'd destroyed something in Sadiq, taken the heart out of him and left him a perpetual adolescent, chasing thrills.

Anger propelled her at a swift pace from wall to wall in the small room. “I tried to keep you safe.” But human free will and Abbas’s wards had stolen the child Sadiq from her. Each time he emerged from Abbas’s stronghold to return to school or university, there had been a near brittleness and an unhealthy recklessness in the young man.

“I can’t imagine how much damage Abbas will do now he commands Theron.” She kept bracing herself for news of atrocities. But it seemed the dark mage was still considering his options or planning an unimaginable destruction. “God, I’m so mad.” She paused at the foot of Sadiq’s bed and grasped the railing.

“I can see you,” he said.

She glanced up and saw his eyes were open. He seemed to be looking at her. But she checked and she was definitely invisible to humans. He had to be hallucinating.

“And hear you,” he added. He tried painfully to hitch himself up on his pillows. “What has Dad done, now?”

She blinked and walked across the room.

He continued to track her.

“You *can* see me.”

He smiled, then grimaced as the action split his cut lip. “I always could. Why do you think I prefer blondes?”

She shook her head, dumbfounded, and collapsed onto a visitor’s chair. “You shouldn’t be able to see me. No other human does.”

“Perhaps no other human has a dark mage for a father?”

That was possible. But... “Why haven’t you ever said anything or shown that you can see me?”

“I didn’t want to lose you.”

It was the stark desperation of the traumatized boy he’d been. She clasped his hand. “That will never happen.”

He looked at her hand, holding his. All the humor faded from his face. Pain-lightened skin stretched tight over the arrogant bone structure. “You’re there in all my good memories of childhood—oh not at school. I could cope there. But... at the oasis. I’d walk in there and I could feel the wards shut me in and you out. God, that’s loneliness. Scared. Powerless.” He took a deep breath, cutting off his words. “You were always there waiting

when I got out. Always. I'd see my golden angel and know everything was okay—that I still had my soul."

"Your soul? What the blue hades was your father doing?"

He squeezed her hand and released it. "He didn't use me in his magic, but the cold stink of it was everywhere... and the people... the villagers were my grandfather's traditional responsibility, my mother's father. Dad should have continued to look after them when he gained the oasis. Instead, they're like grey ghosts within the ward. No joy. No children born for seven years."

"It's worse than I thought." She slumped back in her chair. "No children." No new life and hope. *What are the Guardian Council thinking? Something must be done about Abbas and his dark magic.*

"What eats at me." Sadiq stared at the ceiling. "Is how pathetic I am. Those villagers are stuck. Dad doesn't let them out. But me, I'm free to come and go, and I'm always so bloody relieved to escape."

"That's natural. Dark magic is a perversion. You ought to be glad to leave it behind."

"Except I leave the people behind, too." He slammed his fist on the bed. "Ten years I've spent trying to outrun my cowardice."

*I should have realized. She sat up. The risks he takes are self-destructive, self-loathing. And I dismissed him as a playboy and forgave him because of his childhood. Idiot.*

"Sadiq, you're not responsible for your father's sins."

"Who was it that said that to do nothing in the face of evil is not a neutral act?"

"Edmund Burke. Evil triumphs when good men do nothing."

"He's right. Not that I'm saying I'm a good man." His mask of easy humor slid back into place. "So what's Dad done, now, and how can I help my angel kick his butt?"

"I shouldn't tell you."

He raised an eyebrow.

"It's not your problem."

"I thought I'd established that it is. Cough it up, darling. The full story."

"My name's Alexa."

"Alexa, darling, tell me who Theron is and why Dad commands him."

She studied the man in the bed and her professional and personal instincts reached the same conclusion: He needed to challenge his father. If he didn't, his sense of impotence would, as he'd said, eat him alive. But did she have the right to involve him in Theron's situation?

"If you're trying to keep me safe," he said quietly. "Some things are more important than safety."

"Yes, they are." And the courage and wisdom of that statement decided her. "Let me tell you about the djinn."

"You've heard of Adam and Eve, but Adam had a wife before her. Lilith was beautiful and wild. She was more than Adam could cope with and he repudiated her. In revenge (and perhaps because she was hurt and insecure), she went looking for men to sleep with."

"But if Adam was the first man." Sadiq screwed up his face. "She didn't—not with her sons."

"No. At that point she had no children. But there were demons."

"I think I see where this is going."

"Lilith had seventy seven children, all of whom were half human and half demon. They are the djinn. Like angels, they can take corporeal form." She indicated her own body. "Or exist as spirits, and they have power, some more than others."

"For a long time they used their power to amuse themselves. Unlike demons, the djinn haven't chosen damnation. Like humans, they have the potential for good or evil. Then Solomon got involved."

"King Solomon?"

"It wasn't one of his better moments. He wanted to demonstrate his own power. He summoned the djinn, calling them from the desert and mountains, from their homes and lives, and he bound them in seventy seven separate glass bottles. He cursed them to serve humanity until freed by a human's free wish."

She sighed. "To be fair to Solomon, he didn't expect humans to be as selfish as they proved."

"No one wished the djinn free?"

"There have been a couple of cases recently, but on the whole, having a djinni at your command for the count of three wishes is too much temptation for most people."

“So much for Solomon being wise. I could have told him power corrupts.”

“He discovered that for himself.” Alexa stood and paced the length of the room. “The djinn adjusted to their imprisonment in various ways. Some became bitter and vengeful. Some withdrew, hiding their bottles. Theron, my friend, tricked his way to a tied freedom. He can leave his bottle for as long as he’s entertaining humans. He travels Arabia pretending to be a conjuror. In the twenty first century, no one believes his magic is real.”

“Except Dad,” Sadiq said bitterly. “Of course he’d recognize power—and crave it.”

She nodded. “He stole Theron and his bottle five days ago.”

“How powerful is a djinni?”

“Theron is powerful enough to grow roses in Antarctica. Or less positively, create a new plague or plunge the world into darkness—all the latter would take are a few well-placed volcanoes.”

“And Dad has three wishes.”

“Yes.” She gripped the back of her chair and hastily released it when she heard the plastic crack. A smudge of magic restored it.

“A world in which Dad has unlimited power doesn’t bear thinking of.”

Nonetheless, there was silence for several minutes as they both contemplated it.

“I never studied dark magic,” he said finally. “But I noticed some patterns in the way Dad worked. There was a lot of blood.”

Alexa winced. “Sacrifice and suffering.”

“Hmm, but also his own blood.” Sadiq pushed back the light blanket and sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. “Particularly when he created his wards.”

“What are you doing?” She steadied him with a hand at his shoulder.

“I’m my father’s son. His blood runs in my veins. I should be able to crack his wards, enough at least for you to slip in. Then you can rescue your friend, the djinni.”

“Abbas will be furious.”

“So we’ll have to be fast.”

They stared at one another.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“It’s now or never.” His mouth twisted in a painful smile. “After all, I’m injured. What could be more natural than that I return to my father’s house to recuperate.”



### 3. Chapter Three

Alexa remembered the oasis thirty years ago, when Sadiq was born. Then it had been a green place of rejoicing. The villagers had smiled easily, stood straight and had the healthy look of people well fed, secure and hopeful for the future.

The date palms were still there and the water bubbled as sweetly from the spring, but the village had an air of sullenness. The clay houses huddled forlornly. Two more years of summer rains and they'd return to the dirt from which they'd sprung. Elsewhere in Oman they'd have long since been replaced with concrete houses, modern, stormproof and air-conditioned.

Only Abbas's house had changed for the better. Made of steel, glass and concrete, it loomed over the village and from the flat roof, commanded the view for miles around.

"The wards start a few meters from here," Sadiq said. "I can feel them."

"So can I." They gave Alexa the chills. Dark magic drew its power from death and suffering. Abbas had strengthened his wards with death. She switched off the SUV's engine and air conditioning.

She had translocated Sadiq and herself to Salalah and they'd driven from there. She didn't know what warnings Abbas had woven into the wards and she didn't want to trigger them by using her power anywhere near them—not until she was inside and able to free Theron.

Sadiq opened the passenger door. Hot air rushed in like an oven blast. Welcome to the desert. He moved gingerly, protecting his fractured ribs and bruising.

Alexa frowned. She'd wanted to heal him, but that was against Guardian Council rules, too. What Michael would say about involving Sadiq in—

She cut off that useless train of thought. She was committed, now, and so was Sadiq. He needed to act against his father.

Dirt crunched under her feet, the heat shimmering up as she walked around the car, all too conscious of the wards.

Sunglasses hid Sadiq's eyes, but his mouth was thin. Pain, determination, fear? She could only guess.

He drew the dagger he'd bought in Salalah from its sheath. Sunlight glinted off the sharp blade. "I don't know how long we'll have from me breaking the ward to Dad reacting."

"I'll be as quick as I can." The challenge was twofold: To find Theron and to escape with him and Sadiq before Abbas closed the wards and locked them in.

A human ward oughtn't to be able to hold an angel—but Abbas's wards had kept angels out for years.

She looked at the oasis. It could be a deadly trap. "Sadiq, when you've broken the ward, go back to the car and start driving out." He glanced at her. It wasn't what they'd agreed. "I'll catch up with you and translocate you from there."

"If Dad closes the ward, you'll need me to reopen it. I'm staying." He slashed his wrist.

The shallow cut oozed pearls of blood.

Sadiq stuck his wrist in the ward. "Open." The desert heat intensified as the raw power of the ward writhed. "Open for me and mine." He turned and smeared the blood on his dagger onto the back of Alexa's hand.

They walked through the invisible barrier. A wind that smelled as if it had blown across a charnel house wailed around them, and then they were through.

The ordinary dust dry scent and heat of the desert returned.

With no time to waste on walking, Alexa translocated herself and Sadiq to Abbas's house. If Sadiq insisted on staying, he'd be safest with her.

The heavy wooden door was shut, but not bolted. It opened when Sadiq pushed it. A puff of foul air suggested it, too, had been warded—and broke at his blood.

How many more traps lurked in the damned house?

Inside, the room was sparsely furnished: Cool tiled floors, white walls, carved wooden furniture. A reception room in a house where the host never entertained. There were no ornaments, no djinni bottle hidden in plain sight.

Sadiq didn't spare it a glance. His footsteps rang against the tiles as he strode through it, but neither Abbas nor servants appeared.

Beyond the reception room lay a smaller room, owning only high narrow windows and a second door.

"The antechamber to hell," Sadiq said.

Alexa pushed open the door.

She'd braced herself for the stench of black magic. Instead, cool air carried the scent of freshwater. Apparently, Abbas had diverted some of the spring to his private quarters.

She descended the circular stairs, her senses straining past the physical to anticipate any attack from Abbas and to detect the pulse of magic that was Theron's signature.

Light came from solar tubes, revealing an underground space of vaulted arches and shadowed corners. Water bubbled on the edge of hearing.

She started counting arches, remembering Sadiq's advice. He'd seldom ventured down here, but he thought Abbas kept his treasures in the seventh space, behind grills and locks, but hopefully, not behind yet more wards—or at least, not behind wards aimed at keeping out angels.

After the fourth arch, she encountered the spring. It bubbled into a low pool before draining away beneath the flagstones. She paused a moment because water not only cleansed, it hid. The spring could muffle the signature of Theron's power.

She dipped her hand in the water. It stung with the chill of its sunless depths, but there was no echo of Theron.

Sadiq, impatient, had gone on before her.

She wiped her hand on her trousers and hurried after him. The fifth alcove held dead bodies—stuffed animals. Light glinted off their glass eyeballs.

Yuk. Abbas was experimenting with animating the dead.

The sixth alcove was surprisingly cozy. A wide table served as a desk. A comfortable chair was positioned for reading beneath a solar tube. Books were stacked on steel shelves.

No hint of Theron, but from the next archway she could sense a muddled and powerful pulse of magics.

Abbas's treasure room.

She glanced up, just before she walked in and saw a grille that could lower from the roof. She shrugged. If Abbas caught her here, a physical barrier would be the least of her problems.

But Sadiq hesitated, too. His cut hand rested on the wall beside the arch. His other hand toyed with the hilt of his dagger.

She touched his arm in a silent command to wait there.

He jerked his head in agreement.

Abbas's "treasures" likely included some of the worst products of dark magic through the ages. Such objects could carry curses. Worse, they could be enchanted to whisper darkness into a person's soul or suck that very soul from them, killing them breath by breath, from heartbeat to heartbeat.

The shadows in the treasure room shifted, deepening, moving, despite the steady light from the solar tubes. A light switch by the archway showed it was also wired for electric light.

Alexa didn't flick the switch. The shadows weren't natural, and therefore, weren't something human science could dissipate. These were shadows of dark magic and her skin crawled that she'd have to walk among them.

*Theron, if you're in here...* She shuddered. *I won't leave you, here.*

The ward on the archway hadn't been set against angels. Clearly, Abbas trusted his outer wards. Or else, he knew no angel would willingly search out objects of dark magic.

The ward parted around her like sticky, greedy cobwebs. The stink of brimstone and rotting blood stirred in the heavy shadows.

Alexa walked three steps and stopped. Relief welled up. *There!* She could sense Theron's presence. Somewhere in this tangle of darkness there was a clean freshness, like a sea breeze on a summer's day. She caught the hope of it and simply followed, stepping warily around a bloodstained spear. The carved mask beside it grinned in imbecilic hate.

Horrid guardians. But beyond them, she caught the topaz glint of Theron's bottle. She took two quick steps and reached up to the high shelf. She expected a ward, pain, something. Instead, her hand closed triumphantly around the neck of the bottle. She settled back on her heels.

"Ah, Sadiq, you brought me a visitor." Abbas appeared from the shadows. They clung to him with the remnants of a cloaking spell. He addressed his son, but he looked at her. His eyes followed Theron's bottle which she hugged tightly. "An angelic visitor, if I judge the power accurately. How fortunate."

*His eyes followed the bottle.* Reluctantly, Alexa put Theron's bottle on a low table and backed away. Sure enough, Abbas looked at the bottle and then, unfocusedly, around the room. *He can't see me.*

Sadiq hadn't inherited his angel-seeing abilities from his father. Abbas sensed she was here, but he couldn't see her.

She returned to the bottle.

"I brought a dagger, too," Sadiq said.

Alexa spun to face him. "No." She hadn't come here to support patricide.

Abbas didn't move. "How else would you break my wards, blood of my blood? But the wards are up, now, and you won't find mere blood opens them again."

"Your blood will."

Abbas chuckled, low and evil, in the wild mass of his beard.

Sadiq swore and plunged through the archway. He rebounded, violently, landing on the floor. He dropped the dagger and hugged his ribs, groaning.

"Fortunately," Abbas said. "I am pleased with your gift, my son. An angel to complete my collection of powers. I have the demon and the djinni."

*He's trapped a demon?* Alexa fought uncharacteristic panic. If Abbas

was powerful enough to capture an unscrupulous demon, what chance did she have to escape his treasure room?

Her hand closed once more on Theron's bottle. Whatever happened, they were leaving together, and she was saving Sadiq. She gathered her power. She seldom used it to its full extent, but it burned with the white hot energy of a lightning bolt.

She flung it at Abbas.

A demon swirled out from the ring on his finger and ate her attack. The energy simply vanished.

Abbas shook his hand. The demon had allowed loose enough energy to singe him. That was all.

When fight failed...Alexa snatched up Theron's bottle. She could always run.

Dark magic boiled up around her, shutting her in a cauldron of evil. It choked and suffocated her, blinded her in a way she'd never imagined. If she lost consciousness, even unable to see her, Abbas would have her at his nonexistent mercy.

She wrenched the stopper from Theron's bottle, dived into it and pulled the stopper in after her.

"Alexa my love." Theron glanced away from the knives he was juggling. "You're a damned nuisance." The knives struck the far wall in a heart shape. "Come here."

## 4. Chapter Four

“I’m here to save you.” Alexa picked herself up off the floor of Theron’s bottle. She rubbed a sore elbow. “Although it mightn’t look like it at the moment.”

A mirror on the wall behind Theron showed a view of the outside world. Abbas had picked up the bottle and was shaking it violently.

“Your bottle must have good stabilizers.” She sat down on a wide leather couch. She felt no more than the gentle rocking of a yacht at anchor.

Theron left the knives in the wall and strode over to her. He appeared quite intimidating in leather trousers and no shirt, and certainly not in need of rescuing. He folded his arms and glared.

“I couldn’t just leave you, here,” she said.

“Yes. You could.”

“Huh.” She tipped her chin and glared back at him. “A lot you know about friendship.”

His arms unfolded and his biceps stopped bulging. “Is that how you think of me, as a friend?” He sat beside her, his weight on the cushions sending her sliding thigh to thigh against him.

“Yes.”

“You don’t sound happy about it.” The unfamiliar scowl left his face and the usual lurking smile reappeared in his eyes. “I make a good friend.

In fact, because of our friendship, I'm willing to overlook the trouble you've caused flapping in here on angel wings."

"The trouble I've caused? You're the one who brought this on yourself, flaunting your presence and powers up and down the coast."

"I know. It took months." He raised an eyebrow at her shock. "Honestly, angel, do you think I'd let a madman like Abbas capture me unless I planned it?"

She couldn't find words.

"The only thing that worried me." Theron could always find words. "Was the fate of Mutt. Who is looking after him if you're here with me?"

"I left him with Peter, one of my charges. The kid needed something to take care of. The worst that'll happen to Mutt is a severe case of spoiling and over-feeding. Forget the dog." She swiveled round, hooking one knee up on the sofa, to scowl at him. "What do you mean, you planned this?"

"I freelance for your Guardian Council."

"No."

"No, you don't believe me? or no, you don't *want* to believe me?" He relaxed back against the sofa.

"Why would they employ you?" Her voice trailed off as she realized the answer. "Because you can go places angels can't."

"Like through Abbas's wards. Although I notice you found a way through."

"That was Sadiq." She glanced at the mirror window. Abbas was still focused on the bottle and her. So Sadiq was safe for the moment. "He needed to confront his father."

"Your Guardian Council *might* buy that excuse."

"Involving a human in angel affairs is no worse than involving a djinni."

"The inference being you can trust a human, but a djinni..." He shrugged expressively. Muscles rippled. "You think your Guardian Council was wrong to employ me."

"Yes, but not for the prejudiced thinking you're accusing me of." She was so angry she got off the sofa and put space between them before she tried shaking sense into him. "You're operating under a curse, Theron. That's not a minor detail. You're handicapped, vulnerable."

"Vulnerable?"

It was the last thing he looked, lounging there, all masculine power and grace.

She flicked him a dismissive glance. “Appearances are deceiving. Abbas can *command* you for the count of three wishes. Can you imagine what power that gives him?”

“Exactly as much as I decide to share.” He stood, good humor gone, and prowled towards her. “You could try trusting me, angel.”

“It’s not a question of trust. It’s one of commonsense. It’s not safe for you to be here. Abbas is a dark mage.”

“And that is precisely why I’m here. He has to be stopped. Angels can’t do anything. He’s warded against them, and besides, you’re hampered by the tricky issue of cosmic balance. If you directly take out a dark mage, the demons can take out a saint. But I’m not hampered by those considerations and—you’ll notice—I’ve gotten through his wards.”

“Sure you’ve gotten through his wards. You’re a damn prisoner in his disgusting treasure room. He’ll command you to do something like blast a city to pieces and Solomon’s stupid curse will force you to do it.”

“For your information, Abbas has already used one wish. Do you see any blasted cities?” He crowded her personal space, annoyed and making no effort to hide it.

She flattened both hands against his chest and pushed back.

He didn’t move. “I told you. I’ve worked for your Guardian Council before. I’m not a naive do-gooder. I know the risks and I know my own abilities. I can take out Abbas by using his wishes against him.”

“Abbas is a devious bastard.”

“So am I.” He smiled unpleasantly. “And I’ve had centuries more experience at the game.” He caught her wrists and pulled her off balance against him.

Infuriatingly, the only thing keeping her from stumbling was Theron’s hard body and before she could catch her balance, he pushed forward and pinned her against the wall.

He bent and whispered in her ear. “Abbas’s first wish was protection against you and yours, Alexa. He commanded protection against angelic power. I gave him my brother.”

“Your brother? You surrendered another djinni to Abbas?” Outraged,

she managed to push him back a couple of inches, but the victory was only momentary.

He settled back, aligning their hips with slight, indecently sensuous nudges, making a space for himself between her legs.

She wriggled, annoyed.

“Uh, angel.” A mingled laugh and groan.

“Well, let me go, then,” she snapped. “I don’t play these games.”

“What games?”

“Sex games!”

“Who says I’m playing?” He inhaled deeply. “You smell like cherry blossom. And you feel so good. Skin to skin would be better.”

“No.” Way too shaky. “And don’t try to distract me.”

“Why not?” A slight, whimsical smile. “I’m distracted.”

“You’re not. You’re teasing. And I . . .” She craved him. She’d been so scared for him. Now her body wanted reassurance in the most intimate of ways. Not that she was ruled by her desires. “You were telling me how you betrayed your brother to Abbas.”

“I didn’t betray Emmott.” He nuzzled her hair. “I taught him a valuable lesson. And he’s not a djinni. He’s my demon younger brother. He was hanging around, laughing at me being at a dark mage’s command. As an older brother, I decided he needed a life lesson. I placed him under a geas to protect Abbas from angelic attack.” He kissed the curve of her throat.

Belatedly, she realized she’d arched her head back, encouraging Theron’s attentions. She snapped her head forward.

He kissed her.

Hunger and need roared through her from him, revealing just what a lie his lazy, teasing touch was. He *had* told the truth. This wasn’t a game. He had himself on a leash, but he wanted her. His mouth ate hers. Ate her control.

She put her arms around his neck and kissed him back just as hungrily, desperately.

“Angel.” His chest heaved against hers. His thighs were steel hard. “We have the worst timing.”

“I know.” But she didn’t stop caressing his back and his chest, exploring,

claiming. “You snuck into my life and until you were in danger, I didn’t realize how important you’d become.”

He snatched another kiss, a reward. “I knew I wanted you a long time ago. But you’re an angel, free. You never showed any signs of—”

“Wanting a walk on the wild side?” She smiled against his mouth.

“Of wanting me. Of accepting that I’m imperfect.”

Her smile died. She eased back. “Imperfect?”

He cupped her head, his thumb tracing a line along her cheekbone. “I’m a djinni. Not everything I’ve done has been good. Not everything I’ll do will meet your Guardian Council’s ethics. I didn’t know if you could accept that.”

“You have your own code. I’ve seen you live it.”

“But can you live with it?” His eyes searched hers.

She wasn’t sure what he asked. Did she want him? Yes. Did she care? Why, else would she be here.

“Ah.” She rested her head against his shoulder. He was so powerful, being with him she forgot his history and reality: the constraints of Solomon’s curse. Centuries of slavery left their mark on even the most self-confident of men. “I respect you, Theron. I might argue with you, but I do trust you.”

His arms tightened around her. “Thank you.”

“But I still think you should escape Abbas.”

He shook with silent laughter.

She pulled back to glare at him. “It’s not funny.”

“Angel, you’re as trapped as I am.”

Her eyes widened at the thought. “We have to get out of here. And Sadiq.” She twisted around to look at the mirror window. “We have to—Oh my.”

Abbas was on the move and carrying the djinni bottle with him.

The scene in the mirror showed Sadiq slumped against a wall, holding his ribs.

“Come with me,” Abbas directed.

He kicked away the dagger Sadiq had dropped. It spun into a corner.

Sadiq’s gaze fixed on the bottle, then lifted to his father’s face. “Don’t hurt her.”

“Of course not.” Abbas stroked the bottle. “I must think on this gift you brought me. For now, I have other plans.”

“The djinni—

“A marvelous find. Those fools I took him from had no idea of his value. They didn’t even recognize the power of him.”

“Maybe too much power for you,” Sadiq said sullenly.

Abbas glanced slyly at him. “I plan to strengthen myself.”

They walked out of the seventh alcove and Sadiq stopped, confronted by the iron bars of a prison cell. Behind them, a young woman looked up from her seat on the floor. “I’ve told you, I’m a US citizen. My government is going to kick your ass.”

“Delusional,” Abbas said. “An archaeologist. She drove in here three days ago. Saved me the trouble of buying someone from the slave market. I’ll sacrifice her tomorrow to strengthen me to deal with the djinni. Or you can agree to die in her place.”

## 5. Chapter Five

“Bastard,” Theron muttered.

“Abbas intends to sacrifice his own son?” Terrible though she knew the dark mage to be, Alexa found such inhumanity difficult to comprehend.

“Your charge is a damn fool, using his blood to break the ward. It’s given Abbas ideas.” Theron used a touch of magic to change his clothes. Jeans replaced the leather trousers and a shirt covered his impressive muscles. Scuffed boots tied their own laces.

“The costume party’s over?” Alexa inquired.

“I played to the image of how Abbas thought a djinni should look. He’s a traditionalist. But for the first wish, he didn’t sacrifice anyone.” Theron sounded annoyed. “I thought I hadn’t scared him.”

“You delivered a demon to him. I imagine that gave him an idea of your power.”

“So maybe that wasn’t one of my better ideas.” He turned away, hunting for something on a wide, scarred worktable.

“Nor was the geas. It was a geas you said you put on your half-brother, wasn’t it? No, demon has ever been bound long by a geas.”

Theron’s teeth flashed in a fierce grin. “That was the idea.” He snatched up an old brass astrolabe and realigned its circuits.

“Oh.” She contemplated the extent of his deviousness. Abbas had asked

for protection from angelic attack. A demon could provide that and a geas could compel that protection. But Abbas had overlooked placing a forever timeframe on his wish. “How long before your half-brother breaks the geas?”

“Emmott could have broken it by now. He wasted two days raging. Kids today have no self-discipline.”

“I heard that.” The deep, rough voice emerged from the astrolabe. “Your damned geas is tricky.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Theron grinned, amused.

“Is that angel with you?” Emmott asked.

“I’m here.” She strolled forward to examine the astrolabe.

Emmott lowered his voice to a purr. “Your energy feels goooood. Like being stroked all over.”

*Eww.* Her nose wrinkled.

“I think your seduction technique needs work, little brother.” Theron tossed the astrolabe in the air and caught it. “But not with Alexa.” There was enough steel in his voice to surprise her.

She jerked her gaze to his and found him watching her possessively. She cleared her throat. “About Sadiq.”

“It’s a good temptation,” Emmott said judiciously. “Takes advantage of the human’s desperation. He wants to prove he’s not like his father.”

“Sadiq is nothing like Abbas,” she said, outraged.

Theron leaned against the table. “The real question is how Abbas intends to use Sadiq’s sacrifice.” He reached out a lazy but determined arm and pinned Alexa against him.

“I have to stop Sadiq agreeing,” she said urgently. “I have to remind him he can’t trust Abbas to keep his promise. He’ll die, then Abbas will kill the woman, anyway.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Emmott said. “The beauty of this temptation is that either way, your Sadiq loses. If he doesn’t agree to sacrifice himself, he has to live with that decision.”

Alexa stopped struggling to free herself. She held Theron’s gaze, a question in hers.

He nodded.

The only way to save Sadiq was to defeat Abbas, now.

Theron addressed the astrolabe. "If Abbas takes Sadiq's free sacrifice, he'll be beyond reach of your vengeance, Emmott. Blood of blood is what protects from demons."

"Ahem."

Theron smiled at her. "A dark mage is hardly likely to embrace love and hope, Alexa, none of the normal protections against demons will appeal to him. They all involve trusting someone else. Abbas is all about power and control."

"Are you saying it's in my interests to join forces with you?" Emmott inquired.

"Only if you want vengeance," Theron said. "I can do this without you."

"What do you intend to do?" Angel and demon asked in unison.

"Watch."

#

Abbas gripped a revolver. He gestured to the newly opened cell door. "In you go."

"Isn't your magic enough to compel me?" Sadiq ducked his head to step in. "Or couldn't you use your djinni to force me?"

His father swung the door shut and locked it. "Crude though guns are, I've discovered they spare me a lot of unnecessary argument. You have an hour, Sadiq."

The young woman glared at Abbas. "You can't expect a stranger to sacrifice himself for me."

"It seems my son is in a quixotic mood, today. I merely seek to indulge him."

"Your son?" Her eyes widened. She looked at Sadiq.

He grimaced apologetically. "Sorry."

"Your father really intends to kill you? Is he crazy?"

"I wish I could believe so." He slid down the wall, grunting at the slight jolt as he hit the floor.

"Did he beat you up?" Her horrified glance darted between the man on the floor and the older man gloating on the far side of the bars.

"No, I did this in a car accident."

"Her name is Mandy Lorne," Abbas interposed. "Twenty seven years

old, unmarried, an archaeologist. If you let her die, she won't be a nameless sacrifice to your cowardice."

She swung around, temper flaring. "What the hell do you want to kill me for, anyway?"

"Power," Theron said.

Abbas stepped back from the cell bars as if they'd become red hot.

The false smoke djinni Theron used in his conjuring act swirled up from the floor, stretching to touch the roof. It loomed over the two prisoners.

Sadiq raised an eyebrow. "Theron?"

"You can't leave the bottle without my permission," Abbas screeched.

"I am the djinni, little man," Theron boomed. "Three wishes are all you command."

Emmott snaked some of his power out of the ring the dark mage more. It looked like a serpent, forked tongue flicking to taste the air.

"Get away in, demon." Abbas slapped at the ring. "You are bound to protect me."

"A geas," Emmott said. "And one I'm already breaking."

Abbas hissed in sudden pain and wrenched off the ring. He flung it across the room. The forked tongue of Emmott's power had burned him.

"A wise man knows the limits of his power," Theron said. "But you're not a wise man, Abbas. You are cruel and stupid. And now, you shall learn."

The smoke djinni and Emmott's serpent both vanished.

Abbas spun in a circle, muttering charms and wards, searching for invisible enemies.

"This is insane," Mandy said, but her voice wobbled.

"There are more things under heaven and earth, Horatio." Sadiq held out his hand in silent invitation.

She hesitated, then sat beside him, accepting the casual embrace. "I came here searching for Umu, the Lost City. I didn't expect to encounter other legends. Er, was there really a djinni in the cell with us?"

Sadiq leaned his head back against the wall, but he watched his father's antics through narrowed eyes. "Yes. His name is Theron. And somewhere there should be my angel."

"I'm here," Alexa said.

Mandy looked around, searching for the source of the voice and not finding it.

“Can you get us out of here?” Sadiq asked.

Abbas stopped turning in circles and squinted at the cell.

“Theron has to destroy your father, first,” Alexa said.

“He can’t do that,” Abbas shouted. “No djinni can destroy its master.”

“That’s not quite true.” She strolled the length of the cell and studied Abbas’s distorted face. “Theron can’t attack you directly, but he can let you destroy yourself.”

She vanished a split second before Abbas blasted dark power at the air in front of him. One of the cell bars disintegrated.

Mandy cringed against Sadiq, who winced at the pain to his ribs. “She’s gone, Dad.”

“You can see her?”

“Of course. She’s my angel.”

Abbas and Mandy both stared at him. Then Abbas appeared to reach a decision. He pulled out the gun. “If she cares about you so much, she’ll want to stop me killing you.”

“I thought you intended to sacrifice me, tomorrow.”

Abbas lowered the gun. “Will you give me your free sacrifice?”

Sadiq tightened his arm around Mandy. “No.”

“Then I can kill you here and now. You betrayed me, anyway. Bringing an angel, here. Breaking my wards.” He raised the gun.

Alexa stole the djinni bottle from the pocket of Abbas’s robe.

He dropped the gun as he recognized the sudden lightness. He snatched for the djinni bottle that—to him—seemed to float on the air.

Dark words of power and violence slammed into Alexa.

“God damn you.” Theron’s impotent rage shook the underground chamber. “Release her.”

Abbas laughed. “So much power. I’ve never killed anything so powerful.” He was drunk on the angelic energy. “My trap succeeded.”

“Alexa?” Sadiq crawled forward.

A casual flick of his father’s finger cracked him back against the wall. He cried out at the pain.

“Sadiq, please.” Alexa managed a painful whisper. The killing spell Abbas had laid on her was tearing her energy body to pieces. It was all she could do to hold onto her physical form for one last, vital effort.

She threw Theron’s bottle to Sadiq.

Mandy caught it.

## 6. Chapter Six

With Mandy holding his bottle, Theron wasted no time. Solomon's curse prevented djinn as hurting their masters, but masters was defined as whoever held their bottle. Abbas was now fair game—and Theron was inside his wards. But at what price?

Alexa's death screams sounded in his ears.

"I hope Sadiq and Mandy are in the mood for violent entertainment," he said between his teeth. Because entertaining humans was how he stretched the constraints of the curse.

All the blazing power he refused to surrender to human control struck at Abbas's personal wards, brushed them aside like tissue paper and set him on fire.

"The flames of hell. Nice touch," Emmott said.

Abbas screamed in frustrated fury, fear and pain. His power and spells shattered.

Theron knelt and gathered up Alexa. He'd pushed the loopholes in Solomon's curse to their limits. Now they tightened like an iron noose. He'd never hated his captivity more.

"Is she dying?" Sadiq asked. He ignored his father's screams.

"I won't let her." Theron vanished into his bottle.

He'd put the pressure on Abbas, judging the dark mage was near

snapping point, but he hadn't expected the power of the man's greed. He'd dared to try and sacrifice an angel.

"God I'm sorry. I thought I knew what Abbas would do. In my pride, I thought—"

"I'll live," Alexa whispered as he laid her on his bed.

"I can feel your pain. I thought I could keep you safe. You're so damn impulsive."

"Emotionally involved." Wry words.

"You care too much. It's an angel failing."

She smiled, but the small action clearly hurt.

"Let me heal you." He leant close. "Please."

The level of hurt she'd suffered, made it the most intimate of requests. She had to trust him, open her energy to him, so soon after Abbas had violated the integrity of that energy.

"Please." He couldn't live with seeing, feeling her pain.

Her blue eyes were glazed with pain as she searched his face. "Yes." She let go of her corporeal form.

Deadly rage threatened to overwhelm Theron again as he saw the extent of damage to her energy body. He controlled it. First, Alexa needed him.

He shifted into his own energy body and eased himself into alignment with her. Very gently he pulsed power through the pattern of their entwined bodies. He felt the moment when pain ceased in her and healing began. He continued the feed of power carefully.

"Too much," she said softly. "You'll exhaust yourself."

She stroked her own energy through the pattern, reassuring him of her wholeness. But it had an additional effect.

He wasn't quite sure when the healing drifted into loving, but suddenly he wasn't simply giving. He was receiving the sweetest energy. It flowed through him with intoxicating warmth and delight.

The lonely, aching scars of centuries of slavery vanished, vanquished by his angel's passion—and the tenderness she'd woken in him.

Sparkles of delight kissed along the paths of their shared energy.

"You are beautiful, so beautiful." He praised her as the intensity of their desire deepened, strengthening the pulse of energy.

“Ahem, Theron?” Emmott’s voice. “You’d better get out here.”

A split second later, Alexa tore out of their incorporeal union, jolting into her physical form. “Sadiq!” She flashed out of the bottle into the cell.

Theron swore as he caught her shoulders and hauled her back against him. The hellfire he’d left dancing over Abbas now covered his son, Sadiq. Theron cancelled it in a heartbeat and the horrid screams ceased.

In the furthest corner, Mandy huddled with his bottle, not wishing. He wondered absently if she was too traumatized to realize what she held.

Abbas knew, though. The old man was already running towards it, halting in impotent fury at the sight of Alexa and Theron. “I killed you,” he shouted at her.

“You bastard,” Theron said low and deadly. “You used the blood link to Sadiq to shift the hellfire.”

“I am stronger than you think, djinni,” said the dark mage.

“I doubt it. But I did underestimate your cruelty, greed and stupidity.”

Abbas howled in outrage.

“Got it.” Emmott shattered the ring that had held him, physical sign of the broken geas. He strode forward, a younger, brasher mirror of Theron. “And now...”

Abbas cringed with the realization he stood between an enraged djinni and a demon hell-bent on revenge. He began muttering desperate, dark magic enchantments.

Emmott threw back his head and laughed.

“He’s mine,” Theron warned. In his peripheral vision, he saw Sadiq move. The young man moved freely. In freeing him of the hellfire, Theron had carelessly used enough power to mend his broken ribs and other injuries. “Shit.”

Sadiq had plucked the djinni bottle from Mandy’s unresisting hands. “Djinni, I don’t want you killing Dad or hurting him. I’ll wish it if I have to.”

Alexa covered Theron’s right hand as it tightened on her shoulder.

Of course his angel wouldn’t want him to torture and kill in front of her, but he had a killing rage inside him.

“Looks like the fun’s all mine,” Emmott said.

“No. Djinni, stop the demon from hurting Dad. I wish it.”

The wish bound him in iron. He wrenched his hands from Alexa and vaporized the cell bars, striding to meet his half-brother.

Abbas's face split into an evil, triumphant grin. "My son." He straightened.

It twisted Theron's guts to protect such a man.

"I forgave the geas," Emmott said. "But not this. I won't let you stop my revenge. This man thought to command me."

"Welcome to my life, brother."

"No. You're bound by the curse and your conscience. I have neither." Emmott hurled raw power at Theron, enough to kill him.

Theron deflected it into the ground. The earth shook.

Alexa strengthened the structure of the underground chamber to survive the awesome forces released in this clash between brothers. She had a responsibility to Sadiq and to Mandy. Abbas, well, he lay dazed, caught by the edge of the first blast of power. He could be dealt with later.

Mandy huddled in a corner. She couldn't see Theron and Emmott, but she could hear the latter's snarls and feel the chamber shudder to their blows.

Sadiq watched the fight with a blank face. Only when his gaze caught Alexa's did an expression shiver over it. His shoulders relaxed and he walked to her, holding Theron's bottle. "I'm sorry I used your friend. I couldn't let Dad die...I'd always wonder if I did have his blood in me. If I'd wished his suffering and death."

"He hurt you a lot," Alexa said.

"And he hurt others." Sadiq looked away from the raw fight in front of them, to Mandy. "He said he bought people from slave traffickers. He must have killed them to fuel his dark magic. I know he deserves to die."

"But if we kill him in a passion, we perpetuate his violence and darkness." She watched Theron blocking Emmott's every move. The angry set of his jaw said how much he hated protecting Abbas. "Denying anyone their free will is wrong, but I'm glad Theron won't have your father's blood on his hands."

"You're a fool." Abbas had crawled up to them.

Alexa kicked the gun out of his hand.

Sadiq looked down at the broken shell of a man, eaten out by his own evil, beaten and still trying to hurt, to control.

Theron slammed Emmott onto the ground and put a foot on his throat. "Enough. Leave be, Emmott."

For answer, Emmott grabbed Theron's leg, twisted and flung him. In the moment's advantage he gained, Emmott launched forward, intent on Alexa.

She smiled.

Theron had healed her. She had all her energy and she'd been compelled to stand here, a mere spectator. All her guardian nature and training surged to the challenge. She closed her hands in a sharp clap and her energy rang out either side of Emmott.

He stumbled and dropped to one knee.

Her kick carried him to the other side of the chamber where he hit the wall and landed in an uncoordinated sprawl.

Theron looked down at him and grinned. "You should choose your targets more carefully. Alexa is not my weak spot." He picked up his groaning brother. "She's a guardian, you idiot." He threw Emmott back to hell, then hands on hips regarded Abbas. "Now, what do we do with you?"



## 7. Chapter Seven

Alexa stepped around Abba's prone figure and clasped Theron's hand.

He smiled down at her with casual intimacy and gently swung their clasped hands. "It's all right, angel, I've recovered my temper. I won't skin Abbas alive and leave his carcass for the jackals."

"Sadiq?" The dark mage's arrogant command was half plea.

Theron nudged him with a boot. "What a terrible old hypocrite. You plead for mercy after showing none yourself."

"Sadiq, give me the bottle," Abbas said from the floor. "I have two wishes left."

"Don't!" Mandy scrambled up and ran across the cell to grasp Sadiq's arm. "I don't understand everything that is happening here." She glanced at Theron who, like Alexa, was now visible to humans, then looked down at Abbas. "But he's the wrong man to trust with anything—and I don't care if he is your father."

"Believe me, I'm even less inclined to trust him than you are." Sadiq drew a deep breath. "Alexa is compelled by nature to be merciful, but Theron, what would you do with him?"

Abbas yelped a protest and was ignored.

"He can't be left to cause more trouble." Theron wrapped both arms around Alexa, holding her protectively against him. "I have the medical

knowledge to cause him a stroke, one which will cripple his hands and confuse his speech so he can't perform dark magic. He'll be dependent on your kindness and the kindness of strangers."

"No!" Abbas rose to his knees. "Sadiq, I am your father. You can't let him do this to me."

"You were willing to kill me," Mandy interjected. "And your own son. You're a monster."

"And I am his son." Sadiq looked down at the djinni bottle, then up at Theron. He threw the bottle to him. "I wish you free."

The bottle exploded, lighting the underground chamber with brilliant topaz dust. Amid the glitter, Theron bowed his gratitude.

Alexa flew across the room and hugged Sadiq. "Thank you."

Sadiq looked over her shoulder to meet Theron's dark gaze. "You and Alexa decide Dad's punishment."

"Viper. Snake in the bosom." Abbas drew his gun. "I will not be reduced to ridicule." He pulled the gun from his pocket.

"Wait, Alexa," Theron said.

Abbas put the gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

In the echo of violence and the stink of blood, Theron nodded, grimly satisfied.

As he must be, Alexa thought. His mission had been Abbas's self-destruction. Only her intervention had added Sadiq to the unholy mess.

"I'm sorry, Sadiq." She kissed his cheek, offering comfort.

"It was his choice. It was all his choice." But his voice broke. He ducked away, footsteps fading through the chamber.

"I'll go after him," Mandy said uncertainly. She edged away, skirting the blood splatter, then ran.

"They'll find daylight," Theron said.

"Metaphorically and truly." Alexa sighed as she studied Abbas's corpse. "Some people refuse it." She shivered. "I need to get out of here, too."

"Wherever my angel wants."

"Where would you like to go?" She embraced him loosely, comforted by his hold.

"I'd like to make love to you in a garden under the stars." He translocated them as he spoke.

Alexa glanced around, recognized her surroundings and sighed with pleasure. “The Alhambra.” The perfect place to celebrate his freedom.

The moonlight was so bright that the flowers glimmered with ghostly color in their frame of soft greens and silvers, while the fountains tumbled gently in the background.

Theron scattered thick cushions in a decadent outdoor boudoir. He dropped down on them and brought Alexa over him.

She spared a half second to blank human technological surveillance, then surrendered to the moment and the man.

Kisses like fire.

They were both so hungry.

He tore the buttons from her shirt and pushed aside the lace cups of her bra, filling his hands were her sensitive breasts and caressing them with urgent anticipation. He lifted her higher and took a tight nipple into his mouth. Desire spiraled near to pain. She cried out at the pleasure, but needed so much more.

She vanished her clothes.

Theron pushed her down onto the cushions. His own clothes vanished as he thrust his thigh between her legs in rough claiming. She rubbed upwards, dampening against him.

“Wanton angel.” He drew back long enough to admire her nakedness, his hand skimming her curves and sliding up to push back her head and drink her kisses.

“Only with you.” She clutched his shoulders as his hand travelled lower, to trespass intimately. “Theron.” Pleasure pulsed under her skin, surrendering her to his touch and guidance.

“If I wasn’t about to explode, I could tease you like this all night.” His finger tantalized, dipping near, but never quite entering her no matter how she squirmed and panted, ached and threatened, pleaded and promised. “I’ll take all you offer, angel mine.” He stopped teasing, placing himself between her thighs and thrust into her, freezing as she orgasmed.

“Beautiful.” His praise greeted her when her shattered senses re-formed. He thrust again, so powerful within her that one orgasm wasn’t enough. She ran possessive hands down his hands and gripped his buttocks.

“Alexa!” His control shattered into a pounding instinct for completion.

She gloried in it, rising to meet the tender violence and taking everything, sharing and doubling his climax. Matching him. The intensity of passion in his eyes and body riveted her.

He rolled off her heavily, and at her muttered complaint, tugged her to sprawl over him. He nuzzled the soft skin under her ear. "Thank you."

"It was a mutual effort."

"Very mutual." The smile was in his voice. "It exceeded my fantasies."

"You have fantasies about me?" She lifted her head.

His expression was relaxed and smugly satisfied.

Well, she felt smug, too. She wriggled into a more comfortable position. "Tell me about these fantasies."

"Fair exchange," he warned. "You have to tell me yours."

She blushed and sat up, curling beside him.

"Oho." He propped himself on an elbow to study her moonlit expression. "This looks promising."

"It's only because I trust you," she began.

"You can." Two words, but no teasing. Just a soul-deep vow.

"I want to watch us in a mirror." The words rush out.

"A mirror. What would we be doing in front of the mirror?" He stood and extended his hand, pulling Alexa up and turning her round to face an ornate wall mirror suspended to a column. "Tell me how to touch you."

She shivered. Their moonlit images had a dreamlike aspect. In this garden, this night, with this man, anything was possible. "I'll show you. You... you're to touch me how I touch myself."

"Angel." He crowded up behind her, all hard muscle and heat. "I think this is my fantasy, too."

"I hope so." She touched her throat, her breasts, drew patterns down her stomach.

He savored the slow caress around her nipples. "Two circles or three?" He had an arm around her waist, holding her up as her thighs trembled and her knees gave out.

"Th-three."

He completed the third circuit. "Touch yourself."

She widened her stance, and felt the breath he took. His arousal pressed against her bottom. She wasn't accustomed to touching herself there, but

this was a fantasy for two and Theron's gaze in the mirror was hot with need.

She stroked herself and cried out, her flesh too sensitive.

"Angel." Theron shook. "Put your arms around my neck."

The posture thrust her breasts up and tautened her stomach. His hand went between her legs. She watched her own erotic response and climaxed.

Theron turned her, lifted her against the mirror and entered her as the last tremors still shook her. "I like your fantasy."

She shuddered at the exquisite contrast between his heat and the cool glass of the mirror. Then the mirror warmed with their passion.

#

Later, Alexa woke, feeling him watching her.

"Do you want to know my fantasy?"

She smiled. "Yes."

He didn't smile back. "You love me, adoring me with your eyes and mouth, hands and body, until you take me inside you and ride me to heaven."

She stroked his chest, holding his gaze, reading all his hunger of lonely centuries, then bent and kissed a flat male nipple. "It will be my pleasure."

It was an incredible pleasure. He urged her on, not with touches, but with words of praise and the eager, undeniable response of his body.

Her mouth felt swollen by the time she finished with his, stealing another kiss as she straddled him. Then there was the awesome delight of cupping him, finding him so ready and guiding him into her.

He groaned as she lowered herself onto him, taking him deeply. She rode him slowly, taking his rhythm, feeling herself falling into the awed wonder in his eyes. Sharing it.

He climaxed and she let her own climax roll through her, tightening her around him a final time before she collapsed panting on top of him.

"Angel, you are heaven."

"You're not so bad, yourself."



## 8. Epilogue

“Theron, behave.” Alexa’s reprimand would have had more power if she hadn’t choked on her laughter.

He patted her solicitously on the back. “Now, where would the fun be in behaving?”

The crystal dome atop the Heavenly Library revolved slowly, each facet showing a different scene from—

“Michael will strangle you.”

“He can try.” Theron grinned. “He shouldn’t have denied my request at Council to go after the dark mage apprentice, Kevin, in Australia.”

Alexa craned her neck to see the next scene on the crystal dome. “Oooh,” she wailed with laughter and clutched at him.

Other heavenly citizens, hurrying between the library, opera house and sports grounds, also paused to snicker.

“Where did you find Michael’s training video?” she gasped.

High above on the dome, a much younger Michael took another prat fall. At seventeen, he’d been skinny, uncoordinated and a greater danger to himself than to anyone else in his training bouts. Only in height did he bear any resemblance to his current somber battle-readiness.

“Heaven’s archives are amazingly complete,” Theron said.

Thunder boomed across the sky and the images vanished from the crystal dome.

All the onlookers suddenly remembered their urgent appointments.

“You’re busted,” Alexa said.

“I rely on you to protect me.”

“Huh.” Scornful disbelief.

“Or we could run away and visit Sadiq.”

She was tempted. Sadiq was working hard to heal the damage his father had done, particularly to the villagers at the Dark Oasis. The responsibility suited him. He’d lost his playboy ways and air of disinterest. He was thinner, harder and focused.

“Theron.” Michael materialized on the path in front of them.

“Hello, Michael,” Alexa said.

He glanced at her. “Can’t you control your fiancé?”

“Only in bed,” Theron said outrageously.

She punched his arm.

“Ow.”

“You know I can’t let your insult stand unavenged?” Michael folded his arms. Muscles bulged.

Theron raised an eyebrow, politely, tauntingly, interested.

Alexa grinned. This male bonding party didn’t need her presence. She kissed Theron’s cheek. “Have fun, honey.”

He patted her butt, keeping his gaze on Michael. “Don’t I always?”

“And when you’ve finished playing,” she continued serenely. “I’ll be in the waterfall oasis swimming naked.” *Three, two—*

Heaven vanished. The oasis surrounded her and Theron. He’d lost their clothes somewhere in the transition.

“You,” he said when they surfaced and broke the kiss. “Are a devious angel.”

“I try.”

## About the Author

Jenny Schwartz is an Australian author currently mis-using her history degree to write steampunk.

For a full list of her books — including the other paranormal romance titles in the “Out of the Bottle” series — please see her website:

<http://authorjennyschwartz.com/>





