

RACHEL CAINE

NY TIMES BEST SELLING AUTHOR

WEATHER WARDEN: OASIS

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I know I've complained about this before, but believe me, I'm going to complain about it again, so get used to it: Being human sucks. Especially after you've been a Djinn. Granted, being a supernatural creature subject to a whole different set of physics and laws brings with it some significant downsides -- and Lord knows that includes a humiliating episode with a lecherous teenage master and a Frederick's of Hollywood maid outfit -- but it also has some great advantages. You don't get easily tired out, for one thing. You don't need to sleep as much.

And you don't need to stop to pee when you're trying to prevent the latest Apocalypse.

"I've got to stop," I sighed, and checked the sign flashing by on the passenger side of the car for information about what would be available at the next exit. The next exit, it appeared, was four miles ahead, give or take, and would feature a Conoco station and a Dairy Queen. Probably in the same building. On both sides of the freeway, desert blurred past in a continuous loop. I had started feeling some days back like I'd entered a video game designed by a lunatic with a cactus fetish, and I was nowhere near winning, or even cracking the first level. Hell, I was starting to wonder exactly what kind of game I was playing.

My whole body -- human, thanks very much, universe -- was aching with exhaustion and vibrating with road noise. My lovely Dodge Viper wasn't feeling the strain of this drive across the country (New York to Nevada) nearly as much as I was. I needed sleep. I needed food that didn't contain preservatives. I needed ...

Well, I just needed.

"There's a motel at the next exit," David said, from the passenger seat. Speaking of need ... My Djinn lover was comfortably seated with a book in his hands, reading as if he could do this forever. Which he probably could, being supernatural and therefore not subject to the effects of small bladders and large quantities of coffee. I glanced over at him. He wasn't looking at me, he was focused on the pages of the paperback he was holding -- ah, another Robert B. Parker, he was on a Spenser kick -- but I could sense his attention straying toward

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me. Behind the innocent round glasses, those dark-brown eyes swirled with random whirls of hot bronze. I found myself glancing over to admire the elegant planes of his cheekbones, the fullness of his lips, and it occurred to me that his comment hadn't been all related to an altruistic concern for my wellbeing.

I cleared my throat and reached for the cold coffee in the drink holder. Ugh. It tasted nasty, oily and old. Really, it was about the same as it had tasted when I'd poured it at the last 7-11 we'd visited, but at least then it had been hot. "I'm okay," I said. "I just need a bathroom."

"No, you need to sleep," he said, and turned the page. I didn't recognize the title of the book, I realized. Maybe David was reading a book that hadn't actually been published yet. I wouldn't put it past him. "You won't be any good if you arrive in this condition. There's a battle ahead of us when we get there. You need to rest."

Djinn. Always right, and always smug about it. You'd think it would get annoying, but from David ... not so much.

I drove in silence for another four miles, which was about two minutes at the current speed, and took the exit too fast. Mona whined in protest as I throttled her down. There was a gas station -- with a faded Dairy Queen sign on the side -- and, just beyond it, a deserted-looking place called DESERT INN. Descriptive. The sign also promised CABLE TV and AIR CONDITIONING. The building was laid out in a long L-shape, one story, with about twelve rooms. One dilapidated 1980s-era Cadillac with dark-tinted windows lurked in the last parking space, and the VACANCY sign flickered on and off in red letters in the grimy office window.

I'd never seen anything so beautiful in my life. I could have written poetry to it.

But we were on a timetable, and frankly, sitting in one spot and waiting for someone -- like, say, Kevin the Teen Psycho, now armed with the power of a VIP among Djinn -- to notice that we were an easy target ... didn't sound like a sleep-inducing idea.

No. I just needed food and a bathroom. I could always sleep in the car and get David to drive, if necessary.

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David lifted his head from the book and looked at me as I slowed Mona down even more, preparing to turn into the DQ parking area. He didn't say anything, but I knew he was thinking about it. We had a silent argument. I won.

I drove up to the window and ordered a hamburger, fries, and a chocolate shake. David had the same, which made me mildly curious ... Djinn could eat, of course, but normally they don't bother unless they're trying to fit in. But David was a little bit odd, by Djinn standards. He tended to actually like being human, or humanoid, or however you define it.

"What?" he asked me, raising his eyebrows as I stared at him, thinking about it. I shrugged and handed over money to the cashier, who looked like she was probably working in violation of child labor laws. I hoped she wasn't also the cook. At her age, I wouldn't have been able to turn out a halfway decent sandwich, much less actually operate a fry basket.

"Nothing," I said. "Just don't try anything funny."

"Funny?"

"Funny."

Two bags and two shakes later, I drove around to the front of the gas station, hesitated, and then continued through the conveniently cojoined parking lot into the Desert Inn's domain.

David said nothing, but when I parked, he sucked on the straw of his chocolate shake with evident satisfaction. Speaking of that ... I tasted mine, and nearly had an intimate moment with the smooth, creamy taste of chocolate on my tongue. Well, plus the way David's lips fit around that straw.

"Are we going into the restaurant?" he asked, when I didn't put the car in gear.

"I'm thinking," I said. "Maybe I should just, you know, visit the Little Wardens Room and then eat out here in the car ..."

Whatever else I'd been about to say dissolved into white noise as I watched him lick the taste of chocolate shake from his lips.

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"You bastard," I said.

"What?"

"Don't do that."

"What?"

He licked the taste of fries from his fingers.

"Dammit, stop it," I said. "I'm not going to fall for that, so you might as well ..."

He took my hand in his and touched it to his lips. His expression was entirely serious now. "Joanne. I can feel how tired you are. You need this, you need sleep and rest. I won't let anything happen to you."

"You can't promise that."

His eyebrows quirked, then settled. "No?"

"No. Not when it comes to, well, you know who." Jonathan.

David said nothing. There was really nothing he could say about that.

"I can keep going," I said. "Really."

Right about then, Mona shivered in the middle of idling, and my heart skipped a beat. When you're in tune with a car, you can feel that kind of thing like a malfunction of your own body. My hands tightened around the steering wheel.

Mona sighed, shuddered, and died. The engine vibration stopped, and for a few seconds there was just the ticking of a cool engine, and the wind blowing random sand against the windows.

"You need to rest," David said, without emphasis. Careful about it.

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I cranked the ignition. Nothing happened.

"I mean it," he said. "One night, Jo. One night, you sleep, we continue."

I kept cranking for a solid minute, then stopped and sat back in the leather seat, staring out at the panoramic view.

"I don't like being manipulated," I said.

"I know," David said. "But you're not leaving me much choice. I won't let you kill yourself."

The unspoken again vibrated in the air between us.

I sighed. I didn't want to fight, I didn't have the energy for it. And my food was calling.

"Fine," I said. "One night."

Mona's engine vibrated to life the instant I turned the key. I turned her wheels into the Desert Inn parking lot. My body was already craving a hot shower and a soft bed, now that I'd let the thought sink in.

One night, I promised myself.

Yeah, myself sneered back. Nothing can happen in just one night, right?

Right.

###

The room rate would have been reasonable for, say, a decent Hilton featuring crisp white sheets, turn-down service and complimentary guest robes. It was a little high for a sagging mattress, yellowing bedding, indoor-outdoor carpet, and a bathroom decorated in early Ugh, What The Hell Is That?

Still looked good to me.

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David and I sat on either side of the bed; he ate slowly, watching me wolf down my burger and fries with every sign of fascinated amusement. After a while, he disposed of the remains of his meal -- he'd only eaten a couple of bites, just for taste, I suspected -- and took off his long dark-green coat. He tossed it over the back of the unhappy-looking armchair, kicked off his shoes, and stretched out on the bed full length. Ankles crossed.

Reading.

I sucked contemplatively on my milk shake. Yes, I was bone-tired, but still, there were parts of me that really weren't all that tired, and were clamoring for a little attention. My eyes traveled from his naked, slender feet up blue-jean-clad legs and narrow hips. His checked shirt was lying open over a white t-shirt. He turned a page, apparently not noticing my stare. I tossed my DQ bag at the trash can, missed, and got up to throw it in; he made a gesture, and the balled-up paper levitated itself up and gracefully out of sight.

I waited.

He read.

"Well," I finally said, when I'd noisily sucked up the last of the shake, "I think I'm going to take a shower."

He nodded and put an arm under his dark-auburn head without comment.

I got up, turned around, and unbuttoned my blouse. Slowly. Let it slide off over my shoulders. The air conditioning whispered its way over my skin I bent over to slide off my skirt with a lot of unnecessary slow motion and some equally unnecessary wiggling.

I glanced behind me while I was down there, hair dangling to the ground.

David was still reading. Spectacularly not watching my strip tease. Bastard.

I slammed the door behind me on the way into the bathroom, reached in and cranked the water to full blast. It heated up nicely. As steam fogged up the age-spotted mirror, I shed my underwear and stared at my pale face, my blue eyes. I'd always been fair-skinned, but it

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seemed like coming back to human form had been a real shock. I still looked kind of ill. Not to mention really, really tired. Raccoon-eyes tired.

I twisted to look at my back. Yep, the bullet wound was still there, though reduced to a fading scar. It only twinged a little, thanks to David's healing touch. I was lucky to be ... well, I was just incredibly lucky to be, actually. The odds hadn't been with me for quite some time now.

And here I was, going into something with even worse odds. Am I crazy? The thought wasn't new, but staring into the mirror, it seemed more pertinent than usual. I should just turn the car around. Go home. Find someplace to live out my life in peace and quiet, with a minimum of people shooting at me or blowing me up or trying to kill me with tornadoes.

Because I'd just climbed out of a hospital bed and was heading for Las Vegas, and near-certain death, and nobody was holding a gun to my head to do it. I could punk out. Nobody would blame me.

Except me, of course.

The mirror fogged over again. The steam in the air was making my hair curl, which it never had before I'd done my brief stint as an immortal, all-powerful being, and where's the justice in that? Shouldn't you get a pass on bad hair days after things like that?

I swiped a palm over the glass, clearing a moist path again to continue moping at my reflection, and found that someone was standing right behind me, in the classic surprise! position of serial killers everywhere.

My heart gave a painful, unpleasant twist. I instinctively jerked forward into the bathroom counter, and the man standing behind me gave me a slow, superior smile. Tall, lean, medium-brown hair thickly salted with gray, eyes like black holes.

I knew him. His name was Jonathan, and he was a Djinn. Well, not just a Djinn. More like, the Djinn. Lord and Master. Grand Pookah of the Universe. Et cetera.

He didn't like me very much. I couldn't quite figure out if it was just a personal thing with humans, or a particular thing with me; I suspected the latter, though. He thought David was

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wasting himself on me. He probably had a point.

"Just thought I'd drop in," he said, in a perfectly normal tone of voice, as if he hadn't noticed he'd committed a huge personal invasion of my space, and hello, naked? I grabbed for a thin motel-quality towel. Not that he was looking. Jonathan seemed to find me downright boring. I didn't even rate a reflexive hmmm, naked girl glance.

"Get out," I said. I kept my voice down, because the last thing I wanted -- the very last thing -- was for David to come charging to my rescue and become the third leg of this triangle. Jonathan could, and had, overpowered him before, and David had to be tired. I sure as hell was.

"I have a message for you. Don't keep this up," Jonathan said, and looked around the bathroom with an expression of disgusted disdain. Like a debutante faced with a Porta-Potti.

"Don't keep what up? Showering? For humans, kind of necessary. Unless you like the funky smell of -- "

"Quit trying to stop Kevin," Jonathan continued, just like I hadn't spoken at all. He was still focusing on the missing piece of tile in the floor next to the tub. "More to the point, quit trying to stop me. You can't get to Las Vegas. Stop trying. I'll only kill you really, really hard."

"I guess that won't bother you," I said.

For the first time, he met my eyes in the mirror. Unsmiling. Those eyes gave me the shivers, because they were like windows into infinity, the only real outward sign of the power he held within. "Yeah, can't deny there are upsides," he said blandly. "Also problems." As in, David might never trust him again. Killing me might destroy every vestige of friendship between them, and for Djinn as powerful as those two, that couldn't be a good thing. "Do the smart thing. Turn around and go home."

"I can't do that. You know I can't," I said. "Look, I'm doing this to help you, don't you get it? I went through being a slave to that kid, I know how terrible it is. Help me get into Vegas, I'll set you free." Because that had to be what he wanted, ultimately. Wasn't it?

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But if it was, I couldn't tell it from his expression, which remained closed and tight. "You're feeling sorry for me?" His tone was dry and clipped. "Funny. I was about to feel sorry for you."

All my instincts kicked to life. "Why?"

He raised his graying eyebrows, shrugged, and slipped on a pair of entirely unnecessary sunglasses. Nice sunglasses, mind you, the kind made for cutting the glare for Everest climbers and hard-core black-diamond skiers. But entirely unnecessary, because the dim fly-specked bulb over the sink didn't exactly give out a majestic eye-blinding glare.

"Ah, but that would be telling," Jonathan said. "Do yourself a favor. Go home before you get hurt worse than you have to be." And he vanished. Just like that. I didn't trust him to be gone, either, but there wasn't anything I could do about it if he chose to hang around in invisible form. I made a short circuit of the bathroom, pacing, and finally dumped the towel and got into the shower.

I was halfway through soaping my hair when the hot water ran out. Guess I'd spent too much time staring into space and being intimidated by the most powerful Djinn in the universe.

Being human sucks.

###

When I came out, chilled and breathless, with my hair wrapped in a loose turban and my body wrapped in chill bumps, David was still flat on the bed, reading.

But he let his book fall to his chest and looked at me directly. Maybe it was the chattering teeth. "Cold?" he asked. I tried to nod, but the shivering probably sent a clear yes anyway. He got up and came to me, and put those warm, broad hands on my arms. As he glided them down, fingers dragging on my damp skin, heat bloomed. Water disappeared. By the time he got to my fingertips I was shaking for an entirely different reason, and warm as if I'd spent an hour out sunning myself by the pool.

"Better?" he asked. His voice had a low, rough edge to it, and as he raised his eyes I saw

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flickers of orange swirling. His hands circled both my wrists, and I felt an impulse in him to pull me closer ... an impulse he resisted. I could feel things like that, thanks to this nifty new master/Djinn bond we'd developed since I'd finally claimed him. Feel the breathtaking, scary strength inside of him, and how very careful he was about its use.

"David -- "

When he looked up, his eyes were shifting colors to bronze, a breathtaking, alien color that sent shivers up and down my spine regardless of the toasty warmth. "I know he was here," he said. "I was ready if he -- " Flares of gold in those eyes. His skin caught fire in a golden flush, entirely Djinn; he controlled it and kept himself flesh and blood and bone. "Jo, I don't know how we do this. He knows we're coming. He's ready. He knows what you can do, what I can do -- and he can beat us. It will hurt him, but he can win. Our one chance was to get in under his notice, but if we can't do that ..."

"It doesn't matter. There are lives at risk. You know Kevin -- do you trust him with the kind of power Jonathan represents? Hell, with any kind of power? I don't. We both saw what he did to his own stepmother." I bit my lip, watching him. He was still holding my wrists, and warmth pulsed up into me from his touch. "David, this may not be safe, but it has to be done. Somehow."

"I know."

"I just --" I was on verge of tears, suddenly. Adrenaline and exhaustion carbonating together in my blood. "God, I just want to rest. I just want to forget." He let go of my wrists and put his hands on my face, tilting it up, and then he kissed me, and all of the fear and exhaustion melted away. His lips were damp and hot and silken, and he tasted like the chocolate shake and a dark, male undertone that made me moan and suck the taste off his tongue, and God, stopping at a motel? Best idea ever.

He broke it off and studied me with a warm, yearning distance of about an inch between us. "You should rest." His breath moved over me like his touch. His voice vibrated inside me, deep inside. I resonated to his sound, his touch, everything about him.

Rest was just about the farthest thing from my mind. "Later," I promised breathlessly, and swayed toward him. Our lips brushed, lingered, slid away. Teasing. "Maybe I need to relax

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first," I murmured. Another gentle slide of our lips, not quite a kiss. "Maybe I need to spend a long ... time ... relaxing."

And unspoken, we were both thinking that somewhere out there Jonathan was lurking. Maybe focusing his attention on us. There was no hiding from him.

David's eyes were brilliant, molten copper, and his skin was a hot inhuman gold, and he was beautiful, beautiful, beautiful.

"A long time," he whispered, and we were breathing the same intoxicating air, living in each other's space, each other's skin. He was hot enough to melt me. "Yes. I think maybe that's a very good idea."

He picked me up and carried me to the bed, and for a long, long, long time, Jonathan and the crappy motel décor and the world waiting to destroy us beyond the door ceased to matter.

###

I woke up and it was dark and quiet outside, just a low plaintive moan of wind rattling the big windows. I rolled over on my side, instinctively searching for David's warmth -- the night had gotten cold, the way the desert does once the sun disappears -- but he wasn't there.

Wasn't anywhere.

I sat up slowly, listening, but there was no sound in the room except for a low, slow drip of water from the tap in the bathroom. The clock showed me a dim glow that, when I squinted and blinked, read 3:27 a.m.

I got up, found clean underwear and some not-to-badly-wrinkled rolled up blue jeans and a knit shirt in my bag, toed on shoes and walked outside into the still, chill night.

The sky was unbelievable. Clear from horizon to horizon, a black bowl crowded with stars. I stopped, staring, and craned my neck back to get the full effect. Dizzying. I breathed in deep and felt clean, cold air fill my lungs. I wished I was an Earth Warden, because this seemed to be a place where having a connection to the land would be amazing ... even dull

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as I was to that side of things, I could feel a kind of power here, a slow, strong pulse that made me want to lay down on the ground and let it flow through me.

When I let out my held breath, it came out as white mist. Colder than I'd thought. I shivered a bit and looked around. Except for my Dodge Viper crouched in its space, looking like a wildcat ready to spring, there were only two other cars -- one, a sun-faded Ford pickup with a missing tailgate, was parked at the office, so I figured it was the manager's. The other was the dusty old Cadillac with its coating of road dust, parked in front of the last room in the motel.

As I stood there, wondering where David had taken off to, and why, I heard someone open a door and close it. When I looked over, I saw that someone had come out of the Caddy's room -- a man, medium height, slender, wearing a black knit shirt and black jeans, with a sleek-looking black leather coat over the monochromatic ensemble. He had close-cropped brown hair, military style, and as I watched, he leaned against the cinder-block wall and lit up a cigarette. I realized I was staring when he cocked an eyebrow at me, and went back to studying the sky. The moon was almost full, a big white eye staring back.

"I hope you're not a werewolf," the man said.

I looked at him, startled. His cigarette glowed hot red, then subsided to embers. He blew smoke out into the clear, still air, and it hung indecisively between us.

He made a lazy gesture up at the sky with his free hand. "Moon," he said. "Full."

"Not quite," I said.

"Not quite full, or not quite werewolf?"

I showed teeth. "Either way, I don't eat strangers."

He sucked smoke and considered me silently. I wasn't sure about him. If I'd really been what I appeared to be -- a young woman, alone, in the middle of nowhere in a deserted motel, vulnerable -- then I'd have been deeply worried. But I wasn't, and he was right about one thing: I was a man-eater when I needed to be. Even if David had taken a long walk and wouldn't be around to defend my honor, I was quite capable of doing it myself.

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I drifted up into the aetheric, which was just as still and silent as the desert in real-world; it was layered in white and silver and velvet blues, and it was full of that silent pulse, too, that powerful sense of being. But the Man In Black was just a man, not a Djinn, not a Warden. Hence, nothing to be worried about.

Except that his aetheric image was ... unsettling. Most normal humans don't display well on the aetheric -- they're shapes, ill-defined, insubstantial. Not enough presence and power to manifest clearly. But this guy was different. In the aetheric, he was bigger, more muscular, and instead of being dressed in black he was dressed in white. Or, it would have been white, if it hadn't been drenched in blood.

Blood running in thick streams from his hands as he lifted the cigarette to his lips. Pattering from his earlobes to his shoulders. Dripping from his elbows and the hem of his coat. He was standing in a pool of it, shining red, and he just kept dripping. I couldn't tell if the blood was someone else's, or his own -- whether he thought he was a murderer or a victim.

Either way, it was disturbing. I'd never seen anything like it. People saw themselves as supermodels, yeah. Gender-switchers. Knights in armor. Kick-ass bitches in leather jumpsuits. Maybe the occasional pirate. People tended to dress themselves up in their soul-selves, and it was one big, long costume party up on the aetheric.

But he was just ... odd. So full of oddness that it made me shiver.

I dropped back into my body with a snap, took one last deep breath of cool air, and walked away, toward the office.

"Hey," the guy said. I glanced back. He hadn't moved, but he flicked his cigarette down to the ground and crushed it out with his boot. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

I kept walking.

The creaking glass door brought with it a rush of too-hot air and a smell of slightly stale cheap cologne, tobacco, body odor gone just slightly rancid. For a second I wondered if I'd be better off outside with the creepy guy, but the man behind the counter was grizzled, sixtyish, had little half glasses and crazed Albert Einstein hair, and who could be scared of

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Einstein? He was reading a magazine he hastily stashed under the counter when he saw me coming. I didn't imagine he was reading it for the articles, if you know what I mean.

"Hi," I said. He grunted, pale eyes studying me. "Listen, you're probably an expert on roads around here. I'm looking for some way to get to Las Vegas that's not as direct as the freeways. Maybe a scenic route? Back roads?"

He frowned at me, thick eyebrows rustling together, and I resisted the urge to tell him that if he wasn't careful they might stick together like Velcro; he reached under the counter, rummaged around, and came out with a big road map that he unfolded out onto the cracked vinyl-topped counter between us. He didn't bother to turn it toward me.

"Scenic," he said. "Ain't a lot of scenic around here unless you fancy desert."

"I like desert."

"All looks the same," he shrugged. "Seen one part of it, seen it all. Better off sticking to the highway, get there quicker. You break down out here, you ain't got a lot of help coming. Cell phones don't work a lot of places. Sun gets brutal."

"I know," I said. I knew all about the sun in the desert. That was a memory I didn't call up often, and flinched away from it. "Just show me."

He traced a couple of skinny little road map lines with a blunt, stained finger -- evidently, he worked on the Ford himself to keep it running, and he'd never heard of those industrial-strength grease-cutting soaps -- and I made some notes on a fly-specked piece of paper with a stubby pencil.

The proprietor looked over my shoulder as I wrote, staring out through the glass door. He grunted again. I looked up, then back; Caddy Guy was out there, smoking another cigarette, strolling the parking lot and blowing clouds at the sky.

"Friend of yours?" he asked.

"Don't know him," I said.

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"Huh." He looked at me, pale eyes bright behind the Einstein glasses. "Saw you with a young fella earlier. Not him?"

"No, not him."

"Where's your young fella, then?"

"Asleep," I said shortly. "Thanks for the info."

"Checkout's at eleven a.m. sharp," he said, and folded up the map with a snap of his wrists and thick rustle of paper. I was right, those eyebrows were just never separating again. He'd have to get out the scissors to cut them apart. "You oversleep, you got to pay another day."

I wasn't about to oversleep. I could feel my body craving rest, but it'd have to get by; no way was I going to shut my eyes at this point. Not with blood-dripping-guy stalking the parking lot, and Slightly Creepy Einstein in here watching my every move.

I missed David.

I left the office and avoided my fellow motel visitor on my way back to my room. I unlocked the door quickly with the chunky old-fashioned key, locked it behind me with the push-in lock and the deadbolt and the slide chain, checked the drapes to make sure they were fully closed, and sat on the cold, empty bed with my legs crossed.

I drifted up on the aetheric and sent out a wordless call along the shining silver strand that bound me to David, or David to me, or both of us to the other. I felt it zip away, stretching off into the distance ... far, far away.

Wherever he'd gone, it wasn't just distant in terms of geography. I felt a pulse of reassurance along the link, something along the lines of I hear you, back as soon as I can. Nothing clearer than that.

I meditated until my back got sore, and then braced myself against the headboard and picked up the book David had left behind. I'd always liked Spenser, and the clean, crisp rhythm of Parker's words.

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Even so, I was only three pages into it when I fell asleep.

###

I woke up to screaming. Genuine, honest-to-God screaming. I flailed, dropping the forgotten book to the floor, vaulted out of bed and landed barefoot on the thin carpet with my heart pounding an erratic salsa rhythm. I jerked aside the curtains and winced at the sudden blinding blaze of light ... the motel faced east, and the sun was well over the horizon. Out here, you were strongly reminded that a star was a big ol' fusion reactor, because it looked dangerous and bubbling and radioactive, closer than it did in safer climates.

The screaming was coming from the Dairy Queen next door.

I stuck my feet into my shoes, grabbed up the key and unlocked the door with shaking hands, then pelted across the parking lot. On the way, I was joined by a dark figure heading out of the last room of the motel -- Number 10 -- who paused to pop the trunk on his Cadillac and retrieve something.

The screaming had the high, panicked pitch of a kid in real trouble. I skidded to a halt at the double doors of the DQ dining area and grabbed the handle, but it was locked. I rattled it and made a cave of my hands to try to see into the shadows inside.

I saw the girl who'd served up my shake pressed against the wall, fists crammed against her mouth. Still screaming. Staring at something hidden behind the counter. I banged on the door hard. Glass and metal rattled. She dashed over and did unlocking things, and as soon as the door was open threw herself on me like a shaking, girl-sized limpet. I couldn't make anything out of what she was gasping at me, so I peeled her off and edged over to peer over the counter.

I'd seen dead guys before, but this guy was really, really dead. In pieces. There was something particularly revolting about a dead guy in pieces on the floor of the DQ, under the brightly-colored posters advertising tasty frozen treats and brazier-cooked meat products.

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I swallowed hard, several times, and tried not to breathe through my nose.

"I'm no doctor," the guy in the black leather jacket said casually, leaning over the counter, "but that guy may need medical attention."

Laconic, and not funny. I whirled toward him. He had a shotgun propped casually up against his shoulder, and sunglasses pushed up on top of his head, and he looked bland and utterly disinterested as he stared down at the pieces of what had formerly been known as Bob or Fred or Joe.

"Call the police," I said. I was facing Mystery Man, but I was talking to the girl, who was hovering by the door. She pushed through and sped off at a run, hopefully for the phone in the motel office. "You know anything about this?"

"Why would I?" he asked.

"You come fully equipped for killing people."

"Yeah, not for chopping them into bits, though. And you seem awfully damn calm about it," he pointed out. I wasn't, in fact. My heart was pounding hard, and my hands were shaking, but I knew how to fake it. "Look, I was kidding about that werewolf thing last night, but ..."

"Can it." I could do a lot of things, but quipping over a corpse was a little beyond my gag limit. "Any idea who he is?"

"Not a clue." He studied me for a few seconds. "Let's take this outside. We've already left enough forensic crap on the scene of the crime."

He spun on his heel and walked out, elbowing the door open rather than using his hand. Fingerprints, right. I'd left mine all over it. Out in the sunlight, he looked even more normal than before -- not a remarkable face, dark eyes, intermediate-colored skin, eyes and nose and mouth all in normal proportions. Nothing you'd fall instantly in love with or photograph or remember five minutes later.

Except for the deadly-looking shotgun he was holding, of course. That made him stand out.

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He saw me staring at it and dropped the barrel to point toward the ground. "Precaution," he said.

"You always carry that kind of stuff?"

"Pretty much, yeah." He walked back to the Caddy's open trunk and stowed it away in a rack that seemed specifically built for the purpose. Or maybe it was meant to hold fishing rods. How would I know? "What's your name?"

I wasn't planning to get chummy with the potentially crazy and definitely well-armed. "Gail." Gail, as in gale-force winds. I'd have gone for Wendy if it hadn't been so cute and associated with fast food.

"You?"

"Brian McCall," he said. "Pleased to meet you." He slammed the trunk, pocketed the keys, and leaned against the dusty car. "We've got about ten minutes, give or take, to get our story straight."

"Story? I don't have a story. Maybe you have a story."

"Oh, I've got one," he said, poker-faced. "But I'm talking about the story of the dead guy in the DQ. Which, seeing as I don't think the little girl did that, just leaves a few suspects. You, me, the motel manager, or some crazy drifter who happened to break into a Dairy Queen. The motel manager, he's local. They'll like to have a nice easy answer, and you and me, we're easy. Unless you've got an alibi."

I didn't. I swallowed hard.

"Didn't think so," he said, and rolled his shoulders in a gesture that wasn't quite a shrug. "Me neither. I was thinking ... want to be alibi buddies?"

"Not if you did it."

"Lady, if I did it, I'd damn sure be halfway across the state by now and not hanging around for the discovery of the corpse," McCall snapped, and I believed him. He looked like the

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kind who'd know exactly how to get away with murder. "I thought you checked in with some guy. Where's he?"

"Off on an errand," I said.

McCall fixed me with a stare. "The cops are going to be very interested about why he bugged out in the middle of the night. Not to mention how he bugged out, seeing as you came in the same car and we're in the ass of nowhere."

Lies were going to get too elaborate. I kept silent, staring back, and raised an eyebrow. McCall, unexpectedly, grinned at me.

"I like you," he said. "You don't fluster."

"I'm too damn tired to fluster."

He started to say something, then stopped, face smoothing back into an expressionless mask. His eyes were fixed somewhere just over my shoulder.

"What?" I started to turn.

"Don't move," he said. I froze. "Stay here."

He hit the remote control on his keys and popped the trunk of his car, yanked the shotgun out of its brace, and headed for the office.

Great. My new alibi buddy was about to rob the place. My day was just getting better.

###

I didn't stay put, but hell, I never do what anybody tells me to do, especially armed strangers I barely know. So I trailed along behind Brian McCall as he entered the office. He didn't seem to be wasting any time alarming people; the DQ girl gave a full-throated shriek and made herself into a tiny little ball in the corner, and Einstein held up his hands in the world-weary posture of a guy who'd been through this before.

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McCall thumped the shotgun down on the counter and said, "I need the keys."

For a second, nobody moved, and then Einstein cleared his throat loudly and said, "Which keys would that be?"

"Master keys." I couldn't see McCall's face, but what I read of his body language seemed nonsense. "Right now. We haven't got much time."

"Should let the police handle this -- "

"I do that, more people get killed. Keys. Now."

Einstein moved one hand slowly toward a ring of keys and then thumped them on the counter. McCall picked them up in a jingle of metal, shouldered the shotgun again, and turned back to see me standing there.

"You're one of those," he said, and walked past me back into the cool, bright morning.

"One of those what?"

"Ones who don't stay put. Here. Make yourself useful." He tossed me the keys. "Open the rooms, one at a time. Stay off to the side when you do it."

He marched me over to Room 1. I slid the key marked 1 in the lock, edged as far over as I could, and turned it. McCall hit the door with his booted foot, and all of a sudden that shotgun was down, aimed and meaning business.

Nothing inside. He scanned it, went in to look at the bathroom, then joined me outside again and nodded at the next room.

Room 2 yielded nothing. I was in Room 3. Rooms 4 and 5, also nothing. I wondered when the cops were going to roll up, and wondered what they would make of us doing room-to-room searches of the armed and dangerous variety.

I was wondering about then when I turned the key to Room 6, McCall hit the door, and something loomed out of the dark inside and hit him back.

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He hurtled at least twenty feet across the parking lot, hit, rolled, and lay there limp. I hesitated, shocked, and whipped my head back to stare at the open door of the motel room.

Inside, something large and hulking blinked luminous eyes at me, and I saw the glint of teeth.

And felt a sudden hot gust of wind whip around my legs, swirl up my body, and twist my hair around my face.

It took a step outside into the parking lot, and I had about a half a second to figure out what it was. What it wasn't was easy, because it damn sure wasn't human. It was too big, too twisted, too powerful. I instinctively used Oversight, and damn if I didn't see a great, big red ball of fire, twisting in on itself, full of agony and pain and breathtaking, jagged fury ...

Oh shit.

That was a Djinn. And not just any Djinn. That was a Djinn infected with a Demon Mark. It was destroying itself in the fight, losing itself, and it might be able to win and survive, but meanwhile, it was being eaten alive and the Demon in it wanted to feed ... to ...

I became aware of three things: one, a police cruiser with flashing blue and red lights and a moaning siren was speeding up the road toward the motel; two, McCall was crawling over the pavement behind me; and three, that the body in pieces in the Dairy Queen had probably been a Warden.

And then the Djinn focused on me, and the Demon Mark recognized me as a Warden, and hunger flared in those glowing white-hot eyes. It lunged for me, and I didn't have any time for finesse; I skipped backwards, screaming, and reached out for the wind. If the Djinn wasn't anchoring itself completely, then the wind should disperse it enough to give me some time ...

The wind did nothing but ruffle the rags the Djinn was still barely wearing. She'd been female, at some point, or at least liked to manifest in female form. I slammed a harder gust of wind at her, well aware that I was draining energy out of the atmosphere and something

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was going to have to create balance for it. Molecules rushed in to fill empty spaces, vibrating faster; temperatures rose from the friction of atom against atom.

But it was too slow. Wind wasn't going to stop this thing, and the weather system was way too stable for me to get anything out of it in time to save my life. No rivers around to redirect ...

Water. Strictly speaking, Djinn didn't need air to breathe; they could adapt themselves just fine. But one thing all cells need, no matter how artificial: they need water just to have form.

I'd never done it before, but it came to me in a blinding and rather scary flash, and I didn't stop to think, I just acted.

I reached out my power into a bubble, surrounded the Djinn, and called every microscopic speck of water out of it.

It was like watching something freeze-dry in time lapse ... between one step and another, the insane Djinn went from huge and bulky and twisted to dry and thin and twisted, a husk of what it had been. It had made itself too real, and reality required human building blocks. Without water, its muscles couldn't function to move. Nerves couldn't conduct impulses.

It let go of flesh and became vapor and flew at me, screaming. I threw up a wall of wind and slammed the vapor back against the cinder-block wall and held it there, pinned. It was strong, oh God it was strong, and it was full of hunger and black fury, and I couldn't keep this up all day. Too many variables, too many witnesses ...

The Djinn snarled and solid or not, proved it was capable of a little weather-manipulation of its own; I sensed the wind coming and braced myself, but didn't dare let up on the Djinn to summon up any kind of shield. It hit me hard and fast, a linebacker of a wind packed with scouring sand, and I was knocked off balance and sprawled full length on the pavement, and the wind kept howling, growing, taking on a life of its own as it swept up sand and random trash into an unsteady broad circle around me.

Trying to form a dust devil. Dust devils are a version of a tornado, one without the killing interaction of moisture and air; they're a dry-air phenomenon, and lack the force to really

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kill.

Unless, of course, they're powered from an outside force, like the Djinn I was trying to hold helpless against the wall.

I felt my control slipping.

"David!" I yelled, and clawed my hair out of my eyes. "David, I need -- "

But my command was stopped in my throat, rammed back by a monster punch of wind that nearly blew out my lungs. I was pulled off the ground, whirling. I had a great view of the wind dying around the Djinn, and it reforming into flesh and blood, staring up at me and snarling as the dust devil tossed me around like a toy. Heat lightning shimmered across the sky.

The police car, speeding toward us, suddenly left the road and flipped over into the air four or five times, or maybe I lost count because of my own sickening spin ... I saw it in flashes, the metal crunching, bits flying off, the horrible rending shriek of metal.

I had to stop this. Now.

I reached out for the wind, and tried to grab hold, but it was under the Djinn's control and fought me, fought me hard, lashed me bloody with debris and then dropped me with casual, cruel suddenness to the hard ground.

I rolled over, gasping, and saw the Djinn looming over me, and there was something in its mouth, something horrible and I remembered it all too well, the Demon twisting its way into my body and soul ... never again, never again ...

A boom like Armageddon tore the world in half. No, not the world, just the Djinn. It staggered back, a huge hole in its middle, surprise on that twisted face, and I smelled gunpowder and looked up to see Brian McCall standing there with his shotgun smoking in his hands. Pale and scraped, but upright. He pumped it and pulled the trigger a second time.

"You can't kill it!" I screamed at him, and spotted something shiny lying in the weeds

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growing next to the wall. I lunged for it, praying, and felt the Djinn gathering its insane strength behind me. When it struck, it wasn't going to screw around; it was going to flatten me, McCall, the motel, and everything in sight.

Or it was going to come after one of us and put that Demon Mark down our throats.

Either way, I couldn't let it happen.

There was a brown glass beer bottle half-buried in the weeds. I pulled it out, breathless, shaking, and held it up to the light.

No cracks.

Also, nothing to use for a cork.

No time to worry about it. I felt the hot rush of power behind me, rolled over on my back and held the bottle up in both hands toward the sky and the Djinn, who was falling on me like a storm, and screamed, "Be thou bound to my service! Be thou bound to -- "

It grabbed me by the ankle and yanked. I slid across the parking lot in an abrading scrape of back on asphalt, and somehow managed not to drop the bottle. McCall had his shotgun aimed, but there was no way he could do anything without hitting me as well, and besides, I wasn't sure the Djinn would even pay attention to a little pellet spray, not with a Warden in its hands.

"-- to my service! Be thou --"

It fell on me, driving the breath out of me; it felt exactly like a two-hundred-pound wrestler had dropped with both knees onto my rib cage. I felt things crack, saw red flashing stars, and felt a jet of agony spray through me like acid. My third repetition dissolved into an inarticulate scream, and I felt the Djinn's hand -- or whatever passed for it -- scrabbling at my mouth, trying to hold it wide open ...

Something yanked it off.

I blinked, whooping in painful gasps, and saw that another Djinn was materializing behind

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the insane one -- bronze and gold, swirls of power, hot molten eyes, fury ...

David.

He put his forearm across the other Djinn's throat and yanked it upright and screamed at me, "Finish it!"

I could barely get my breath, but I forced enough in and whispered, " -- bound to my service," and the Demon-infected Djinn dissolved in an explosion of mist, and I felt the bottle in my hand grow instantly cold and heavy. I slapped my hand over the top of the bottle.

"Cork," I whispered, but David didn't respond. He couldn't. Those were the rules ... he couldn't provide anything to do with bottles or corks, couldn't touch his own bottle or those of other Djinn. "Shit. Forgot."

He knelt next to me, holding me up, combing hair away from my face. Frantic. I didn't have time for that, not now, I was too aware of the bottle I was holding, the energy contained by nothing more than my hand, and the darkness unraveling the edges of my vision. I was going to pass out. If I did, my hand would fall off of the bottle, and ...

I looked up into the sky and called rain. It took a few minutes to get what little moisture there was in the area crammed together, and rub the molecules together enough to produce the energy necessary. McCall, who hadn't moved from where he was standing, shotgun still at half-mast, stared at me without any understanding of what I was doing, but when a lightning bolt suddenly whipped out of the clouds forming above he ducked for cover.

Rain fell in a hard silver curtain, brutally fast, hitting my exposed skin in cold slaps. I didn't care. The chill and pain anchored me, kept me awake. I blinked away water and looked at David. Water didn't touch him, just vanished into tiny wisps of steam a few inches from his body. He was staring at me with an intent half-frown, and when the ground was wet enough, I smiled and turned the bottle upside down, removed my hand and dug it into the mud. Screwed it in tight.

Mud squeezed into the mouth of the bottle three inches deep. I let go of the rain and bled

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the energy off into sheet lightning, white flares across the sky. Static electricity crawled power lines and hummed, but the rain stopped. Clouds swirled, confused, and the sun burned through in a matter of minutes.

Only the sun was eternal, out here.

I didn't have power over that, but I did over the water; I concentrated on the bottle and yanked the moisture out of the mud packing the mouth and neck of it, jamming it tight as concrete.

And then I remembered to breathe. Ow. It hurt.

David got me up to my feet, mainly by supernatural strength. "Tell me to heal you," he said.

"Yeah, good idea. Heal me, would you?"

I felt it come over me in a hot golden rush, the feeling of his power moving through me -- or my own power, amplified and changed through him. Given form. The grating agony of ribs went away with sharp little glasslike stabs as bones knitted. I coughed and spat blood, wiped my mouth and looked at the innocent-seeming bottle in my hand. Sealed, it felt like any other bottle half-full of dry mud. I could toss it at the side of the road and nobody would pay any attention.

But something like this shouldn't ever be broken again.

I shook my head and focused on David. He looked -- well, like David. With just an unsettling, unfamiliar trace of exhaustion in his face, and a shadow in his eyes.

"Where were you?" I asked. He shook his head. "No bullshit, David. Where were you? Where were you?"

Rule of three. His eyes flared for a second, and then he said, "Talking to Jonathan. Trying to -- trying to find a way for this to work."

"Any luck with that?"

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I already knew the answer, from the frustration I could feel radiating off of him. "No."

I nodded wearily, and looked past him at Brian McCall, who'd evidently decided not to shoot us.

"What," McCall asked in a very reasonable voice, "the fuck was that?"

I looked at David. David looked at me, raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

"That," I answered, "was a Djinn. So's this. And trust me, you're not going to want to talk about any of it."

###

It took a little bit of time. I'm not an Earth Warden; altering memories isn't all that easy, even for Djinn, and it sure wasn't in my normal skill set. David fetched a second wrecked car (and that nearly wiped out what power reserves I had left) and we arranged the poor dead guy from the Dairy Queen in the wreckage, then woke up the cop from the police cruiser, who'd fortunately benefited from the presence of airbags and seat belts. I patiently, fraudulently explained the accident. Luckily, the girl had been too panicked to give anything like a rational explanation on the phone, and with the DQ sparkly-clean and nobody backing her hysterical story of finding him dead inside, the cop went with the obvious.

I might have helped that along a little by depleting the oxygen around her and letting her hyperventilate and pass out in the middle of her story.

McCall didn't say a thing to contradict me. His shotgun back in the trunk, he was the picture of innocence, his scrapes and bruises explained by his efforts to get inside the wreckage and save the dead man.

Once the excitement was over, we watched the wrecker clear everything away, and I said to McCall, "We need to talk."

"Figured that," he said. "You going to do some voodoo on me?"

I turned to face him. The sun was up and in full fury now; sweat stung my eyes, and I

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reached up to tie my hair back with a rubber band from the pocket of my jeans. Possibly in deference to the fact that David was standing next to me, looking human but entirely dangerous, McCall didn't lower his stare to my breasts while I did that.

"Why did you come here?" I asked. "You were tracking it, right?"

He shrugged. "Nobody believed me. Series of mutilations through the Southwest, heading this way -- I thought it was some kind of werewolf, actually. Never thought it'd be -- what was it?"

"A Djinn."

"Right. Always thought of those as being cute, dressed in pink and purple ..."

"Too much television," I said. "How long has this been happening?"

"I tracked it from Michigan," he said.

"Show me on a map."

He traced the roads we'd taken. Dammit. This thing had followed me. If it had just been heading for the same destination, it could have easily beaten us there. It had been stalking me, and I'd finally allowed it to close in.

When I looked up, he was staring at me with nothing at all in his face or his eyes. "It killed a friend of mine," he said. "I watched her die, and I couldn't stop it. It tore her apart right in front of me."

"I'm -- I'm sorry."

He ignored that. "Is it dead?"

I exchanged a look with David. "Not -- dead exactly. But confined. It's not getting out."

"I want it dead, not confined."

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"I know. I'm sorry."

"No, you don't know. I want it dead, do you understand? I want its guts strewn over half the county. I want its fucking head on a pike!" The sudden burst of fury out of him was unexpected and shocking, because he did such a good job of hiding it behind that casual toughness. I swallowed, but didn't flinch. He balled up his fists at his sides and took a step into my space. "Now you let it out of whatever prison it's in and give it to me. I'll -- "

"You'll end up dead," David said flatly. He hadn't moved, but there was a sense that he had, that he'd gotten larger, somehow. "Guts strewn over half the county. And it wouldn't bother to stop and put your head on a pike, because you wouldn't matter enough. People don't matter. They're only vessels, or meat. What's in that bottle is insane, and it's powerful, and it's far out of your ability to destroy." His eyes went dark. "Now you need to take a step back, because I promise you, I'm not going to let you touch her."

McCall said nothing. His eyes burned, but they were just human eyes, after all. He didn't strike me as the type to step off from a fight, but this time, he did. He must have had the sense to know that David wasn't kidding.

I cleared my throat. "Look, McCall -- you have to trust me. I'm not letting this thing go, all right? But you have to do something for me. You have to stay quiet about it."

He pulled his stare from David to lock it on me. There was a bleak fury in him, but a bleak humor, too. "Fuck. I look like the chatty type to you?" he asked, and jammed his hands in his pockets. "In my line of work, keeping your mouth shut is a condition of continued breathing." He shook his head and walked away.

I watched as he got into the dusty Cadillac and drove it off the lot. No good-bye wave. Not even a glance back.

When I turned back to David and took his hand, I caught sight of the proprietor of the Desert Inn standing in his doorway, watching us. Amazing. He hadn't bothered to come out for the excitement, but now he was watching.

He tapped his watch. "Eleven thirty," he yelled. "You owe me for another day."

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I blinked. "What about him?" I gestured at McCall's Cadillac as it crested the hill and disappeared into the vastness of the desert.

"What about him? That bastard's dangerous, I ain't asking him for money. You, you got to pay another seventy dollars. Plus damages for all those doors you broke in."

Some days, being heroic really doesn't pay.

###

We negotiated it down to an even hundred, and got Mona back out on the road in half an hour. Heading for Las Vegas. Since the motel owner was ripping me off anyway, I'd borrowed a couple of pillows, and they were tightly tied around the beer bottle. As soon as I had a chance, I'd hand it over to a Warden, who could get it back to New York to put into the vault.

David was characteristically silent as I drove, the sun flickering over his skin and hair. He wasn't reading. He was watching the landscape slide by outside the window. Sand, cactus, more sand. Not a lot to see.

"We're not going to make it," he said softly, after a while.

I hoped like hell he was talking about Las Vegas.

"We will," I said, and held out my hand.

He took it, and the warmth of it made me smile and settle deeper into the comfortable seat, and urge another few miles an hour out of the Dodge Viper.

We were on our way to a fight I couldn't begin to imagine, but dammit, we had each other, and that was, for the moment, enough.

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