

Midnight at Mart's

a new Weather Warden short story by Rachel Caine

This story falls between the end of *Chill Factor*, the third novel of the Warden series, and *Windfall*, the fourth novel.

Quitting the Wardens sounded like a really, really good idea at the time. I mean, there's nothing like going out in a blaze of glory with a great exit line, kicking sand in the bully's face, all that stuff. And it did feel good, when I told my bosses to stuff it, and exited stage left with my dignity intact.

Besides, I wasn't exactly losing on the deal, thanks to Rahel's parting gift of cash and newly-minted (and hopefully valid) credit cards. I was feeling like the star of my own slightly over-the-top action film as I burned rubber out of the hotel parking lot and onto the endless desert road.

That feeling wore off after thirty minutes of monotonous travel. After that, I was just feeling tired, achy from all my assorted abuse of the past few days and weeks, and ... lonely.

I couldn't decide whether I loved the desert, or hated it. Bit of both, I supposed. There was something eerie and remote about the vast stretches of land; it seemed so unapproachable, and so empty. Hostile. But when the sun touched it just right, layered it in velvet and gold, it was like a goddess had opened her jewelry box. The sky was a bright, brilliant turquoise, with a glittering diamond sun. The road gleamed like onyx.

I kept the Viper's air conditioning on high. Experiencing the beauties of nature is one thing. Sweating through it is something I like to leave to sturdier people ... say, some who haven't been killed a few times, beaten up, and nearly drowned. I deserved a little peace and comfort, right? I did. I was convinced of that. In fact, I got myself good and worked up about how much I deserved not to be tossed in the center of the crossfire again.

I was so convinced that when I felt the air shift around me in patterns not associated with the air conditioner, and sensed a presence forming in the passenger seat next to me, I felt a flash of utter fury. Enough, already. I'm done. "Get lost," I said flatly to whatever Djinn was about to pay me a visit. It wouldn't be David, and he was the only one I wanted to spend time with at the moment.

Sure enough, it was Rahel. The tall, elegant Djinn looked over at me as she manifested herself, and I returned the favor just for a second. She looked great, as always. Gorgeous, smoothly groomed, dressed in a lime sherbet color that was something of a change from her usual neon shades but still startling against her dark chocolate skin. Eyes of a haunting shade of gold. She'd done something new with her hair. Still in cornrows, but there were more beads woven in, shades of greens and golds and blues. Vaguely Egyptian.

"Is that any way to greet someone who saved your life?" she asked. And yes, she had. More than once, technically. But I wasn't feeling all that fair at the moment.

"Sure, when they just drop uninvited into a moving car. Seriously. Whatever chain you want to yank, yank it and go. I'm done with the drama."

I pressed additional speed out of the Viper. When I'm pissed, I drive aggressively. Yeah, like you don't. Please.

"I need something from you," Rahel said soberly. "A boon."

Wait a minute. Wait just a damn minute. The Djinn didn't ask for favors. They granted them. Grudgingly, sure, but in accordance with an agreement laid down in the mists of time and space. Their view was that mortals basically had nothing they wanted, so ... a favor? Weird.

I thought about it for several seconds, eyes fixed on the road. My shoulders were hurting. I deliberately relaxed them, or at least tried to; apparently while I'd been thinking of other things, my muscles had been replaced with metal guy wires, strung at maximum tension.

"What kind of favor?" I asked.

"Return to the Wardens."

I blinked. Surely I hadn't heard her right. "Why?"

Rahel drummed her sharp-nailed talons on the window glass next to her -- dry, clicking sounds that tightened those guy wires just another ratchet. "They have need of you."

"Oh, please. If you weren't Free Djinn, I'd swear some Warden had put you up to this, but ..." One had. Crap. "Lewis sent you."

The steady percussive rhythm of her tapping continued, as annoying as fingernails scraping paint.

"No," I said. "I'm not going back. Not for Lewis. Not for anybody. I'm done, Rahel, and you can tell him that for me. I'm not putting up with the bullshit, I'm not playing politics, and I'm not going to make compromises and tell myself it's for a just cause. I'm no longer Warden material."

Rahel's eyes narrowed. Burning. "I am asking as a favor, sistah. Understand me. This is not something I do lightly."

"Or ever, I'm guessing," I said. "Respect, babe, but I'm not doing it. Not for you. Not even for Lewis. I got their asses out of a sling, and that's all I'm good for. Just let me rest."

She laughed. It was a thick, velvety laugh, dark with possibilities. It raised the fine hairs on my arms. If tigers could laugh ... "Dead men rest very well."

I hit the brakes. The Viper's tires grabbed, screamed, slid and fishtailed. Even before the car had come to a complete stop, I turned to face her. I was feeling an overburn of fury, and I'm pretty sure she read it in my expression. Or aura, at least. "Don't you dare threaten me," I said, low and certain. "You're a Djinn, sure, but you're not claimed, and I'm a well-trained Warden at the top of my game. Maybe both of us get hurt. I don't care."

Her face went utterly still. With the Egyptian-style beading in her hair, it gave her an eerie look, like Tutankhamen's gorgeous funeral mask.

"You presume," she said. "Crawling mortals do not threaten the Djinn. You should know better."

"I'm tired of pussy-footing around your ego. You have a problem with it? Leave!" I roared it at her. It occurred to me, in that red-tinged moment, that I was doing something really stupid, but I'd had enough crap, and I was being human. Unreasonable. Taking out my wounded, scared feelings on the first likely target.

Well, at least she was up to it.

Rahel regarded me with bright-swirling eyes, as incandescent as the sun above, and I was coldly reminded of the kinds of powers the Djinn could touch, if they chose. Of the vastness of their history, and the fragile bonds that constituted Djinn civilization, at least as it related to humans.

"I will go," she said. "But you should have been more mannered, Snow White. Remember that when you find yourself ... lacking."

And she was gone. She went without fanfare or warning, another shift of air and a slight popping sound, like what you get when you twist the lid on a sealed jar.

I was shaking all over. Hysteria, fury, fear ... shame. Why had I yelled at Rahel? I thought I'd been at the top of the world, when I'd pulled away from the motel, and yet here I was, less than an hour out of town, throwing the most dangerous sort of tantrum. Lashing out.

Humans are weird like that. I had no excuse.

I breathed in and out for a while, then wiped sweat from my forehead, turned up the air conditioner, and put the Viper back in gear.

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I didn't think she meant it literally, about finding myself lacking.

Rahel's revenge for my fit of temper became blindingly, stupidly apparent when I stopped at Mart's Texaco in Pine Springs, Arizona, because when I opened my wallet, it was empty. All the new credit cards: gone. All the cash she'd granted me earlier: missing. She'd been scrupulously fair about it. I still had what I'd had before her contributions.

Well, that was okay. I didn't need Djinn charity, I told myself self-righteously, and proffered my Warden-issued American Express card to pay for the gas.

It was dead as the proverbial doorknob. Figures. The Wardens hadn't let any grass grow in cutting me off the payroll.

It ain't cheap to gas up a Viper in this day and age. And I had exactly twenty-nine dollars and forty-two cents in my purse -- not enough to pay for the gas, much less the soda and pretzels I was craving. You know that feeling, right? That cold, sinking feeling. The freezer-burn of panic setting in when you semi-calmly check all the pockets and nooks and crannies and come up with an additional penny and a half a mint.

I was the only customer in the place at the moment, which was a relief; at least I didn't have some poor sucker standing behind me, shuffling his feet and sighing over my stupidity. No, I only had the cashier, a middle-aged balding man resplendent in his red canvas vest and nametag that said he was ED. He stared at me over the plastic jar of made-in-China American flags.

"Um ..." He was going to make me say it. He was just going to stand there and wait for it. Probably the most excitement he'd seen in days around here, unless somebody had driven off with the nozzle still in their gas tank. I took in a deep breath and felt my cheeks getting hot. "I'm sorry. I'm a few dollars short."

Nothing. Not even a blink. I got a blank, blue-eyed stare that lasted about an eternity, and then Ed abruptly said, "Seven dollars and twenty-six cents."

Oh, this wasn't going to be easy. "Yes, I know. I'm sorry, I just -- well, I don't have it. So ...?" I tried a smile. That got me nowhere. Without a change of expression, Ed picked up the phone next to him on the counter, punched buttons, and said, "Hello, Sheriff's Office? Oh, hey, Harry, how you doing? Yeah, it's Ed. ... Fine, fine. Listen, I got me a girl here who's trying to drive off without paying --"

"What?" I yelped, and made wild no motions. "I'm not! Honest! Look, I'm paying! Paying!" Because the last thing I needed was to get roused by the local police without the invisible might of the Wardens backing me up. Damn, Rahel was sneaky. She hadn't needed to risk breaking a nail in an undignified scuffle with me. All she had to do was step back.

I must have looked pitiful indeed, because Ed hesitated, sighed, said, "Never mind, Harry," and hung up the phone. He leaned on the counter -- a fiftyish guy, lean and sinewy, the kind who deals with truckers and assholes on a regular basis and isn't impressed by a bad mo-fo attitude (or, I was guessing, anything less than a rocket launcher). Tattoos in blurred patterns all up his forearms, crawling into the hidden territory under his short-sleeved shirt. Balding. He stared at me with those cold, empty eyes. "So?"

I did another frantic purse strip-search, which involved taking each and every thing out and laying it on the counter. Except for David's bottle, which was securely sealed and wrapped tight. If he wanted that, he could pry it out of my cold, dead fingers ...

I came up with a battered, faded ten dollar bill stuck in a hole in the lining. It looked as if it might have come

out the wrong end of the dog that chewed it. Ugh. I handed it over and took advantage of the mini bottle of hand sanitizer before I repacked my purse. Ed, with no visible change of expression, rang up the sale and handed back my change as I got myself together again. The crisis over, I was feeling hot and fluttery, and falsely relieved. Having come up with the money didn't exactly mean I was out of trouble. I had two dollars and change on which to drive to Florida in a car that drank gas like an alcoholic at open bar. I didn't want to end up holding a cardboard sign that said WILL (verb) FOR FOOD.

Ed kept staring at me. I couldn't detect any warmth in it at all. I finished repacking my purse, gathered up my soda and pretzels, and wondered what I had in my possession at the moment that I could hock. Not a hell of a lot. Damn.

"Hey," Ed called, as I headed for the door. I turned to look at him. He jerked his chin toward a sign hanging from the counter. It read, in jerky Magic Marker lines, HELP WANTED.

"Just thought you might want to apply," he said. "Not long-term or anything. Just for a while, to get you down the road."

I blinked. Offering to work off the debt had frankly never occurred to me. Now, that was a sure sign I'd been a Warden for way too long.

"Apply?" I echoed. Man, I sounded dumb. Might have been why he was being so kind, after the equally brainless floor show with the lack of money. "Oh. Um ... I don't have a place to stay." And I'd slept in my car for two weeks on the way to Las Vegas; no way was I going to make it a life choice. I was way too sore, my body far too abused. "Maybe I'd better keep on going."

Smiling transformed him. He was a hard guy, no doubt about it -- those tattoos were probably the least of it -- but there was something sweet and gentle and warm about his smile that made me feel cozy inside. "That car's going to run dry in a couple hundred miles. What are you going to do then? I'm just saying, there's a lot of trouble to be asking. You could stay here a week, eat cheap, sleep on the cot in the back so long as you don't object to twelve-hour shifts, seven days a week."

I gave him a long stare. "How much?"

"Six an hour. That's as much as I can pay. Free soda, though. One free hot dog a day."

I considered. That was seventy-two dollars a day, and if I stayed a week, that would be enough money, hypothetically, to get me back home and cushion me a little. And Ed seemed hard, but he didn't seem scary. Not in that backwoods chain-your-ankle-to-the-bedpost way, anyway. I had the impression that he was honestly trying to do me a good turn.

As I thought about it, his blue eyes wandered back around and fixed somewhere over my shoulder. Staring right through me. "Of course," he said, and the smile was long vanished, "if you want to move along, that's your business. I don't like to get in anybody's business. Maybe you got some other ways to earn money, pretty lady like you."

I took three steps back to the counter, leaned on it, and got his stare straight-on. "Meaning?"

His thin eyebrows levitated. "Nothing."

Yeah, right. "I'm not allergic to honest work!"

"Good thing," he said. "Got a toilet to clean. Second door, can't miss it."

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He wasn't kidding. The toilet really did need cleaning, in the worst way. The work wasn't so hard, though,

and it had been a long time since I'd donned the bright yellow gauntlets and wielded the toilet brush in battle. There was a kind of simple-minded satisfaction when I threw everything in the bucket and looked around at a nice, clean, gleaming bathroom.

I ached like hell, all over, but then again, I'd been aching before. Not a huge problem. And at least this had the feeling of accomplishment to it, instead of that wire-bound nervous tension I'd had before. Physical labor might actually do me some good.

When I came out, sweaty and triumphant, Ed gave me a grudging nod of thanks and tossed me a red vest. It had a hand-lettered nametag on it that said JOANNE.

"You know how to work a register?" he asked. I didn't. He gave me a ten-minute tutorial, punctuated with frowns and shakes of his head, until I could ring up a sale, cancel one, and make change to his satisfaction. We covered emergency cut-off switches, what to do in case of emergencies (like drive-offs, guys with handguns, and teens trying to buy beer and cigarettes).

And then Ed stripped off his red vest, hung it on a hook in the back, and fixed me with the coldest stare I've ever seen. Including anything from a Djinn.

"I'm trusting you," he said. "You run off with the till, you can't run far enough. Get me?"

I got him. I nodded, one quick dip of my chin, and held his stare. "I'm not a thief," I said. Well, that was stretching the truth a bit, but in my heart, I meant it. "I'll take care of things here."

"I'll be back in an hour. You have a problem, my cell phone number's on the note next to the phone. But don't have a problem."

With that, he turned around and banged out of the back fire door, which thunked solidly shut behind him.

I put on my red vest, adjusted it a couple of times, and gave up. Couture, it wasn't. I perched on the wooden backless stool behind the counter and looked around for entertainment. Free sodas, he'd said. I retrieved a cold one from the cooler and drank it with a clear conscience as I flipped through the latest issue of Entertainment Weekly.

As I was wondering what the hell Viggo Mortensen thought he was doing wearing that godawful bolero tuxedo thing, the brass bell jingled at the door, and I looked up with my heart hammering, expecting to see a masked robber. Because that was kind of my luck.

Nope. Just a guy. He sauntered around the store, bought a candy bar, came and paid for gas and food. Nothing special happened, except that he had a nice smile and told me I was easier on the eyes than ol' Ed.

I went back to the magazine afterward.

The rest of the hour went pretty much the same: customers, no emergencies. When Ed returned, he looked just a little surprised to find that I'd inventoried the cash and totted up all of the sales by item in his absence.

Thus ended my first two hours of indentured servitude. It was better, on the whole, than being a Djinn.

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Twelve hours is a long time, in a convenience store. Especially one like Mart's, which wasn't exactly the crossroads of excitement ... the Entertainment Weekly's charms paled fast. I moved on to Martha Stewart's Living, only because it was within reach. It wasn't too likely, even now that I had free time, that I'd feel moved to make origami swans or match table linens with my curtains.

Before long, I was stir crazy enough to come out from behind the register and start inventory against Ed's

meticulous list. So that's where I was, counting Snickers bars, when the brass bell rang over the door, and things took a radical turn for the nasty.

Night had fallen hard and cold outside -- the dry air didn't hold in the day's simmering heat. It was creeping up toward 10 p.m., and I was looking forward to closing up shop and hitting that narrow little cot in the back room at midnight. Ed hadn't taken off like I'd thought he might; maybe he was worried I'd shoplift some Cheerios if he didn't keep an eye on me. Anyway, I didn't resent it. I wouldn't have trusted me, either.

I wrote down the number of Snickers in the box and looked up, a smile on my lips, to see who was coming in the door, but I couldn't really see. He was hidden by the rack of chips (Lay's, mostly). But what I could see was Ed's face, and I felt something clench up inside of me when I saw that blank, iron-hard expression.

I stayed very still. He was focused on the door, but I saw his left hand, the one hidden from whoever was standing there, gently motion me back. I swallowed hard and silently took three steps back, to the end of the row, then crouched down and crawled around the rack. I was now between the picnic supplies and the glass-fronted refrigerated beverage case. There was cold beer next to me. I felt a moment's wistful longing, but I needed to figure out what was happening up front. Ed wasn't my best buddy, but he'd been fair to me ... more than fair. And he'd trusted me.

"Hey, Israel," Ed said. "I wasn't expecting you."

"Why would you?" said a new voice. Soft, whispery, chilling. Like somebody who'd gargled with acid, or gotten clotheslined in a not-so-friendly game of football. "How's business, Ed? Good?"

Ed's voice stayed exactly the same temperature. "Tolerable."

"Doesn't sound all that positive, bro. Free enterprise is supposed to set you free, not make you a slave to the almighty cash register. Or so I hear." The hoarse whisper sounded amused. Not in a good way. I edged cautiously forward, hands and knees, watching out for reflections in the glass. As a precaution, I allowed myself a barely even noticeable violation of the rules, as a non-practicing Warden: I fogged up the glass, just a little, just enough to hide my image. The part that reflected the counter and the door was still perfectly visible.

But there wasn't anybody standing there. So far as I could tell, anyway ... I could see the door, the rack of potato chips, and Ed standing frozen behind the counter.

Of the mysterious Israel, not a sign.

"You buying something?" Ed asked, and deliberately broke his stare to reach for a cloth and wipe down the battered Formica counter. I could sense the effort it took, to be that casual about it. I edged forward again, trying to catch a glimpse around the rack without risking my neck, but again, nothing. Not a sign, not a clue.

"Yeah," Israel said. "Got any candy bars? I've got a sweet tooth these days. Hungry all the time."

Ed paused in his wiping down of the counter, but kept his head down. I could have sworn I saw him flinch, but then he deliberately continued. "Sure. Down that aisle." He nodded at the place I'd been working. I heard the heavy thud of boots, but dammit, there was nothing in the mirror.

Now, I'm a modern girl. I've read Dracula. I've seen Buffy. I'm not totally without a clue. But who in their right mind could possibly expect to run into a vampire at Mart's Texaco in Pine Bluff, Arizona?

I pulled my head back like a scared turtle when I heard the scrape of footsteps on the other side of the food rack. Thin cover. I wasn't sure how much danger I was in, but I knew one thing: Ed wasn't the kind of guy to protect me unless he really believed it was serious. I held my breath and kept the glass fogged all along the bottom of the refrigerated case, just as insurance. That way, if he glanced that way, he wouldn't be treated to the undignified sight of a Weather Warden cowering on the not-too-clean linoleum floor.

Israel fumbled around in the Snickers bars I had so recently counted, and I heard his footsteps ambling back up toward the register. Weren't vampires supposed to be stealthy and quick? Not this guy. He was taking his time, and his footsteps sounded like he'd borrowed the Frankenstein monster's boots.

"Dollar six," Ed said. I risked another look. Love him or hate him, Ed was made of stern stuff; he was staring right at the man who was bellied up against the counter, and holding out his hand. The sale was insignificant, but I had the feeling that Ed was trying to make a point. Maybe if he let Israel take a candy bar, the next thing would be his life.

Israel himself was smaller than I'd have expected, considering the galumphing boots -- maybe five foot five, and either bald or in the habit of shaving his head. He had an elaborate rose tattooed on the shiny mirrorlike finish of his pale -- I mean pale as sour cream -- skin right at the back of his head, and he was clad, head to foot, in black leather. Including gloves. Sharp-looking sunglasses, from what I could see of the side of his face.

I'd never seen anybody that pale, including the melanin-deficient. His skin had a cold gray tone to it, as if it was made of clay. No veins showing underneath. Even the palest albino I'd ever met had a flush of veins showing, and a living tone to that alabaster skin; this was downright wrong.

Israel was staring at Ed. Ed was staring back, hand still extended. After a good, sweaty half a minute, Israel barked a hoarse laugh, reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out two crumpled dollar bills that he dropped in Ed's palm. "Keep the change," Israel said, and smiled. I only saw the edge of it, but that was weird and sinister enough to make me duck my head back again, heart pounding. Could he hear that? God, I hoped not. "And tell your girl I don't eat anybody I haven't been properly introduced to."

I didn't see Ed's face, but I knew my hands were shaking, and I wasn't easy to scare. I pressed them hard into the floor and stood up slowly. No point in hiding, obviously.

I regretted it as soon as my head passed the level of the food rack, because Israel had turned to look right at me. Even with the sunglasses hiding his eyes, I felt the pressure of his stare. His face was smooth and regular as marble. I couldn't say he was handsome, or not; there wasn't any human frame of reference that applied to a face that looked that ... dead.

I could see the trailing leaves of the rose tattoo spilling over around his neck, indigo blue against cold white. His jacket was zipped open, and he was wearing a black t-shirt underneath. A Grateful Dead t-shirt I remembered well, of a skeleton wearing a crown of roses, barely visible through the gap. He was narrowly built, compact, almost frail. I was right about the boots. They looked like they were made of concrete and painted black. Very Goth.

"Hi," I said in the silence. My voice was a little too high, but he probably wouldn't know that. Probably. "Sorry."

He inclined his head just a bit, not really a nod, more like he was zeroing in on the target. His smile came back, but it was fifty percent more charming. He didn't show teeth. "My name's Israel," he said. "And you are?"

"J -- " I choked it off fast, because I remembered what he'd said to Ed. I don't eat anybody I haven't been properly introduced to. "Just passing through."

He laughed. "Your nametag says different."

Crap. My heart contracted to a painful little walnut when he laughed, because the teeth that showed in his mouth didn't look right. Not right at all. Not vampiric, exactly, in the classic Christopher Lee sense, but ...

"Joanne," he nodded, and kept smiling as he purred out my name in that hoarse voice. "Pleased to make your acquaintance." And then he laughed again, lunged forward and formed his pale hands into claws.

And halted a few inches from my face and yelled, "BOO!"

I don't know how I managed it, but I didn't flinch, and I didn't scream. I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, he was moving back, clearly disappointed. He shrugged and started to clump away, but then ... he turned back, a slight frown on his face.

"Israel," Ed warned him.

"Shhh." Israel took a step toward me. "Something different about you. Right? Ed, don't you feel it?"

I backed up. My shoulders pressed against glass, and the chill seeped through.

"Not like the rest at all," he said, and reached up to slide his sunglasses down his nose, and oh God ...

Djinn eyes.

No, my second fast assessment told me; not quite, but close enough. They weren't human eyes, that was for damn sure; they were a dull red, the color of murder in mud. And they flared hot when he looked at me without the intervening Ray Bans.

"Israel!" Ed banged up the counter's service hatch and stepped out. He was holding what looked like a gigantic cattle prod, and as I watched, lightning zipped cold blue at the tip. Ah. It was a cattle prod. For really dangerous cattle. "Leave her alone."

"You don't understand, Ed," the vampire said, and took another step toward me. "She knows. She understands what happened to me. I know she does. And she can fix it!"

He lunged forward, and one gloved hand grabbed my throat. Inhumanly strong. I twisted, got free, and ran backwards away from him, just as Ed stabbed him in the back with his portable lightning rod.

Israel went rigid, grimaced, and went down to the accompaniment of fast snapping sounds. He twisted and twitched for a second, then went limp. I stayed where I was, pressed against a corner display of Charmin Bathroom Tissue, and looked mutely over at Ed.

Ed sighed, and said, "Sorry about that. This is my brother, Israel. Help me get him up, will you?"

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He had a place to put his brother. Well, it was a refrigerated cooler, actually, the walk-in kind, but it was sturdy and he put a lock on the outside once we'd dragged the limp, cold weight inside and slammed the door shut.

"Won't the cold --" I asked.

"He won't feel it," he interrupted, and scowled as if he hadn't wanted to think about that. "Son of a bitch. I thought he was decently --"

Dead. I could almost hear it, though Ed didn't come anywhere near the actual word. "What happened?"

Ed stalked past me to the doors, looked outside, and flipped the sign to CLOSED, then locked up. He turned off the sign and most of the lights, leaving just the few in the back. "Car accident. Israel flipped his truck out on a farm-to-market road about four months back." For the first time, I sensed a failure of courage in Ed; he looked away from me and folded his arms across his chest, staring fiercely at the rack of Cheetos. "You eat your hot dog already?"

"Never mind the hot dog," I said. "What happened?"

"He was trapped in the wreck. Don't know if you understand what that's like around here -- sun heats up metal faster than sticking it in a furnace. He must have cooked inside that tangle ..." Ed shook his head, trying to get the image out of his head. Unsuccessfully. "Nobody found him. I started driving around, looking for him. Found the wreck about ten that night."

"He was dead."

Ed blinked and darted me a look. "He look dead to you?"

"Actually ... except for the walking-around part, yes."

Ed didn't answer. He looked off into that long distance again, arms still folded. "Yeah, well, I identified him. Buried him. Next evening, he walks in here filthy and dressed in his suit, the one they put on him at the funeral home. No shoes. No -- " He stopped. His mouth shut with such a hard snap I heard enamel click.

I let out a slow, aching breath. "What did you do?"

"Nothing. I didn't know what the hell to do. Law says he's dead, but he's not, he's ... walking. He talked some, then he left. Next night, he came back. I haven't seen him for a couple of weeks now. I thought -- " Muscles fluttered under the skin as his jaw tightened. "I figured he'd finally died. Or whatever they do. People who come back."

Clearly, Ed wasn't a fan of vampire fiction. "I don't think they just ... roll over and do that."

He lowered his chin. Didn't answer directly. Or maybe he did, I realized, as I listened. "I asked him what he remembered. I was thinking -- hell, you know what I was thinking." Yeah, I knew. Some suave European guy in a cape, fangs, scary music. "He said he was dying, bleeding out in the truck, and he started seeing ... fairies."

"Fairies?" I said. "You're kidding me!"

"Wish I was. Fairies. Little Tinkerbelle lights. Blue. He said they swarmed all over him. I figure it was some kind of hallucination. He says -- he woke up the next night and came up right out of the ground. Right out of the ground."

Oh, fuck.

Little blue sparklies.

Israel was entirely right after all. I did understand what had happened to him. Not the mechanics, not the how and why, but the basic mechanisms at play. But ... the little blue sparklies were gone, right? Banished back to their own Demon dimension when Patrick and Sara, my Djinn benefactors, had sacrificed themselves to seal up the rift that was tearing our universe apart.

Maybe they were gone, but they'd left ... wreckage. Israel was something they'd tried to use, probably out of desperation. The Demon Marks invaded Wardens; maybe this was what happened when one invaded a regular human and couldn't find the power needed to twist itself into a full-grown menace. Maybe it sapped life and kept the body moving, hoping to find another shell in which to grow.

I felt a need to sit down.

"You okay?" Ed asked, as I plopped my butt down on the nearest uncomfortable stool and bent over to put my head in my hands.

"I'm fine."

"Yeah, me too," he said. "He seemed to think you could fix what's going on with him. Can you? Do you know?"

"I don't know." I wasn't really sure what Israel was. Maybe he wasn't a vampire. Maybe he didn't kill people. Maybe he was just scary as hell, and was a walking corpse.

But everything that walked the earth consumed something ... and chances were that he wasn't going to live on sunlight and happy Tinkerbelle thoughts.

"He's probably dangerous," I said. "And he's not going away, is he?"

Ed sighed and shook his head. "I thought he would. Guess he's going to stick around."

"Ed. You can't just let him ..."

"I know," he said, and ran his hands over his balding head. It was the same elegant shape as his brother's, minus the rose tattoo, plus a minor fringe of hair. "But I can't just kill him, either. I'm family."

I had a sister. I hadn't thought of her for a while, but suddenly I thought about what I'd do, if Sarah came shambling up to me a day after her own funeral, white and ghost-ridden. God. I'd be utterly unable to live with it, or myself. Unable to act.

That was the hell Ed was in, and would continue to be in, and it was my fault. I needed to do something, but I had no idea what. I was hungry, I was tired, I was scared, and I was badly wishing -- as Rahel no doubt had intended -- that I'd cheerfully complied with her request and not landed myself in this situation to begin with.

Hungry. As if the idea had triggered it, my stomach loudly rumbled.

I looked up, embarrassed, but Ed was already reaching out to scoop a rolling hot dog from the rack and fold it into a soft white bun. "Knock yourself out."

I chewed nitrates and sulfates, mixed in with some meat and carbs. Added some relish and mustard. It was the best hot dog I'd ever eaten, and it smelled heavenly; I devoured it in about three bites. Ed forked over another one. I mumbled a thanks around another bite.

"I'll deduct it," he said. "Now. Let's talk about you fixing my brother."

###

What killed vampires? I contemplated it in silence, laying on my cot in the dim wash of light from the cracked storage room door. Ed had gone home, at my insistence; I think he understood it wasn't good for him to be there, in case I had to do something radical. Wooden stakes ... garlic ... holy water ... well, I could break off a chair leg to make a stake if I had to, and there was some garlic salt in the condiment section. Holy water was in short supply. I wondered about crosses, but somehow, I didn't think folklore would be quite on the money with this one.

I put my hand on my purse, thinking about David, curled in his bottle. Sleeping, probably. Dreaming of better things. Maybe ...

No. I didn't dare open it and summon him. Not when he was so weak. I needed to handle this on my own, without anybody else to back me up.

That felt ... oddly refreshing. Whatever I did here, there was nobody else involved. It was just me, and the problem.

I got up in a restless creak of cot springs, put on my shoes, and walked to the storage room door. It was quiet in the store except for the dull hum of fluorescent lights in the corners. The night was so dark outside the glass walls that it might as well have been black paint. I wanted to go outside, breathe the fresh cold air, see the thick haze of stars, but I had work to do.

I walked to the cooler. The key was hanging from a hook next to the door, but I didn't take it down.

I knocked. "Israel?" No answer. I put my hand flat against the metal. "Israel, talk to me. It's Joanne. I want to help you. I want to figure out what happened to you."

From a great, hollow distance, Israel rasped, "Don't think anybody can help me."

"You said you saw fairies. Blue sparks. That's what changed you."

He seemed surprised. "Yeah."

"Israel, do you -- " I couldn't think of a way to phrase it. "Hunger for anything in particular?"

"Yeah," he said. "But I don't know what it is. Nobody around here has it. Nobody except you."

He wanted power. Warden power. I swallowed hard and removed my hand from the door. He sounded as if he'd come closer. How strong was he, exactly? Strong enough to batter the door down, if properly motivated?

"I think I understand," I said. "The -- fairies -- are inside of you. They're keeping you alive and moving. But Israel, they're trapped here. They got stuck inside of you when the rest of their kind got destroyed, or banished, or whatever. And they need a place to hide. They want me because they can live and grow inside of me." Because I'd once been Djinn.

He listened, and then he just sat in silence. After a long while, he said, rustily, "Can you kill me?"

"I don't know."

"Because I'm not supposed to be here. I'm ..." He cleared his throat, with a sound like nails in a tin can. "I'm supposed to be dead."

"That's why you didn't leave town," I said. "You want Ed to kill you. But he won't, Israel. He can't."

Israel sighed, I heard it all the way through the thick insulation and metal. "Pussy."

"Well, he might if you talk like that."

Israel laughed. It sounded rusty and agonizing, but it held some genuine amusement. "So what the hell do I do? Piss off my brother until he sticks some damn stake through my heart?"

I didn't think that was going to do it. This wasn't traditional folklore vampirism, this was something else entirely. And I wasn't sure what to do about it, but I was sure that it had to end. For Ed and Israel's sake, if nothing else.

I reached for the key and slipped it into the cold brass lock. My hands were shaking again. I didn't let myself think too long about it, just did the mechanical motions and set the lock aside. I flipped the latch back, took hold of the handle, and pulled.

It came open with a whine of metal and a cold, arid puff of air that smelled of the ghosts of spoiled milk and meat. Dead things. I swallowed hard and saw his eyes glowing in the darkness. Djinn eyes.

"Take off your gloves," I said.

He stepped forward into the thin wash of light. It was freezing in the cooler, but his breath didn't fog the air, and he'd even taken off his leather jacket. The Grateful Dead shirt was a muscle tee, and his arms looked rosy and white and strong.

"Why?"

"Just do it, Israel. Please."

He slowly stripped off the leather gloves and plopped them down on the floor next to his jacket. He'd been making himself comfortable against a sealed box of Popsicles. Cherry flavored.

His hands flexed slowly, making fists, then uncurled. Long, thin fingers. Blue short nails.

He reached out to me.

"You scared?" he asked me.

"Yeah."

A crooked, charming smile. It looked strange on that lifeless face. "Me too. But I'll be glad when it's over."

I took hold of his icy hand, and lightning struck. Not true lightning, the kind that sparked from the sky; this was nerve impulses firing, power coursing hot through my veins. Defense. I had a kind of magical immune system, and it was fighting hard ...

... but it was losing.

I held on, and so did Israel, though I could see from the twisted expression on his perfectly white face that it hurt him, too. Cold seeped out of him and into my hand, my wrist, my arm ... crept up to my shoulder ... radiating in ...

I launched myself up to the aetheric and saw the blue sparklies crawling all over me. Flooding out of Israel in waves.

"Tell Ed ... he was good to me and -- " Whatever else he was going to say, it locked in his throat. His Djinn eyes turned plain human blue, and rolled back in his head.

Israel crumpled and hit the floor with a terrifying thud. I couldn't spare any concern, though; I was fighting for breath as the sparks swarmed all over me, trying to sink into me. Fairies. Not like any fairies Peter Pan had ever encountered ... cannibal fairies, with furious sharp teeth and cold, cold hearts.

Let them in. I didn't know where the thought came from, but it sounded like Patrick's voice, my one-time Djinn mentor and betrayer and savior. Let them in. You have to.

That was a terrifying prospect. I was holding my breath, and I'd squeezed my eyes shut, desperate to keep myself intact ... but he was right, I couldn't defeat them by just blindly trying to ignore them. They'd get inside.

Relax, Patrick's whisper said. You know what to do.

I didn't. I hated it when ghosts tried to shine me on. But he was right about the first part, anyway ... and I slowly opened my eyes and parted my lips and took in a deep breath.

The blue sparklies swarmed into my mouth, down my throat in a brilliant frenzy, and I felt them burrow cold inside of me. Pinpricks of ice, weighting me down. Making me heavy and slow and stupid. I wanted to lie down next to Israel's limp, cold body, but I didn't want to die like this, locked in some smelly old refrigerator in some tiny, out-of-the way gas station. Dying unremarked and alone.

I had my standards, and having a box of Popsicles for a headstone was right out.

I staggered out into the store, grabbed onto the counter, and held myself up with an effort. Tell me! I screamed inside. Damn you, Patrick, tell me what to do!

He was quiet. Damn Djinn. Never around when you really needed them ...

I don't remember falling, but I was on the floor, staring up at a rack of magazines. Tom Cruise was on two of them. That seemed unfair, somehow, but at least I had an audience for my swan song now, even if it was two-dimensional.

No. No, I wasn't going to die like this. Ugh. Just no. If I didn't die at the Bellagio, I damn sure wasn't buying the farm at Mart's Texaco. It lacked dignity.

Do you really think they want to be here? Patrick asked me. He sounded bored and disinterested and out of patience with me. They're far from home. And scared. For heaven's sake, think, woman. Use that brain that came in that lovely body.

Oh.

I looked up, on the aetheric plane. It was like looking up through a skyscraper made of glass ... so many levels, so many realities, each one purer and more precise. Colder. Clearer. Humans -- even Wardens -- couldn't go beyond the aetheric, which was the plane above our own mortal world. Djinn could. They could travel up at least four levels at will, higher if they concentrated hard.

I'd been a Djinn. Could I still ...?

No choice but to try. I took in a deep breath, down on the mortal plane, and thought myself higher. My spirit began to rise, shimmering with cold blue light ... up ... I felt the tug as I passed through the top of the aetheric and up into the plane above, a Djinn place, not meant for humans. It dragged at me, as if the air was thicker. Everything was a confusion of light, odd shapes, subtle warps of reality.

I kept rising.

The second barrier was harder, and I slipped through slowly, torturously. Squeezing through. Beyond, the lights had a harsh, cold clarity that terrified me. Nothing seemed right. I felt breathless and scared, and I was no longer in control of how fast I was going up. I wasn't rising anymore, I was being thrown. Propelled. The pressure was intense. It was more like diving into the ocean than rising into the aetheric levels.

The blue sparklies were jittering madly all through my body. I could almost feel them adding their own fuel to my progress, even as they ate away at the center of my power. Cannibals and predators, mindlessly and furiously destroying their own would-be savior.

Faster. Higher. More pressure, a denser barrier that felt as if it was scraping layers of skin and muscle off of my mortal body when I passed through it. But I couldn't stop. I didn't dare look at what was around me; there were things here, intelligences vast and cold that had never bothered with humans. I didn't want to attract their attention. It would be the end of whatever passed for my sanity.

I ran into the last barrier, and stopped. Stuck. Battering at the slick cold ceiling like a drowning victim under the ice. The blue sparklies in my body were ripping me apart in their desire to push me through, but it felt impenetrable, no way I could slide through ...

If I wasn't willing to die at Mart's Texaco, I didn't want it to end here, either. I extended my hands and pressed them flat against the barrier and pushed. Hard. With all the power in me.

Something broke free, as if I'd tapped into a well long covered over, and I felt a flood of hot, raw energy spill into me.

My fingers slid through. My wrists. My arms, compressed almost to the breaking point. It didn't just hurt, it was like being crushed between two plates of glass -- sheer agony. I felt as two-dimensional as Tom Cruise on a magazine cover, and a lot less glossy.

I popped free with an audible snap and drifted at the top of the world, nauseatingly free.

I opened my eyes, then quickly squeezed them shut. Even as a Djinn, this had been impossible to decipher; human eyes had no frame of reference for anything. It was just blind, cold chaos. And I was lost in it.

But luckily, Israel's fairies weren't.

They dragged my body to a point that looked almost black in the swirling fury, and without any direction from me, my arm extended and my fingertips touched the scar.

It was closed.

Open it, Patrick whispered.

I couldn't. If I did, it would rip in half again, I'd kill the world ...

Trust me.

I wanted to weep, but my aetheric form wasn't suited to the job. I jabbed my fingers forward, deep into the scar, and felt it ... give. Suction on the other side. Cold, eerie suction that was completely alien to anything I'd known ... even the chaos swirling up here.

The blue sparklies began flowing up. They marched out of my body, down my arm, into my hand, and flooded through the bridge of my fingers into that other place, that other reality.

When I was sure they were all gone, to the last little Tinkerbell glow, I pulled my hand back. A single blue mote floated in the air for an instant, and died.

The black scar stayed closed.

And I felt whatever had sustained me start to give way.

Oh crap. Action, and reaction. It existed even here, in this place. The power that had sustained me was giving way, and I was falling.

Hard.

I crashed through barriers that ripped and scraped and tore. It felt like smashing through increasingly thick panes of glass. Gathering speed, plummeting and screaming ... straight through the familiar glow of the aetheric ...

... into my body, where I arrived with a devastatingly hard jerk that made me conk my head into the scuffed linoleum hard enough to see stars.

I looked up at Tom Cruise's toothy smile, and promptly passed out.

###

I came to with Ed sitting on the stool, watching me. I was on the cot in the back room. The storage area had the sharp, clean smell of Lysol, with an undercurrent of dust. I sneezed, whimpered at the strain on my aching body, and curled over on my side. I brushed my hair back with a shaking hand.

Ed didn't say a word. He was looking at me, but I wasn't seeing anything in his eyes. Just ... blankness.

"Hey," I croaked.

He blinked. "You're alive."

"Seems like." I checked the color of my skin. Still its normal color. My heart was beating. Apparently, I hadn't joined the ranks of the vampires, or the zombies, or whatever else Israel had been. Speaking of ...

"Your brother?"

Ed cleared his throat. "He's dead."

"You're sure."

He nodded. "He -- yeah. I'm sure." That spoke volumes I didn't want to read. I closed my eyes and rolled back over flat, and tried sitting up. I managed it. It wasn't a happy process. "You okay?"

"Yeah." I had no idea, but even if I wasn't, there was nothing Ed from Mart's Texaco could do about it. I needed Earth Warden help, or Djinn help, or both. Or maybe I just needed sleep and rest. Peace and quiet and a stop to the demands of the universe that I keep on fighting.

Ed dug in his pocket and counted out five hundred dollars in twenties. I sat in silence, watching him, my lips slightly parted but no words finding their way out. He put the pile of money in my lap and stood up.

"Get a hot dog and a soda to go," he said. "On me."

"But -- "

"I want you gone," he said, and there was naked fury in his blue eyes now, an unreasonable anger that had nothing to do with me. I understood that. I'd come to town, and his brother was dead. Even if one had little to do with the other, he'd want me gone.

It was how I'd been with Rahel in the car. All that suppressed terror and fury and grief finding a target.

And he was right to blame me, after all. The blue sparklies had been my doing. Maybe his initial accident had been fate, but the rest had been me.

I crumpled the money in a fist, thought about refusing it, but I couldn't deny that I needed the help.

"Thanks," I said softly.

He didn't look at me again, even when I insisted on paying for the hot dog and soda. Just rang up the sale and stood mutely to the side, staring at the floor, while I walked out into the hot Arizona morning. I slid on sunglasses and breathed in the crisp, clean air. It smelled like fresh sage and the hot metallic stench of gas and oil. My Viper was parked around the side.

When started the car, I looked in the rear view mirror. Ed was standing out front.

Why? I had to ask myself. Why did I stop here? Of all the places I could have picked ... why here?

It might have been Rahel's doing, but I doubted it. Truth was, I'd have ended up here somehow. Power called to power. Fate had plans for me, and there was no use at all in fighting it.

I had a long, long way to go to find that peace and quiet I'd been craving.

I waved at Ed, pulled out onto the freeway, and headed for parts unknown.