

# Embers

After so many millennia as the next best thing to a god, Jonathan thought it was strange how fast he remembered fear. Personal fear, the gut-deep kind. A dread of pain, of loss, and ... how weird was this ... death. Death hadn't been a concern for him, not since he'd collapsed on that dusty battlefield under a bright hot sun and woken up Djinn.

Not that Djinn couldn't die ... they did, they had in the past few months with truly grim frequency. But he, personally, was more or less immune from those kinds of concerns, being the best, the brightest, the most powerful.

The most guilty, probably.

He was finding that having death to look forward to was strangely refreshing. Bracing, like high mountain air, or standing in the middle of a storm and feeling the energy whip and crawl. Humans died all the time, regardless of the lengths they went to to stave it off. Jonathan had for the last few thousand years thought it hardly seemed worth the trouble, all the being born and struggling and fighting for life, only to be snuffed out a few years down the road. He supposed that was some kind of epic tragedy, but he couldn't bring himself to really care all that much. Focusing on a particular human death would be like mourning a single ant in a colony, or a curled-up housefly, or a brown leaf falling from a tree. He'd been Djinn far too long to feel any kinship with these here-today-gone-tomorrow man-shaped mayflies.

But it made him think. Would his death matter, in the end? Or would he be just one more leaf, one more ant, one more annoying dead insect swept up by the Earth in its constant housekeeping?

Mortal thoughts. How interesting. Next thing you knew, he'd be caring about individual humans, like David. Or worse, falling in love with one ... and David's commitment to this latest human was something special. He'd fallen in love before with mortals, but never so fast, and never so completely. It would pass, because she would pass, but for the first time in millennia, Jonathan had gotten impatient with the process. He'd needed David by his side. But where had David been when he needed him? Off dying. Dying. For her. For -- literally -- nothing.

Jonathan hated him for that, as much as he mourned. Too much anger. He didn't know what to do with it all, other than destroy things. What a fucking mess, he thought. Not a particularly Djinn thought, but he was as guilty as David of liking some of the more convenient and attractive aspects of mortality. Human language had always been a source of great amusement. There hadn't been any other species on the planet who'd produced so much in the way of color, light, life, sound. Expression.

Or so much damage.

Jonathan manifested flesh, more out of curiosity than anything else, to sit on the shore and watch the storm approaching. It was an old friend, this storm. An old enemy. He'd cheated it once, but it was black and full of malice and it wasn't taking no for an answer, not again.

He didn't know if he really cared anymore, at least about the human world. He had once, but that had been in their youth, when humanity was full of promise and hope. Now that the species was approaching its maturity, it didn't strike him as deserving of so much effort. If the storm ripped their so-called civilizations out by the roots and sent the few survivors back to stone tools and conjuring fire, well, it might not be a bad thing. Maybe they'd get it right a second time around.

He doubted it, though.

"Oh, hell, I don't know," he said out loud, surprising himself. Nobody to talk to but himself, and the fiddler crab working its clumsy, angular way along the rocks next to him. The crab paused, watching him with beady eyes

before edging away with its gigantic left claw upraised. "So what do you say? Do I just let 'em all die?" The crab didn't seem inclined to answer, except to lean back even farther and click its claw threateningly. Probably wondering how the hell it had managed to get into so much trouble. "Humans, I mean. Wouldn't be hard. All I have to do is sit back and wait, that storm will do the rest."

The crab looked nonplussed. "Yeah, I get your point, you're not in favor of humanity. Too many crab dinners. But what about the things they've done in the last few thousand years? The wheel, harnessing fire, farming, architecture, sailing ships ..." He wasn't impressing the seafood, that much was clear. The fiddler crab edged away a little bit more. "Look at the art, the music. They tell stories, you know. Nobody else tells stories. Maybe that makes them just a little bit closer to divine."

A wave, stronger than the previous ones, thundered on the rocks and threw up a titanic amount of spray. The crab, caught by surprise, was swept off, rolled in the surf, righted itself and quickly scuttled back onto the rocks. Jonathan thought it looked just a little embarrassed. "Not convinced?" he asked. The crab rocked back and forth, as if deciding whether or not to make a break for it and take its chances on the beach. There were seagulls circling. Probably not the best situation for a crab. "How about this: without humans, there's just nobody to talk to. Pretty compelling argument, right?"

The crab scuttled forward and nipped at him, suddenly and weirdly brave. Jonathan scooted it back with his foot, and watched the thing snap its pincers threateningly at his boot. "So no, then," he said.

The crab decided to give up. He watched it sidle over the edge of the rock, down to the sand, and scuttle off into the lacework of foam that flecked the smooth brown sand. Crab business. Probably just as important as anything nine-tenths of the humans were doing at the moment. It all boiled down to the simple things, in the end. Birth, reproduction, death.

Birth. Now that was a tricky one. As if he'd conjured her up, the image of David and Joanne's daughter appeared next to him, sitting on the rock, knees drawn up, black hair blowing in the stiff ocean breeze. Beautiful in ways her mother couldn't imagine, this child, this potential. She was a dizzying incongruity. A difference in the world. And as things stood, she'd never live, not unless David died and that flood of energy washed over the seed that constituted an embryonic Djinn.

Life. Death. Birth.

Damn near the same things, in Djinn terms.

"Hey," he said to the ghost-girl. She didn't respond, of course. Even he couldn't get ghosts to talk. "You look a lot like her. Her. You know who I'm talking about."

No answer. Her hair stirred and lifted and swirled in the wind, black silk flying, and her eyes were like David's, full of secrets and gold.

Nothing here but pain, in the end. Jonathan sighed. "Get lost, kid."

She whispered away on the wind, like sand dropped in a hurricane. He was left with less interesting company: the storm, the increasingly distant fiddler crab, his own thoughts.

It was getting cold, and it was getting late. Time to make something happen. That was his specialty, really, knowing just where to push, and when.

This time, he pulled.

The result came as a dark breeze on the back of his neck, a shiver on his newly-formed spine, and the certainty that something was behind him. Death. Cold and immediate.

"Jonathan." A hoarse scrape of a whisper, more stone than voice.

And this was how it was going to end. Together again. Jonathan felt a bright burst of something inside -- grief, rage, hope, fear, love -- and twisted to look behind him.

A flash of black in shadow. Angles and cutting edges, nothing soft, nothing remotely in human form. Standing still, David looked like a pile of volcanic glass. Fire hardened into cold, gleaming ice.

"You've looked better," Jonathan said, and turned his back. He pitched a pebble into the ocean. It was swallowed up by swirling foam and roaring surf. "I told your girlfriend to find a way to fix you. Guess she wasn't quite as good as she thought she was. Figures." Not that he'd really expected her to manage it. But she'd surprised him before, David's little dark-haired honey. By still being alive, if nothing else. He'd never met a human who could have weathered the storms -- pun intended -- she'd been through in the past year.

Had to admit it: he respected her. A little. More than another of her six billion fellows, anyway.

David didn't answer. Couldn't, probably. Nothing left in there that could form words, really -- just hunger and torment. That was what human love had done for him. Cored him out, left him hollow and empty and dead.

Jonathan shook his head. The surf pounded spray into the air; it clung to his hair, moistened his skin, slid down his neck and into the black cotton t-shirt he was wearing. Uncomfortable, being human. He forgot how strong the sensations were. He supposed if you got into the thing enough, it could be addictive, but he usually got bored long before the supposed charm of the human condition made itself felt.

He was waiting for David to lose control and strike, but it looked as if he'd have to wait a while; David was silent, motionless, just a black hunk of angles sitting behind him. A constant nervous vibration, but no sense of forward momentum.

Jonathan watched the vast storm moving across the ocean, driven by a blind and instinctual hunger. It rolled like black milk poured in water, terrifyingly packed with energy, alive and incredibly hungry. The storm was an Ifrit, really, given massive scale. It would eat until it satisfied its mindless cravings, and then it would .... what? Die? Be reborn? There'd never been a storm like it, in all the memory of the world. No telling what its life cycle encompassed.

"What's it going to take?" Jonathan asked. He was facing the storm, but it was David's question. "What will make you save yourself? You're a goddamn Ifrit, David. Not like you have a choice."

And, incredibly, the pile of shadows and angles that had once been someone he knew, someone he valued, whispered, "Always a choice."

"Not this time, kid." Jonathan stood up, dusted off the khaki pants he'd manifested along with the skin, muscles and bones, and walked to where David was waiting. David's angular shadow shifted, light crawling on broken curves and jutting angles, but he didn't attack. "No choice for anybody here. I'm tired, I'm no longer needed here, and you need to live. It's that simple."

"No."

"You've got to be kidding me. You're not that strong. It's fate. Just let go."

The shadow stood up from its crouch, revealed itself in all its black, broken glory. Lightning stabbed hard across the sky, bleaching everything else, but David stayed as black as a hole in the world.

"No," the Ifrit said again.

Fear tightened the back of Jonathan's neck, and he felt the first chilly drops of rain. The storm wasn't coming ... the storm was here, now. And it was going to sweep this planet clean of its human infestation, once and for all. That was its blind hunger, its mission, and its destiny. He couldn't stop it this time, because he finally understood that part of what was keeping this thing alive was his own power. His own anger.

And as he stood there in the full glare of that future, knowing it was partly his fault, he realized that he didn't want it to happen. Humankind wasn't disposable. In a very real way, they were his responsibility -- his unpleasant, surly children.

He couldn't let it end like this. He didn't want to be standing in an empty world, talking to a stupid damn crab for eternity.

"David," he said. "It has to be now. Now."

"I won't."

The wind was shrieking, the rain pounding like bullets. The waves were pressed flat and whipped to foam by the momentum of the storm. "Now, dammit!"

"No!" The Ifrit was trembling. Almost convulsing with the need to feed. Its voice -- David's voice -- sounded like the harsh crunch of gravel, barely even recognizable as language. "Not you." The fever-heat of hunger was coming off it in waves.

Fuck it. It was past time for him to be moving on, whether David wanted to know it or not. And it was time for David to heal.

"Do it," Jonathan said flatly, "or I swear to whatever god you choose that I'll find your girl and kill her especially hard, even if the storm doesn't."

The Ifrit's claws sank into his chest with a whipcrack motion. Reflex, more than intention; he felt David trying to pull away, screaming, but it was too late.

Too late for anything. Everything.

It hurt. That was new, too; pain was newborn to him, shockingly real, and he felt the human heart he'd constructed faltering and struggling. He let it go. Let his body melt away, until he was Djinn, fire, free.

The pain stayed. He heard David crying out, struggling to let go, but it was too late for anything like that now.

There was a kind of peace to it, Jonathan thought. Weirdly, at last, peace.

He felt the presence of others on the shore. Ashan, gray and grim. Rahel, her brightness dimmed, unnaturally still and silent. Many others, coming to see the end of things.

He bled, and bled, all his life sucked away, until he was ashes, embers, dust. Barely alive.

"No," David whispered. He was exactly as Jonathan remembered him, all those long-ago thousands of years ago -- human in aspect, kneeling over him as he breathed his last. Darkness overhead, so much darkness, and David's eyes as bright as suns. "Don't do this, Jonathan. Don't."

David's hand gripped his tightly. He was flesh again, wasn't he? Flesh and bone and spilling blood.

Mortal. Afraid. Hopeful.

"Don't go," David cried. "Don't leave me!"

There were no words for where he was going now. He wanted to tell him that he still loved him as his own soul, but it was too late. No matter. He saw it in David's eyes, and when David spoke again, it was in the old tongue, the ancient tongue, the voices of angels.

I have made a covenant with thee, he whispered, and they were close in that instant, two fires together. As my own soul. My own soul. Stay.

He couldn't stay. Jonathan let go, and it was like falling from the tallest mountain, falling into darkness and seeing his people, his children recede above him.

One last act of love left. He let go of the last ember of his life, the last primitive spark, and felt it fly up and ignite into a beautiful thing, a girl, a girl with David's brilliant eyes and her mother's coal-black hair and beautiful, cocky smile. Saw her look down on him, and tears like fire fell.

Don't cry, he told her. Your name is Imara. Take care of them.

And then he was in the arms of the Earth

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