

## Black Corner

Flying is not my favorite thing. It's not the favorite thing of any Weather Warden, but the stronger you are in talent, the more likely you are to end up in the middle of some very unpleasant turbulence along the way, especially on a cross-country flight. When you're up in the air, you're out of your element as a human, and the forces that exist up there know.

They react.

On the plus side, I was flying with my own personal Djinn bodyguard, which meant that the plane wouldn't crash, the storms wouldn't become so bad innocent bystanders would be slaughtered, and I had a strong hand to crush in a death-grip for the duration of the endless, bumpy, slippery trip. David didn't complain. In fact, he found it a wee bit funny. I hated him a little for that.

We landed in Lubbock amid wind gusts and blowing red sand – in other words, normal West Texas weather. The plane bumped, jerked, slipped, and threw me forward into the too-close seat in front of me as the pilot hit the brakes and flaps. David helpfully pushed me back upright and patted my shoulder. "You did fine," he said.

"You mean, I didn't shriek in terror or get tasered by a flight attendant?"

"Yes."

"Missed it by that much." I concentrated on slowing my pulse rate and centering myself – easier to do, now that I was ground-adjacent. "Explain to me again why I'm here?"

David's smile turned just a touch bitter. "Because Lewis snapped his fingers and summoned you?"

That was not exactly fair, although it was more or less accurate.

He hadn't said much on the phone call, other than a simple "Need you here, now, hop a plane." David hadn't provided much in the way of information either, which was odd -- Djinn were usually better than a gossip column if you wanted the skinny on hidden motivations.

"So," I said as we made our way out of the cattle chute and into the gate area. "Is he here? Or are we on our own?"

"You tell me." David nodded at the window directly facing us. It had frost forming on the inside of the glass -- and the outside temperature was hot enough to melt pavement. The frost formed letters: @ BAGGAGE CLAIM.

"Great," I said. "Remind me to teach Lewis the proper use of a courtesy phone. Or text messaging, Jesus."

"He's rattled," David said. "He wouldn't usually make that kind of gesture."

We exchanged glances, and I lifted my shoulders in a mini-shrug. I didn't know what was up; if David did, he was keeping it strictly to himself.

We headed for Baggage Claim.

Lewis was leaning against a much-leaned-against concrete pillar just beyond the rotating metal suitcase carousels – arms crossed, slouching, looking like he'd just walked in out of the desert after two weeks of roughing it. His brown hair had grown out to brush his shoulders and fall across his eyes, and he was rocking a solid week's worth of manly stubble, which was starting to look more hobo than metrosexual.

It meant he was no longer bothering with appearances.

"Let's go," he said, pushing off of the pillar as we approached. I had to skip a little to catch up as his long strides ate up carpet; David didn't seem to move any faster, but he fell in next to me.

"Yeah, our trip was great," I said. "What's that? You're grateful we dropped everything to come running at your beck and call? Why, you're welcome. I'm sure it's very important - "

"I don't have time for your crap," Lewis said. Not in a funny way. I stopped walking, and David -- attuned with my mood in a way only a Djinn (and/or a lover) could be -- stopped with me. It took Lewis two more steps to realize he'd lost us, and he turned to look at us. There was a jittery energy in him that seemed completely at odds with the usual laid-back man I knew.

"Lewis," I said, very quietly. "Do not snap at me. We came as a favor, and it was a bitch of a flight, and I have no fucking idea what you want from us. We can just get right back on a plane if you're going to give attitude."

His eyes cleared. Nothing like a brisk, cold slap to knock some sense into someone. Lewis took a step toward us, then stopped and pulled in a deep, deliberate breath. "Sorry," he said. "I need your help, and we don't have a lot of time. I'll tell you everything in the car."

David was watching me. I stared hard at Lewis, and finally said, "This had better be good. Seriously. I flew. You know how much I hate that."

"I know," Lewis said. "Please."

That did it. I started walking again.

Outside, the afternoon sun was harsh and unfiltered. A gust of wind spit sand in my face, then rattled away to torment someone else. The parking lot beyond the terminal glittered with windshields and sun-faded paint jobs. We crossed the street to the parking lot, dodging around a few passing cars. He'd parked his vehicle – a battered, dusty SUV – near the back of the lot.

When we got to the truck, Lewis jumped in the driver's seat. David and I looked at each other; David quirked an eyebrow and said, deadpan, "Shotgun." I stuck my tongue out at him and hauled myself up into the back seat. I stayed behind the passenger seat; the driver's seat was jammed all the way back to accommodate Lewis's freakishly long legs. David jumped up with that unearthly grace of the Djinn, and we were in motion almost before his door closed.

"So," I said, leaning over between the seats. "We're in the car. Now can we hear why?"

Now that there was no good reason for him to keep quiet, he still seemed reluctant to share. It was a good thirty seconds of road noise-filled silence before he finally said, "There's a missing boy."

I'm not hard-hearted, but that seemed to be a relatively small matter to fly two of the most powerful Wardens in the country out here, plus the leader of the New Djinn. There had to be more to the story. I struggled to figure out how to phrase my questions without sounding accusatory, and then gave up. "Any reason why this isn't just a straight-up police matter?"

"Yes. The boy's one of us. Or will be. He's already demonstrating some significant power, and he's only eleven years old." Lewis had another of those curious moments of silence, and then continued. "He's also a friend of the family, I guess you could say."

"Whose family?"

"He's Jane Falworth-Davis's son. Francis's grandson."

Oh. That changed things, no doubt about it. Francis Falworth-Davis was one of the grand old ladies of the Wardens organization; she'd been an amazing talent in her day, and the leader of North America for almost thirty years.

Everybody had expected that Jane, her daughter, would be just as impressive -- and she was, in some ways, but she was also fragile as glass. I'd known her at Princeton. Lewis had, too. She'd had some kind of serious psychotic breakdown at school and been whisked off for emergency psychic surgery -- removal of her powers, because she'd been uncontrollably lashing out. The surgery was always risky at the best of times, and these hadn't been. Jane hadn't come out of it well. As far as I knew, she was still clinically insane.

It was only after the surgery that they'd discovered she was pregnant. Jane never admitted who the father was, and Francis had taken the baby to raise herself.

The Wardens owed Francis, who could have blamed us for Jane's troubles, and hadn't. Not only that, Francis had saved the world dozens of times over. She was within her rights to call in favors, even in the form of Lewis, David, and me.

"I'd think you would be more useful coordinating from a distance," David said.

Lewis slid sunglasses on. I saw a muscle tighten in his jaw. "Tried it," he said. "Time could be running out for the boy. I want the best on this, right now."

On the one hand, it was flattering that we were considered the best.

On the other ... if Lewis couldn't handle it alone, that didn't exactly fill me with confidence. And I couldn't understand what David was thinking at all.

###

Francis Falworth-Davis met us on the porch of one of an old-time ranch house, a sprawling two-story thing of sun-weathered wood with a wraparound porch. I couldn't decide how old she was at first glance – over sixty, but younger than the house. She had snow-white hair close-cropped around a tanned, strong face mapped with smile lines, but she wasn't smiling. Not now. As we got out of the SUV she nodded to Lewis, gave David a long, knowing look, then focused on me. It was like being hit unexpectedly with a laser pointer, full in the eyes; the force of her personality was so impressive I felt it from a dozen feet away.

"Welcome," she finally said. "Come on in."

Inside, the house had that lived-in feel, floors worn smooth by generations of footsteps. Walls smothered by photographs, from stiff-postured pioneer families to smiling informal snapshots of a smiling, lovely girl I recognized – Jane, the girl from college. In some of the later photos, Jane was missing, and there was only Francis and a smiling little boy. Ethan. Up until that moment, I'd been able to think of him in the abstract, but the sight of that smile made him real to me, a real person in genuine peril.

Francis motioned us to what I thought was the old formal parlor – the stiff Victorian furniture I imagined had once occupied it was long gone, replaced by a sturdy, battered leather sofa and big, comfortable chairs. David paused in the doorway, his gaze darting around the room. Reading the past echoes of energy stored here in the walls, the carpet, the life of the house.

All I could see was a room ... and tucked in the corner next to the couch, a baseball glove and bat, with a dirty red ball cap piled on top. I couldn't seem to take my eyes off of it once I'd seen that sad little cluster of things, tucked away like Ethan had just dashed off upstairs to wash his hands before dinner. I sat down in one of the chairs. Lewis and Francis took the sofa, and David leaned against the wall, arms folded.

"Lewis here already knows this story," Francis said, "so I'll just be repeating it for the two of you. My grandson Ethan was starting to show the signs, you know the ones. Real strong earth potential in the boy. He has a connection to the land, to the animals. Like his mother." I almost missed the brief flash of pain that sheeted across her face, like lightning. "He came back from ball practice on Tuesday, around ten thirty, just like usual. He went out to feed Drury – his dog - - and take him for a walk. I thought he'd be back for dinner, like always. When he wasn't home by dark, I started calling folks. By midnight, I was calling the police." Francis nodded to Lewis. "And you, of course."

He took up the story from there. “The cops haven’t found a trace of any stranger in the area. They brought in scent dogs, but the trail went cold. There’s an Amber Alert, but no leads so far.”

“And the Wardens?” David asked.

“I sent Edward Tally first, and a team of other Earth Wardens. He brought along Gregor.” Gregor was one of David’s Djinn, a burly, intimidating guy in human form with a bluish cast to his hair, very Aladdin gone bad. “They spent the whole day looking. Gregor tracked the boy out to the desert, but he lost him. He wouldn’t say anything else.”

“I don’t think he had anything else to tell you,” David said. “There’s power involved here, something big enough to block a Djinn and the Wardens. That doesn’t bode well. It also rules out mere humans.”

I took another look at the baseball glove, the bat, the cap. I thought about the smiling boy in those pictures out on the living room wall, and the flash of stoic grief that had shown briefly in Francis’s face. “We should start from the beginning,” I said. “If Gregor picked up a trail, we can, too.” I stood up, and Lewis and David echoed the movement. “Let’s retrace his steps. Maybe we can find something they missed.”

Francis didn’t rise. She sat there on the sofa and looked up at us, and suddenly she didn’t look strong, or capable, or in control. She looked tired, and very hurt. “Bring my boy home,” she said. “Please, bring him home.”

Lewis took her hands. “I swear, we will.”

###

“So, about Jane,” I said, as we let the screen door slam behind us, and the hot afternoon closed in. “Probably ought to talk about the big elephant in the conversational room. Is Ethan’s mother accounted for?”

“Yes,” Lewis said. Just the one word, dry as the desert air.

“You’re sure. Because I’m thinking if she got herself out of confinement ...”

“She hasn’t. I checked in person,” he said. This time the conversational door was slammed completely shut. “Next idea.”

“I’d say interview all the ranch hands and staff, but – “

“Police are all over that. We need to use the time to our advantage.”

I wasn’t sure what advantage there was. There wasn’t anything much to be found out in the yard, which was a big, carefully tended patch of hardy grass beaten down in places by a big, friendly

chocolate Labrador who loped around the chain link and barked at our passage. He was big enough to take down a bear, but I wasn't worried; Lewis could charm a shark, much less a dog. Built-in, deep-seated Earth powers. I had some, but not nearly as much.

No dog on this earth would go after David, no matter how hungry or angry.

We left the yard and headed for the barn. Lewis and I called up power out of the ground, a thick, golden tingle that spread through the soles of my feet and crept through my body like vines around a tree. Lewis spread the power out in a shimmering golden net that lapped our ankles like fog, spreading and rolling. "You think there'll still be a trace?" I asked. For answer, Lewis lifted the dirty red ball cap I'd seen back in the house.

"I've got a DNA sample," he said. "Here."

I took the cap and turned it inside out, running my fingers along the sweat band inside. I didn't have either the native skill that Lewis was born with, or the training, but I could sense the essence of the boy who'd worn the hat. It seeped into me like a faint, but definite, melody – a child's melody, simple and beautiful.

I couldn't hear my own song, but I suspected it was as baroque as an Italian opera.

Lewis slowly turned, orienting off toward the West. David was facing that direction too. As I shifted my weight to follow suit, I heard/felt the melody grow just a tiny bit stronger, and then I saw it – a very, very faint glimmer in the golden field of power Lewis had laid down.

A trace, literally, of Ethan's passage through this part of the world.

I wasn't looking forward to a long hike, even though I'd worn sturdy shoes. "There are ATVs in the barn," I said. "We could make better time that way."

"We'd lose the trace," Lewis said. "It's faint enough that doing it on foot will be hard enough."

So much for saving myself effort. I should have known that traveling with Lewis was going to mean an excess of healthy exercise. He loved to hike.

"I'll take the lead," David said. "If the track disappears, I may still be able to find it."

"Stay in sight," Lewis said. "Last thing I need is three people to find."

###

It was my vacation, and I was spending it tramping through a breathtakingly empty prairie of fine reddish sand, broken with clumps of spiky bushes that erupted out of the soil like grasping hands. Lewis and I worked hard to maintain the field of power surrounding us as David led us deeper into the wilderness – away from roads, trails, and except for the white plumes of planes far overhead, away from civilization. Lewis continued to pick up random sparks of energy that

were signatures of Ethan's trail, but they were few and far between; I doubted any lesser Warden could have managed to find them at all, in so much open space.

The boy had gone pretty far out. I wasn't sure what that meant, but so far, there wasn't any sign that he'd been with anyone else on his nature walk.

David kept ahead of us, but as Lewis had requested, he never got out of our sight. The Falworth-Davis ranch house vanished into the distance behind, and after a couple of hours I broke out water and passed it to Lewis as we paused for a break. David stood motionless on the horizon, facing outward, waiting.

"So, did I interrupt something?" Lewis asked, and took another thirsty swig from the bottle before handing it back.

"Only our first real vacation together in, well, ever. At least, one without a crisis hanging over our heads."

"Sorry." Lewis looked down at the swirling golden fog around us, and passed his hand idly through it. It eddied and curled over his fingers, clinging like a pet. "I'll get you back on a plane tonight if I can. Tomorrow, latest."

The plane part didn't appeal to me, but going home did, so I nodded. "Can we talk about Jane now?"

"Jane?" Lewis didn't look at me; he continued to stare down at the golden fog in his hand. "She's secure."

"You're sure about that."

"Positive. I checked on her in person before I came out here. She's in a padded room in Warwick, Rhode Island. They had to dope her last week. She cut herself again, pretty bad this time."

God. I couldn't help but remember the pretty, sweet, gentle girl I'd known in college. "You dated her, right?" Lewis had been a serial dater, back then, but he'd mainly gone for the "normal" girls, the non-Wardens at Princeton. Still, Jane had wanted to be normal, and I thought I remembered seeing him with her.

Lewis continued to sweep his hand through the fog. "Back in the day, yeah," he said. "Before she had her breakdown. Before they screwed up the surgery and left her broken for good."

I heard the sharp bitterness in his voice. "You liked her."

"Yeah. I liked her." Lewis opened his hand and let the golden power roll out of it. He rose from his crouch and scanned the horizon with distant, cool brown eyes. "Let's keep moving. There's a cold front coming in from the west. We'll have rain by tomorrow."

I blinked, surprised. I hadn't felt it, but when I opened up my Weather Warden side, I could feel the tingle of the approaching front, the energy being produced as it collided and rubbed with the warm, dry air.

Lewis could balance all this without even thinking about it. That was ... quietly terrifying.

We followed a trail of tiny sparks, and David's footprints, across an empty space as the sun blazed across the sky.

###

Trouble came on us suddenly, and without any warning. One minute David was there, striding over the sand, following his own invisible trail, and the next he was ... gone.

Lewis accelerated into a lope, long legs eating up space. I had to push myself to a flat-out sprint to catch up. The golden mist around us roiled and eddied; I faltered in my concentration, panting with effort, but Lewis didn't. When we reached the last spot I'd seen David, the fog was still with us, blanketing the area and sparking with bursts of power. The place David had been glowed hot orange, and the molten-glass color pooled into the hollow of his footprints. Oddly, the fog wouldn't flow past that point; it piled up there, as if held back by an invisible glass wall.

I walked to the spot. "Careful," Lewis said from behind me.

I gave him an impatient wave and edged closer. David was at the bottom of the hill. He was crouched, both hands on the sand, like an animal ready to spring. "David?" I asked, and felt a tightening of my guts when he didn't respond. "David!"

"Something's wrong here," he said. His voice didn't sound normal. "Stay back."

I didn't. I slithered down the sandy hill, half running, half sliding, and landed in a burst of blowing dirt at his side.

Lewis, on the other hand, stayed where he was, at the top.

I crouched down next to David. "What is it?" His face was starkly pale, and his eyes – his eyes were glowing a desperate red.

"Black corner," he said. "It's a black corner."

"I don't know what that means! Are you all right?"

He tried to get up, but staggered and almost fell. I grabbed him to steady him. "We have to get out of here. Now."

"What did he say?" Lewis called from the top.

“Get your ass down here and help me!”

“Not until I hear what he said.”

Son of a bitch. “He said it’s a black corner. What’s a black corner?”

Lewis didn’t move. “A dead spot. A spot that’s been burned, damaged through all the planes of existence. There are five or six in the world, but the Djinn can’t sense them; they only know they’re here when they walk into them. Sort of like aetheric quicksand.”

“God dammit! Help me get him out of here!”

“I can’t,” Lewis said. “I’m sorry. If I go down there, I’ll be just as useless as he is right now. You have to find a way to get him back up here without me.”

“You can be such a – “ I controlled myself and slowed my breathing. “Fine, help me pull him up there.” He shrugged off his emergency backpack and unzipped sections, coming up with some thin, flexible nylon rope neatly stored in a figure eight.

I tied one end around David’s waist. “Right!” I yelled. “You pull, I’ll push! Go!”

David was not quite dead weight. He had balance, and he could move a little on his own behalf, but I could see that it was torture for him to fight to stay with us. Black corner. I couldn’t feel a thing, except –

No. I couldn’t feel a thing at all. I stretched out my senses, but it was like grabbing with a phantom limb. I felt nothing from the earth beneath my boots, nothing from the sky and wind. No sense of the world at all. I was entirely, magically blind.

I concentrated on taking in raw, dirt-fogged breaths as I pushed David up the hill.

We were halfway up David jerked, as if something had struck him hard, and a half-second later I heard the rolling crack of a rifle. It took me a stunned instant to process the evidence – the hole in his back, the limpness of his body against the rope’s pull – and then I screamed. Lewis was already yelling. “Get to cover!” he shouted, and let go of the rope. David and I rolled back down the slope, into the black corner. He flopped flat on his back, red eyes open. Unmoving.

I grabbed his outflung wrists and began dragging him toward the shelter of a low dune – the only thing around. Something puffed dust in a small cloud near my feet. I heard the snap of the shot following close behind, but I kept my head down and continued to drag David with all my strength. My breath was coming in short, gasping bursts, and I was starting to shake as adrenaline rushed into my system, trying to give me fuel for the fight.

“David?” I cupped my hands around his face. He didn’t blink. His pupils had expanded, leaving only a small ring of red around the edges. “I know you’re in there. Don’t you dare leave me!”

No response. I closed his eyes with my thumbs and rolled him onto his side, so I could get a better look at the wound in his back. It was big, and it was bloodless; I could see the ragged track going all the way through him. God, I could see daylight.

It would be a fatal wound for a human, but David couldn't be killed by a bullet. Not even here? some part of me whispered. He's weak. He's failing.

I needed to find out where the edges of this dead zone were, and figure out a way to get David out. Now.

"Lewis!" I shouted. "I need a plan!"

"I know! Stay put!" came his distant response from the other side of the hill. I couldn't feel anything happening, but I saw sand begin to stir up there on the hill, rising up into a curtain, then into a thick red wall as Lewis created a diversion. It pushed forward, and stopped dead at the spot where David's footprints had shown the limits of the black corner.

It curved around, driven by howls of wind, and slowly defined the edges of the place where even natural forces had no power. Now or never, I thought. I needed to act – get to the shooter and stop him while Lewis commanded his attention and clouded his vision. I pressed David's hand in a silent, desperate promise, and then got to my feet and sprinted hard for the closest edge of the black corner.

I didn't make it. Another shot rang out, and I zigged, fast. Sand shifted under my feet, and I went down, rolling.

As I struggled to rise, I felt my hands skid painfully on something hard. Wood. I got a palm full of splinters.

There was something was buried under the sand.

"Jo!" Lewis was yelling at me from outside the black corner, but I couldn't answer him. I knew I had seconds, at most, to save myself, and no power at all. The sand wasn't enough to protect me from the marksman aiming at me.

I swept my hands along the wood, frantically seeking edges, and found them. I heaved with reckless strength, and a broad, heavy trap door creaked up. I slithered into the gap and dropped down into darkness as the door banged shut above me.

The place smelled of fear and sweat and the natural by-product of someone being trapped for a few days. I held myself still, listening, and picked out the sound of breathing. "Ethan?" I whispered. "Ethan Falworth-Davis?" I heard the breathing catch, and start up again unevenly. "Your grandma Francis sent me. My name is Joanne."

"Prove it," said a childish, disembodied voice.

“You left your baseball glove and bat in the corner next to the leather couch in the parlor,” I said. “And I brought your hat.” I had it shoved in the back pocket of my jeans; for a miracle, it hadn’t fallen out during my rolling around. “Do you want it?”

“You got a flashlight?” For a kid who’d spent days in the dark, Ethan sounded remarkably calm. “My batteries are almost out.”

“No, sorry. Not even a match.”

“Okay.” He switched on a flashlight, and although he was right, the batteries were definitely failing, it lit up the tiny space like a flash bomb, putting everything in stark relief. Ethan was still wearing a stained baseball t-shirt with a red logo and sleeves. The box we were in – I couldn’t think what else to call it – was concrete on the sides, with metal sheeting on the inside of the wooden door above.

It was full of wrapped plastic packages, and I didn’t think anybody would come all the way out here to stash their corn meal and flour.

“That’s not mine,” Ethan said, sounding remarkably adult about it. He was the same boy from the photos, only he’d lost the smile. Big, earnest dark eyes, and a serious, square face. “I think it’s, you know, drugs and stuff.”

“I think you’re right,” I said, and crouched down next to him. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” He shrugged, embarrassed. “It’s my hideout. I found it a few months ago, but it was empty. When I got here, I found all this stuff, and then this guy showed up. I couldn’t get out, but he couldn’t get in, either.”

“He couldn’t?”

For answer, Ethan lifted a pistol. It was a matte-black semi-automatic, and the slide was jammed all the way back. My heart did a little stutter, and I held out my trembling hand for it. He gave it to me.

Empty.

“You’ve been shooting at him?” I asked.

“I had to. He shot at me first.” For all his bravery, this was a little boy, and I saw that he was deeply scared. “He missed me, though. I just shot to scare him. That’s not mine either. I found it in here.”

“You must have done a really good job of scaring him,” I said. “How long have you been down here?”

"I don't know. Days, maybe. It got really boring after a while. I figured somebody would find me." He gave me a faint smile this time. "I told him I'd blow all this stuff up if he tried to come in."

"Ah ... and do you have dynamite in your pocket or something?"

"Kind of," he said, and turned the flashlight away, on another box. It had Army stenciling on it, identifying the contents as MK2. It was also clearly marked as EXPLOSIVE. "I didn't open it, though."

I didn't have a pry bar, but the wood was pretty old; a well-placed smack shattered the top enough to give me a look at the interior.

"Sweet!" Ethan said, wide-eyed.

Grenades, the old pineapple kind. I swallowed hard, thinking about the damage a kid could do to himself in an enclosed space with military explosives. I grabbed two. "Don't touch these," I said. "Promise me you won't, no matter what. I can't take them with me, but I don't want you messing with this stuff. It's very dangerous."

The kid looked deeply offended. "I'm not stupid."

At his age, I certainly had been. "Seriously, Ethan. Promise me."

"I promise."

I looked at the gun. "I wish we had a reload for this."

He pulled the top off of another nearby box. In it were three more magazines, fully loaded. "I was going to put another one in," he said, clearly embarrassed. "I kind of forgot, and then when I heard you coming, I couldn't find the box in time."

Which explained why he hadn't shot me, thank God. I decided to save the gun lecture for later, changed out the magazines and worked the slide to load one in the chamber. "So, this is your hideout?" I asked. It didn't make sense to me, a budding Warden seeking out – even accidentally – a secret hideout in a black corner, where he couldn't feel the earth around him.

Ethan was quiet for a moment, then said, "It's the only place where I can be me again. You know? Out there, there's all this noise in my head, all this stuff. Here, it's just ... me."

That made more sense than I'd expected. I remembered what it had been like at puberty – powers waking, complicated by hormones kicking in. No wonder he wanted to have a quiet place to just be. Warden powers were a heavy burden, and he was young. Too young.

I took a deep breath. "Here's what we're going to do. You stay here until I come back for you, okay? Don't worry, it's all going to be all right. Just chill."

“Chill? I can do that.” He grinned at me, and something struck me full force -- a powerful sense of recognition. I knew that smile. I knew those dark eyes. It was only a glimpse, and then it was gone, and I wasn’t altogether sure I hadn’t imagined it.

I heard the snap of a rifle shot overhead, muffled by the concrete and wooden and metal, and realized that I was probably running out of time. “I’ll be back for you. Ethan, stay put. Whatever happens, stay where you are.”

“I know,” he said. “I’ll -- ” The flashlight batteries flickered, then gave up the ghost, plunging us into darkness. Ethan’s voice stuttered, then strengthened. “I’ll be okay.”

“I know you will be.” I hugged him, on impulse, and he wrapped his arms around me with near desperation. “Be right back, hero.”

I climbed up on the crates, wary of my weight on the creaking wood, and managed to get a broken piece of concrete wedged near the hinges to hold the door open at an angle as I crawled out. With any luck, the angle and the blowing sand would confuse the rifleman; if not, the metal and wood were at least a thin cover.

I didn’t know where Lewis was, but the sandstorm was in full roar now, except in the area where I was lying. It was eerily quiet here, the eye of the storm.

It occurred to me, as another shot rang out and shivered the propped-up door, that the shooter wasn’t out there.

He was in here with me, inside the black corner. Very close.

I crawled over to the side and risked a look around the door. If I didn’t have cover, neither did he. I saw a flutter of cloth on the ground, and a glitter of sun on glass. He’d taken a sniper position, probably at the maximum range of the pistol in my hand, and I wasn’t that good a shot. Likewise, the grenades were only as good as I could throw, and I was no professional.

While I was considering the best course to get my message across to Lewis, my phone buzzed in my pocket. Oh. Right. Magic didn’t work in the black corner ... technology evidently did.

Lewis didn’t waste time on pleasantries. “I’m at the edge of the black corner, maybe fifty feet away. I got one of them.”

“Bully for you. Mine’s the sniper, and he’s staying put.”

“You okay?”

That was beside the point right now. “I found Ethan. He’s in a smuggler’s box under the sand. We need to get him out of there.”

Lewis was so quiet I thought about saying, over, but then his voice came in a rush. “I’m coming in. Get him ready. I’ll pull him out and get him to safety.”

The tacit understanding was that once that was done, I’d be on my own. I was kind of okay with that.

Ethan nodded. A second later, Lewis’s pale, tense face appeared above us in the small opening. “Up!” he said, and reached down. I lifted, and Ethan raised his arms. Lewis lifted him straight up and out, and held the boy close to his chest. I saw relief chase fear across his expression.

“Get him clear!” I said. “Here, take this!” I tossed up the pistol, and then one of the grenades. “I’m blowing the hell out of this place, so get the kid as far away as you can!”

Lewis and Ethan disappeared from my narrow view, and I could only hope they were taking me seriously. I jumped for the opening above and hauled myself up by main strength belly down on the hot sand. I saw tracks leading toward the only cover available – the far sand dune where I’d left David.

As I got to my hands and knees, I heard a voice from behind me say, “Don’t move.”

I froze. Through the sweaty, dusty curtain of my hair, I saw a man dressed desert camouflage crouched nearby, aiming a rifle directly at me. He’d made better time advancing than I’d hoped. “Who else is down there?” he demanded.

“Nobody.” I slowly came upright, sitting on my knees, careful to keep my hands at my sides. “Who are you?”

“Who the fuck are you, you crazy bitch? Cops? DEA?”

“You wish. Look, I’ll make you a deal – forget about your drugs and get the hell out of here. We’ll call it even.”

“Know what?” He took aim. “Think I’ll just kill you instead.”

“You sure about that?” I turned my left hand over and showed him the grenade. “Already pulled the pin. Shoot me, and we’re both buzzard meat.”

“You think I’m stupid? You didn’t pull the pin.”

I smiled, cold and certain. “Can you really tell from there? Then shoot me. Or leave. Your choice. But I’m not alone, and you really don’t want to screw with us.”

He wasn’t sure I was bluffing. He couldn’t be, without coming even closer. After a long, frozen second, he took a step back. As he retreated, I edged closer until I was holding the grenade over

the door of the smuggler's box. Even if he was tempted to shoot me, he wouldn't dare now. He still hoped to get his drugs out of the deal, if nothing else.

"Keep moving," I called to him. "I won't drop the bomb if you leave quietly."

I stayed where I was until he was he mounted a dusty camouflage ATV – it was nearly hidden in a new sand dune, thanks to Lewis's distraction windstorm – and began revving it toward the horizon. Only then did I breathe a sigh of relief and relax my grip around the grenade.

The pin – still in place – had branded a red ring into the skin of my palm. I pulled the pin, dropped the grenade into the smuggler's box, and ran to join Lewis and Ethan. We all threw ourselves flat.

Nothing happened. No explosion.

The grenade was a dud.

Lewis slowly got up, holding Ethan close to his side. He stared after the retreating sniper on the ATV, and the expression on his face was somewhere between terrifying and outright insane. "Let's go," he said. He looked down at David, still lying silent on the ground. "He'll be okay once we get him out of the dead space."

I nodded and grabbed David's wrists, and we made our way to the closest edge of the black corner.

As we stepped across that invisible boundary, it felt like I'd been suffocating, and now I was given sweet, delicious air. I hadn't realized how much my body craved its connection to the powers, to the earth, to the wind and water and fire. I hadn't realized how alone I'd been, until I wasn't.

As soon as David was pulled across the terminator, he pulled in a deep, retching breath and rolled over on his side. I flopped down beside him, holding his hand, and watched as the wound in his chest knitted itself closed. Not a single drop of blood.

"You're all right?" David's voice was rough, not entirely steady, and his eyes faded from red back to gold-flecked bronze. He got to his knees. I met him there, and our embrace was desperate and hungry. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I couldn't help you. I couldn't even help myself."

"I'm okay."

"I know you are." His arms tightened around me. "We need to mark this place, warn the Djinn. They can't be here."

“Yeah, it’s not so healthy for Wardens, either.”

Lewis was holding the boy in his arms, but Ethan was squirming to get free. Lewis set him down, and Ethan hurried over to me.

I was watching Lewis, who continued to track the sniper on the ATV as he buzzed toward freedom.

Boom.

ATVs have gas tanks. It didn’t make a very big explosion, but it was certainly big enough. I winced and averted my eyes, but Lewis wasn’t done yet. He turned his hand over, and I saw the dull green pineapple shape of the grenade. He pulled the pin like he’d done it for a living, and in one smooth motion, tossed.

It arced through the air, perfectly placed, and dropped neatly into the open hole of the smuggler’s box.

"Mine was a dud," I said.

"This one's not."

On the count of three, the entire thing exploded in a blast of flame, debris, and airborne cocaine. When the stunning blast died away, there was just a smoking hole in the ground,

“Pretty good throw,” I said, and met Lewis’s eyes. “The kid likes baseball. I guess that kind of thing runs in the family.”

Lewis said nothing. His gaze flicked to the boy, and I saw it again – Ethan’s fine walnut-brown hair, his dark brown eyes. The shadow of Lewis’s smile on his lips.

I let my expression ask the question. Does he know? Lewis shook his head, and I saw the secrets in him, and the torment. I knew why Francis had called him now. I knew why Lewis couldn’t walk away with Ethan still missing, and delegate.

David certainly knew; he’d probably known it from the beginning, from the history written in the walls and floors of the Falworth-Davis house. Lewis must have been a frequent visitor. I knew him well enough to know he’d want to be part of Ethan’s life.

“It’s complicated,” Lewis said, answering some question I didn’t know was in my face. “In the beginning I was on the run from the Wardens, for years. I didn’t want to put Ethan at risk. Later – it didn’t seem like the right time.”

“Time for what?” Ethan asked, and looked at us both in turn.

David studied the horizon, removing himself from the entire conversation as effectively as if he'd held up a NOT HERE sign.

"To tell you," Lewis said, and stopped, as if the words just wouldn't make it to his lips.

He needn't have bothered. "That you're my dad?" Ethan shrugged. "I know that. I always knew it."

Lewis blinked. So did I. Even David raised his head. "You did?" Lewis asked, clearly mystified.

"Sure. I could feel it. Grandma says I've got the gift. Whatever." Ethan shrugged. "I didn't want to make a big deal out of it or anything."

Lewis slowly sank down into a crouch, bringing himself to eye level with the boy. He didn't say anything. Neither did Ethan.

After a long moment, he opened his arms, and Ethan flung himself into them. This time, when Lewis picked him up, Ethan didn't try to struggle free. I clutched David's hand tightly as I watched the two of them together, father and son, and I was overcome by a feeling I didn't really understand – longing, regret, pride, anguish.

David knew. He put his arm around me. "It's good he has someone," he said.

"Lewis, or Ethan?"

"Both."

I couldn't dispute that.

It was a long hike back through the desert, but somehow, it seemed like we were all family, together.