

GENE AND ME

* 1 *

Randall Greystone saw a dark colored stone lying next to a small mound of sand and stopping his bike, reached his three and a half-foot dowel outward. He felt only a minor disappointment when the stone did not leap from the ground toward the rare earth magnet attached to the end of the dowel.

"Meteor wrong!" He thought to himself as he looked around for another rock that didn't match the color of the playa dust.

A gust of wind blew dust in his face and he looked around, finally noticing that the sky to the south was taking on the color of a full-fledged dust storm.

"Damn Arr-Gee." He muttered to himself. "Pay attention to the fucking weather!"

He pulled his GPS unit from a shirt pocket and checked his position, then looked again at the sky ahead of him.

With a shrug, he muttered. "Plenty of water in my pack and the wind'll be at my back on the way back to the Jeep."

He pushed off with his dowel across the handlebars and pedaled onward, scanning the ground as he rode into the oncoming sandstorm.

He stopped several times over the next few minutes, giving a hearty cheer when one of the stones he poked his dowel toward sprang up to the magnet on the end of his stick with a solid snap.

Bringing the stone up to where he could get a good look at it, he was pleased when he saw the unmistakable meteorite stuck to the rare earth magnet.

He pulled the meteorite loose and dropped it into a zip-lock baggie, then pulled the GPS unit from his pocket and marked the spot and wrote the information on the baggie. Tucking the baggie in a pouch attached to his handlebars, he looked around the spot for another stone of the same color and quickly spotted two more within a few feet.

He collected them both with his dowel-magnet and repeated the process of determining the GPS coordinates and marking the bag for each meteorite.

As he was hit by a stronger gust of wind from the sandstorm coming from behind, he decided it was time to head back to the protection of his Jeep. He swung his bike in a wide circle around the spot where he had found the three otherworldly specimens, and was rewarded by another meteorite that was bigger than the first three put together.

He dutifully tagged and bagged the golf ball sized stone and made another scan between the stones he had found in this clump. He was forced to end his search of the area when the wind grew strong and steady for several minutes without let-up.

With the growing wind and increased dust pushing from behind, Arr-Gee, as his friends called him, was flying across the flat playa with the oversized balloon tires of his mountain bike leaving a minimal track that was quickly eroded behind him by the wind. The flat surface was so devoid of obstructions that it was easy for him to spot any off-color objects.

As he rode parallel to his outbound path with his eyes scanning the ground around him, Arr-Gee found another small stone that passed all the tests he knew to give it in the field, but seemed not quite right to his eyes. Tagging with his GPS and bagging the fifth specimen took only a few moments and he was soon back in the saddle and pedaling south-southwest.

After finding another fire-darkened stone on the gray-brown playa lakebed, Argie decided it was time for a break. Sitting cross-legged on the playa surface with the bike between him and the wind, he broke out one of the quart sports drink bottles and a granola bar from the backpack he wore. As he munched and drank his eyes never stopped scanning the desert floor around him.

Remembering the isolated drive to get here, he wondered at how hardy the original pioneers had to have been to walk across the continent to get here. And *then* have to deal with the western deserts in all their many forms on their way to the other side of the desert and the pacific coast beyond.

As he relaxed with the wind at his back, his eyes habitually scanned the desert floor. Following his standard pattern, he scanned the ground close by first, then swept his eyes from side to side in an arc that gradually grew further and further away.

Then, about at the edge of his clear vision in the growing dust storm, he saw a shape that was out of place.

He popped the last of the granola bar in his mouth and swallowed the last gulps from the quart bottle, then tucked the empty into his pack with the other empty and the full one as he rose from his sitting position. Placing the pack in front of the rear axle to somewhat shield the axle from the wind, he moved toward the odd shape.

As he approached he could see that the object was a darker brown than the playa dust and looked somewhat like old pottery. He saw what he thought were cracks, but upon closer inspection, turned out to be lighter markings on the exposed surface.

He bent down on his hands and knees to peer at the object and saw that it looked to be an intact ceramic bottle. Even the cap was still on the top of the bottle, making the whole thing about two-and-a-half to three inches in length.

He didn't want to break the find, so he used his pocketknife to carefully dig the dried playa mud away from the bottle. Ignoring the wind that continued to blow ever more strongly, Arr-Gee slowly exposed more of the ceramic bottle.

His pulse raced as the markings he had first noticed grew into shapes that reminded him of video-game runes, or ancient picto-script.

“Either a really old treasure ... or some high school kid’s class project.” He muttered as he began to carefully dig under the bottle with his knife.

In a few minutes he had freed his prize from its embrace with the hard-packed mud of the dry lakebed. He lifted the bottle from its earthly grasp and saw what looked to be a braid of hair fall away as it broke free of the neck of the bottle.

As he crouched on his knees, he held the bottle up with one hand and brushed excess mud from its surface with gentle stokes of his fingers. As he cleaned the surface, dust fell from the markings to reveal three lines of markings that stretched from top to bottom.

A particularly strong gust of wind slammed into him and Arr-Gee decided to inspect his find in more detail later. Tucking it into a shirt pocket, he turned and retrieved his pack before mounting his bike and heading back to his Jeep.

Pedaling at a fair clip, it took another hour before his Jeep came into view in the distance. Another few minutes had him trading the remaining warm sports drink in his pack for a cold one from his cooler after he propped the bike on the down-wind side of the Jeep.

He opened a door on the down-wind side and took a long pull on the quart bottle after sitting with his feet hanging out of the side. He put the cap back on the bottle and set it on the floor behind the drivers seat, then pulled the ceramic bottle from his shirt pocket.

He brushed at and blew on any dust or playa mud he found on any surface or in any nook or cranny or marking and soon had the whole bottle exposed.

“Too damn perfect to be old.” He thought to himself.

Holding the bottle up to the dust-filled sky, he could not see a single flaw on the rough surface. Even the edges of the markings were crisp and sharp, not weathered or roughened from handling or age.

“Probably not more than a year old.” He muttered. “Probably something some tourist just bought and lost in the same day and was covered by the last heavy rain.”

He turned the bottle over and over in his hands, admiring its craftsmanship and wondering if it was made in a factory or by a local artist. There was no stamp on the bottom that indicated where it was made, so he guessed it was a local product.

The stopper drew his attention and he used a fingernail to scrape the remaining dust from where the stopper stuck into the top of the bottle. He noticed that the stopper handle was about a half-inch long above the edge of the neck and had a different pair of tiny markings on each of its three sides.

And it was on pretty tight.

He pushed against it as he cleaned the tiny markings and noticed the stopper didn't move. Then he lightly gripped the top of the short stopper handle and wriggled it but it still didn't move. Gripping it between three fingers, he tugged and when the stopper didn't move, increased his grip and force of his pull.

All of a sudden, the stopper sprang free and then snapped back into place with a force Arr-Gee couldn't resist.

"What the ..." He exclaimed.

He tried again to remove the stopper, but no matter how much force he used, the stopper wouldn't budge.

He was muttering and growling at the obstinate stopper when he noticed a shape watching him from within the blowing dust.

"Oh. Hi." Arr-Gee stammered as he peered into the dust of the storm. "I didn't see you at first."

The man stood about the same height as Arr-Gee's own five eleven and looked to be around the same 175 to 180 pounds. The figure was dressed in what could only be described as buckskins with what looked like a leather bag over his head and one shoulder.

Argie looked around and reached into the cooler behind the rear seat to pull out another quart sports drink bottle. Motioning to his watcher, he said. "Come out of the wind."

When the man did so, Argie extended the sports drink and said. "Here."

The man took the bottle but did nothing more ... except to gaze at Argie. The gaze was not hostile ... just neutral ... as if the man were waiting for him to explain himself.

So he did.

"I was on my way out to Black Rock for a week of wilderness camping in the desert and stopped here to look for meteorites. Found some too!"

"Anyway," he continued as he waved the hand not holding the ceramic bottle, "I checked with the cop I saw in the town closest to here and he assured me I could be here rock huntin'. His words ... not mine ... rock huntin'."

"Want to see 'em?" Argie asked as he tucked the bottle back in his shirt pocket, then stood up and dug into the bag strapped to the handlebars of his bike.

He held the bags of meteorites out to the man cradled in his hands and saw the first expression from his silent visitor. The man held a hand over the bags holding the five stones and smiled with pure pleasure.

Then he lifted the bag holding the last stone Argie had found and said. "This is not what you were looking for. This stone was formed by the Mother."

Argie gaped as the buckskin-clad man continued. "It is still useful as it has not been contaminated by the essence of the mass of life that covers the Mother." He looked up at the sky. "I think it was propelled into the heavens long ago and has only recently returned to the Mother to lie in this desolate place."

He looked up at Argie. "Still, a wondrous find."

The man looked back down at the bag that held the stone that he had suspected was not really a meteorite, but still had enough iron in it to snap to the rare earth magnet attached to the oak dowel he used to collect his treasure. "I would use this one to store a minor spell that would provide more of a shortcut to a boring task than for anything important."

The strange man then set the bag down and gingerly picked up the bag that held Argie's prize. The golf ball sized meteorite with one side burned into a concave bowl and the other side presenting a small peak with several tiny fingerprint depressions around its perimeter.

Still holding the unopened sports drink in one hand, the man held it up to his gleaming eyes, then set it back down into Argie's palms as if he were afraid to hold it too long.

"That one is a treasure that any mortal with any knowledge of its worth would covet." The man whispered reverently then stepped back.

Argie smiled and exclaimed. "That's what it's all about! I've found others that are close ... but this is the biggest one I've ever found."

He smiled as he gazed at his prize, holding the four bags in one hand he picked up the one he and the man both agreed was not a true meteorite and said. "I wonder if this one was a chunk of the earth that was melted and thrown into space by another meteorite strike ... and finally fell back to earth?"

"After its preparation in the heavens, the Mother has reclaimed what was hers." The man said with bowed head. Then, looking back up at Argie, he asked. "You said you have others?"

"Yea." He replied. "I've been doing this for three years and I've found a few and bought a couple. He held up his new finds. "With these five ... er, well ... these four and the other one, I've got a total of eleven true meteorites and one ... whatever. I guess it would still be a meteorite ... but of earthly origin instead of," he waved at the sky, "out there."

He blinked his pleasure at his dust-storm visitor, then looked around and asked. "How did you get out here? Do you need a ride somewhere?"

"I was lost by my companion, and yes I would like to leave this place." Came the prompt answer.

"Wow! Bummer!" Argie exclaimed as he misunderstood. "I'm headed west to Burning Man. You're welcome to come with me as far as you like if it's in the right direction."

The man bowed formally and said. "Since I have no other options, I would gladly accept your offer."

"Come on!" Argie said, then belatedly added. "Oh, my name is Arr Gee. Well, it's not my real name, but its what everyone calls me so I wouldn't know it if you called me by my given name."

"I am called Sha-Wa-Nayal." The man replied.

“O-kaay.” Argie said, then led his guest around to the front passenger seat and moved those few things that had accumulated on the seat and floor, arranging things around the empty spaces behind the front seats. He motioned his guest to the seat and showed him how to buckle the seat belt when his passenger hesitated.

“It’s the law, you know.” He said, then hurried around to the driver’s side.

He pulled out his keys, then took a quick look around and said. “Oh, crap. Wait a minute.”

He jumped out and opened the rear door and maneuvered the bike onto the packed supplies in the rear of the Jeep. Then he walked around the Jeep, making a ‘matter-out-of-place’ sweep. Satisfied he had left no trace of inadvertent trash he jumped back in the front seat and said. “All set! Let’s go!”

He started the engine and saw his passenger’s flinch of surprise and wondered at the man, sneaking glances as he prepared to drive away.

The man looked to be in his late fifties or early sixties, but still looked to be in excellent shape for his apparent age.

He put the Jeep in gear and pulled away from the spot where he’d parked. His passenger grabbed at the armrest, but soon released his grip as Argie drove across the playa.

Argie made his way toward where he’d marked the end of the dirt road that had led to the dry lakebed and after a half hour driving across the playa reached the path that marked the one-lane dirt road. Another half-hour at between fifteen and twenty miles per hour and he reached the two-lane blacktop that led to the small town twenty miles away.

His passenger seemed to be infatuated with the sensations of the ride and the sights and smells of the scenery around them and Argie wondered if the ancient-young man was slightly off in the brainpan.

“Beautiful . . . isn’t it?” He said with a full-faced smile as he drove. “I wait all year for this time when I can come out here on vacation for a few weeks. You from around here?”

“I was born a long way to the east of here.” The man replied, then his brow furrowed. “Or it could be as far to the west. It’s been so long I’m not sure which is more correct.”

“Hah!” Argie exclaimed aloud. “That would just about put you on the other side of the world, my friend! That’s quite a ways from home to lose contact with your ride.”

He looked at his passenger and continued. “Going any place in particular, or just traveling?”

“My direction seems to always be determined by those in whose company I find myself.” Came the answer.

“Heh-heh!” Argie laughed aloud. “In that case . . . are you up to a couple day’s ride west?”

He looked over at the man and was surprised with the reply. “How far will your wagon travel before you have to renew the spell? Will it travel till night falls?”

“You’re not from around here, are you skippy?” Argie muttered with a laugh.

“No. I am not.” The man answered with no emotion to his voice. “But it has been so long since I have had the opportunity to speak with another that I find myself rambling like a young lad the first times he attempts to speak with a female with no adult standing by to listen in and frown with displeasure.”

Not quite understanding what the man meant, Argie simply made no reply, then his passenger said. “May I ask you a question or more?”

“Sure!” Argie said with a huge smile. “I’m on vacation and I found a fistful of meteorites *before* I got to my week long hippie-fest in the desert! I can answer just about any question you have! None of the answers might have anything to do with the question ... but I can guarantee you’ll get an answer!”

He smiled hugely at his passenger.

“Do you know much about the history of the Mothe... I mean ... the world?”

“You mean geography ... or archeology?” Argie answered with another question.

His passenger blinked a couple of times, and replied. “The history of the stone both without and within the Mother,” he glanced down at the bags of meteorites Argie had placed on the console between the seats, then back up at Argie, “as well as the history of the First Peoples.”

Argie smiled. He had spent many a party night in various bars and homes mentally sparring with friends and fellow students over the past few years. He was pleased to find a challenge after three boring days on the road alone.

“Yea, I’ve studied a lot of geography and even more archaeology, but I haven’t decided on a final major yet. It’ll probably take me six or eight years to get a four-year degree, but if it wasn’t for the unrelated subjects I have to take, I think I’m actually ahead of both with my own reading.”

He shrugged as he finally drove up off the dirt road and onto the paved section of the boonies. As he headed for civilization, he felt the shape of the bottle in his shirt pocket. “But no matter how much I know ... I’m ready to share or learn more. Whatcha’ got?”

The man in his passenger seat looked at the bags of meteorites and said. “One of the stones you have found is an original part of the Mother. It was thrown into the heavens a long time ago. So far up into the sky that it took uncounted ages to fall back down again.”

The man held a hand over the bags of meteorites as he continued. “This one stone would be prized for the fact that it is devoid of the echoes of the ages. It is an empty vessel that yearns to be filled. If I owned such a vessel, I would make good use of it.”

As Argie drove with one hand and opened his pocket with his other and felt the shape of the bottle inside, the man continued to move his own hand above the stack of zip-lock baggies. “The other four are treasures beyond compare. Each is of the stone that was formed outside the Mother and floated in the heavens since the dawn of time. Even though these portions of the heavens were embraced by the Mother hundreds of years ago, they are devoid of the vibrations of the life that covers the Mother.”

The man stroked the tops of the bags that held the four true meteorites and, as Argie pulled the ceramic bottle from his own pocket to look at it as he drove, said. “Each of these three smaller Tears of Heaven can be used to contain the strongest of spells, but this one beauty is a prize indeed.”

The man tore his gaze from the bags that held Argie’s newest meteorite collection and staring at Argie said. “This one Tear alone could hold an entire Book of Spells with considerable space left over.”

Argie seemed to hear the capitalization of the last few words his passenger spoke.

“Well then, write that book on it dude!” He exclaimed.

He was surprised when his passenger bowed his head and replied. “As you wish.” The man then plucked the bag up and pulled the disk-shaped meteorite from inside its enclosure.

The young-old man grasped the meteorite in one hand and held it up to his face.

Argie almost lost control of the Jeep as the meteorite began to glow with a golden light that seemed to come from his passenger’s eyes as his passenger stared at the meteorite while muttering a stream of words.

“Dude!” Argie yelled as he backed off of the accelerator. “What the fuck are you doing?”

As his passenger lowered the meteorite and slumped with what looked like total exhaustion, Argie backed off the gas enough that the Jeep coasted to a stop as he pulled off to the side of the narrow road.

With a quick foot on the brake and putting the gearshift in park, Argie turned to his passenger. “You OK dude?”

“I am well.” Came the answer, then. “Your command just took a lot of my power to complete. I am simply tired. With a little rest I will soon recover.”

“Your power! My command!” Argie exclaimed. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

The man in his passenger seat looked up with tired eyes and said. “You are holding my Djinn Bottle and you gave me an order. Since I was capable of performing your order, I was compelled to do so, just as I am compelled to answer your questions.”

He held up the disk-shaped meteorite. “This Tear from Heaven now has all my knowledge written upon it.”

The man snorted as he added. "This Tear is so pure and so large that even the quantity of my considerable experience does not half fill it to capacity."

Argie looked at the ceramic bottle he still held in his hand and asked. "Djinn? Did you say Djinn? Like in Genie in a bottle kind of Djinn?"

"Yes." Came the reply. "The bottle you hold is the Djinn Bottle that holds my immortality. As long as you hold it, I am compelled to obey your commands ... and answer your questions ... to the extent that I am able."

"Cool!" Argie exclaimed, then put the ceramic bottle back in his shirt pocket, put the Jeep back in drive and headed back toward the main highway.

Argie glanced sideways at his passenger, then with a smile said. "OK. So you're a genie, or a Djinn, whatever. Hell, I'm on the way to Burning Man. I'll be playing this kind of game for the next week or more. I'll play."

He concentrated on the drive for a few moments, then as he patted the pocket with the ceramic bottle, asked. "So I get three wishes?"

The man in the passenger seat laughed. "That old fable! No, you do not get three wishes."

"Then what do I get?" Argie laughed as he asked. "Gotta' be some use or you're not a proper Genie!"

He waited for a while, but his passenger remained silent. Then on impulse, he reached a finger into his pocket with a smile on his face and said as he touched the bottle. "Tell me the history and the rules of the Djinn, from start to finish. Not every bit of it, just the short version that tells me the basics." Then he lifted his finger and drove as his passenger wove a fabulous story.

"Long, long ago, before the pyramids of Egypt were constructed, there were those who collected knowledge." His passenger said. "I was one of those."

Argie started to interrupt, but held back as he remembered the rules of listening to a *story*. He had spent many an evening at a certain bar back at school where *storytellers* practiced their oration, and knew when to listen without interruption.

"In that time, one of those like me discovered a way to extend the life span. Many of those of us who were most proficient at our learning shared this discovery so that we could devote even more of our time to learning the ways of the Mother and sharing and debating the many things we learned."

"This went on for centuries and millennia and those who, like me, were consumed with the learning of everything and anything learned the lessons of the Mother. For untold ages we watched civilizations grow up around us, prosper, then grow old and wither, to be replaced by new civilizations that grew old in their turn to eventually be replaced in their turn by another."

“In that early time there were hundreds and thousands of gods to occupy the minds of men as they built their tribes into cities and their cities into nations.”

“Those like me who sought out pure knowledge were soon spoken of as equal to many of mankind’s gods and some of those scholars grew arrogant with the power they wielded and became the gods they themselves worshipped.”

“Eventually, in the course of time, there were three faiths that reduced the gods they worshipped to just one. It is not known why, but as they aged and grew in political power, these three faiths looked on those like me as a threat because we had proof of their beginnings that they did not want their followers to know.”

“We also knew of a rich time before theirs that exhibited a benevolently tolerant society that made education a universal right. Those few city-states were so efficient that they were able to create whole industries for honest work that paid so regularly that there were no masses of poor.”

“I was one of many groups of those with similar stores of knowledge who gathered together to coordinate the construction of the structures that you call the sphinx and the pyramids. It was a time of great posterity.” He continued. “The trees in that area had just started to die out, but the grasses lasted for another few hundred years before the sand took over.

“But at the birth of the one-god faiths, their book-writers began to label us as enemies of their respective faiths and capture and confine us so that we could not share our knowledge with others.”

“The practice has grown to be muddied by myths and fables that only hint at the truth.” Argie’s passenger continued as he drove toward the interstate.

“I had been captured by one such who was in the process of taking me to a place of worship near a great salt lake where I was to be imprisoned for all eternity so that I could not reveal my knowledge.”

“I was separated from he who wished to inter me in that prison for all time during a storm not unlike the one that started when you found my Djinn Bottle. I lay within my bottle for nearly a century and a half before you found my bottle and released me from my captivity.”

“Wait a minute!” Argie exclaimed as he imagined he had found a crack in his passenger’s story. “It’s your bottle! Why can’t you just, I don’t know, come out whenever you want to?”

“Oh wait.” He said as he poked a finger in his shirt pocket to touch the ceramic bottle and said with a smile as he drove. “Got to play the game and stay on message. Why couldn’t you come out of your bottle anytime you wanted? What are the limitations of your bottle?”

The buckskin-clad man smiled as he watched Argie pull his finger from his pocket. “I can only come out of my Djinn Bottle when I am called forth by he or she who has claimed my

obedience through the binding ceremony or by the lifting of the cap that holds my body within.”

“The limitations of my Djinn Bottle,” the man continued, “are to ensure my immortality and the containing of my essence while I am between bodies.”

Argie laughed aloud and said. “Well, that sure does explain everything!”

He laughed again as he turned on his CD player and the MP3 disk he had inside picked up at the last song he’d listened to. His passenger didn’t seem to mind and Argie drove as the man beside him sipped at the sports drink he still held and gazed in unmistakable pleasure at the scenery that flowed by the open window.

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Argie pulled out of the combination gas station and convenience store and turned to his passenger. The man was still engrossed in the huge sub that had been his choice when Argie had offered to buy him anything he wanted.

“Pretty good, huh?” He asked.

The man looked up with pieces of bread and meat at the corners of his mouth.

“Umph.” He replied.

“Yea. I know.” Argie muttered. “Sometimes ya just gotta’ dig in and forget yammering.”

Argie turned on the CD player as he pulled out and onto the interstate west.

By this time his passenger had learned the basics of a passenger and unbuckled his seat belt long enough to get a drink from the cooler behind his seat when Argie asked for one a short time later.

As the sun drew closer to the horizon ahead of them, Argie asked. “OK. We’ve been riding together for quite a few hours now and I forgot what you said your name was ... so, what was your name again?”

When his passenger hesitated, Argie smiled and poked a finger inside his pocket to touch the bottle inside. “What’s your name, dude?”

“As I told you before. It is Sha-Wa-Nayal. It could be translated into your language as, ‘He who studies all’.”

“So you’re some kind of professor. A scholar. It’s a little long. How about I just call you Nayal?”

“That is acceptable.” Came the answer. “Nayal is a shortened form for one who studies. A scholar as you define it.”

Argie chuckled. “OK dude. I’ll call you Nayal the Scholar.”

“Technically, that would be redundant.” Came the reply.

He just laughed and said. “OK. Just Nayal then.”

“You said your bottle, what was it ... contains your essence between bodies. What does that mean?”

“A Djinn Bottle is made with pieces of the Nayal that creates it inside.”

“Wait.” Argie interrupted. “You said your name is Nayal. What do you mean when you say ‘the Nayal that creates the bottle’?”

“Nayal means one who studies, a scholar. All who study, who devote their lives to the studying all there is to know, are Nayal. Those like me who devote their lives to scholarly pursuits are known collectively and individually as Sha-Wa-Nayal.” The man shrugged. “I have been known by that name for so long that I have forgotten the name with which my sire anointed me upon my birth.”

“So Nayal is another name for Djinn?” He asked.

“Yes.”

Argie laughed. “So your *name* is not actually Nayal. You are, in fact, *a* Nayal ... correct?”

“That is correct. Many centuries ago the term was used as an honorific before the birth name. Over the centuries the title was reduced to the point that those few dozens of us who claimed it were known by no other name than the title itself.”

His passenger shrugged. “Eventually, those who became Nayal, scholars knowledgeable enough to perform the Djinn spell, were known by no other name.”

Argie’s brows furrowed. “So only those who performed the Djinn spell become known as Nayal?”

“Yes.” Came the answer.

Argie noticed that his passenger no longer required him to make a show of touching the bottle before answering and smiled at the lapse in his story rules.

“So the bottle is Djinn and the one who creates it is Nayal?” He asked.

“Yes. As it is created, a Djinn bottle is infused with portions of the Nayal’s body in the form of skin or hair or blood.” The man continued. “The Djinn spell makes it so that the Nayal who creates it can never die. If the Nayal’s current body is killed or dies, the body is transformed to a mist that is collected by the Djinn spell and transported within the bottle.”

“Then it is required for someone to open the bottle for the Nayal to be reborn.”

Wait.” Argie thought he spotted another inconsistency in the man’s story. “You said the Djinn spell makes the Nayal immortal, but you also said a Nayal can be killed or can die. Isn’t that a contradiction?”

Nayal patted his chest and arms as he replied. “This body can die or be killed in many of the same ways as any mortal being, but *my* Djinn spell and *my* Djinn Bottle retrieves the essence that is *me* and allows *me* to be reborn into another body identical to the one that has died.”

He looked down. “Including the clothes I was wearing when my body died.”

“Wow! That’s pretty neat!” Argie exclaimed. “But if you die and your bottle retrieves your essence, how are you reborn?”

“Someone must open the bottle.”

“Oh, like I did back at the lake.”

“Yes.”

Argie thought for minute, then asked. “There’s one thing I’m not too clear on, though. From all the fables and stories, when somebody finds a genie, they’re given three wishes. Earlier, you said that wasn’t true. What did you mean?”

The man looked at him for a moment, then looked out the side window at the land flowing by as Argie drove.

Argie waited for a few minutes, then on impulse reached a finger into his pocket, touched the bottle and said. “Tell me the rules of what you are required when someone holds your Djinn Bottle.”

Still watching out the window of the moving Jeep, the man said. “As long as you hold or touch my bottle, or have performed the binding ceremony, I must answer all questions truthfully and perform any task you order me to perform to the best of my abilities.”

“That sounds too much like slavery for my taste.” Argie muttered. Then had a thought and touched the bottle again. “What is the binding ceremony?”

The man sighed and replied. “If you were to take a lock of your hair, or even a single hair, and tie it around the neck of my Djinn Bottle, the contact with that part of your body would bind me to you. This binding would be the same as if you held the bottle in your hand or touched it with a finger and I would be compelled to obey your commands even if my bottle were stored inside a backpack.”

“Now that *really* sounds too much like slavery for my tastes.” Argie said, then remembered the lock of hair that had fallen from the bottle when he pried it from the caked mud of the dry lakebed.

They rode in silence for a while, when Argie finally said. “Uh ... I’m not going to drive all night ... I’ve got to get a room. I could get two beds if you want to ride further with me tomorrow. I don’t want to seem like I’m coming on to you, so if you don’t want your own bed to sleep in you can just hang out till morning or catch a ride with someone else.”

“I have been awake for a century and a half. I could sleep where I am till morning and would consider it the most luxurious bed in the world in the morning.”

Argie laughed aloud and exclaimed. “Whatever, dude! I’ll get a room and you can sleep in the Jeep. But I sure hope you’ll take a shower before we hit the road again!”

They drove into the night till he came to Wells Nevada, where he got a room.

True to his word, after being showed how it worked, leaned the passenger seat back to sleep in the Jeep while Argie relaxed in the luxury of a hotel shower and bed.

The next morning, when Argie came out to offer his rider the use of the room's shower, he was surprised to find his passenger surprisingly clean and his formerly dusty leather buckskins looking like they had been freshly dry cleaned.

"Dude!" He exclaimed. "You're holding out on me! You've been here before or you wouldn't have known where to get all spiffed up!"

When he got no response, he patted at his chest for a moment, then said. "Oh crap, I put your bottle in my overnight bag with my shirt from yesterday." With a huge smile he said. "Just a minute while I get it."

The man put a hand up and said. "It was a simple spell. With the food and drink that remained in the chest you call a cooler, I was able to restore much of the energy I used to write the Book of Spells to your Tear. It was a simple matter to clean my person as well as the clothes that I wear. The spell is in your Book if you ever learn how to access the Tear."

Argie shook his head and with a smile said. "Whatever, dude. Hang on a minute while I get my stuff, close up the room and check out.

He did that and soon they were back on the highway driving west. He and the man talked for hours and somewhere along the way Argie started calling his entertaining passenger Gene and had offered to share his camp at Burning Man.

When they got to Fernley he pulled into the box store for his last supplies and made sure to get enough food and fluids for his new camp mate. It was not that much more when considered over his whole budget, so he bought a backpack, sleeping bag and ground pad, and a few other basic supplies for Gene.

Two nights in a rest stop instead of a hotel would pay for the expense. Spread over the two weeks of his vacation after Burning Man would make it no great sacrifice.

They managed to get all their supplies into Argie's Jeep with no problems and they made one last stop at the Love's truck stop to fuel up and buy a few extra bottles of water and skin cream just because they had room.

As the sun set over the mountains to the west they joined the string of vehicles on the two-lane road north toward Gerlach.

Argie knew the rules, so he stopped at every opportunity to rest and make use of the shops along the way that provided Indian Tacos and desert wear for those who still had money to spend and time to kill before they got to the playa.

It was just after midnight when he pulled off the two-lane road and was engulfed in the dust that was stirred up by the hundreds of vehicles arriving for the week long festival of sharing.

Argie asked Gene several times if he was sure he had enough money to buy a ticket, but Gene assured him there would be no problem. When it came time to hand his ticket to the young woman who came to collect it, Argie was surprised when the woman ignored Gene.

It was if she didn't even see him.

With furrowed brow, Argie presented his own ticket and accepted the information package that held all the maps and stickers that came with his entry into the festival.

Beside him in the passenger seat, Gene occasionally muttered a few words and when he did Argie could see his form flicker and shift as if it were not there. As Gene's shape became clearer and more distinct, he would mutter more words and his body would slowly become more opaque again.

"Weird." Argie muttered as he drove past the last greeter and headed into the depths of the playa to search for a campsite.

He found a spot at the corner of the "C" road and 6:30 spoke and within sight of the porta-pots. Argie was glad to have help assembling his canopy and within a couple of hours had the twelve-by-twenty-four foot structure up and the Jeep parked on the canvas ground tarp inside the canopy.

Argie was able to stay awake long enough to inflate his air mattress and put it in the back of the Jeep. With the last of his energy he said. Find a spot to crash and I'll see you in the morning."

With that he crawled into his sleeping bag and was soon oblivious to the commotion of the growing city in the desert that was Burning Man.

* 3 *

When the first sunlight peeked over the mountains to the east and probed the inside of the Jeep through the opening in the canopy, Argie stirred and blinked himself awake.

He crawled out of the back of the Jeep and made his way to the nearby porta-pots to take care of his morning business. He quickly returned to his campsite and set up his tables and stove to make a breakfast of a mixture of chopped meats and vegetables mixed with scrambled eggs.

He was just turning off the burner to the camp stove when Gene came walking from the seven o'clock direction of "C" street.

"Your people built this city in just one night!" Gene exclaimed. "It is an amazing feat!"

"Well," Argie replied, "all the bigger structures were built over the past month or more, but yea ... the streets are filling up with people getting here in the last few hours."

"It is wondrous the magic that man has wrought while I endured nothing more than the sight of the foggy patch of sky that lay above my bottle." Gene said with a shake of his head.

"And the sights to behold!" He exclaimed as a pair of topless girls strolled nonchalantly past on their way toward Central Camp.

"You're really taking this to the limit, aren't you dude?" Argie laughed as he spoke. "So what have you done this morning?"

“I walked the full length of this road.” Gene said as he pointed toward the six o’clock direction of the ‘C’ Street, “Then at the end I moved outward one road and came back this way on the circle. When I reached the end, I came inward one road and eventually returned here where I started.”

“What is that exquisite smell?” Gene changed the subject.

Argie smiled as he stirred the mixture in the skillet. Steam rose from the newly exposed mix. “It’s a mixture of scrambled eggs, sausage, ham, mushrooms, onions, and peppers. If you want, I’ve got cheese to sprinkle on the top after I fill your plate.”

He scooped half of the contents of the skillet onto the end of the fork that rested on each of two plates that waited on another aluminum folding table, then added. “There are drinks in the cooler. It’s under the rear of the Jeep if you want a cold drink with your breakfast.”

He pointed to the two chairs in front of the canopy. “You can eat standing, but I always carry two chairs when I travel, so there’s one for you if you want.”

He didn’t wait for a response, and after making sure the gas was off on the camp stove, picked up one of the plates of camp omelet and sat in the far chair. A quart bottle of water rested between the legs of the two chairs where he could get to it no matter which chair he sat on.

Argie picked the water bottle up, twisted the cap off, unopened it to take a swallow, and replaced the cap. He then placed the bottle on his left side and dug into the food on his plate.

He had only started when Gene joined him in the other chair.

They ate in silence for several minutes, then Argie rose and cleaned the plates, forks, skillet, and camp stove. By the time he was finished, Gene was anticipating where help was needed and was there to provide it.

As Gene held the gallon jug, Argie poured the gray water from the wash tub and through the screened funnel. Peering inside the funnel, Argie said. “Oh good! No chunks.”

He then pulled four, two-foot two-by-fours from next to the cooler along with four metal stakes, a sheet of plastic, and a wire grate festooned with strips of cloth.

Within moments he had poked the stakes through holes in the two-by-fours and draped the black square of plastic inside the resulting enclosure. The grate with its hanging strips of cloth lay across the top of the stakes.

“Just pour that water over the rags as slow as you can without splashing it out of the tray.” Argie said as he pointed to the gallon jug of gray water Gene carried.

When he had done so, Gene asked. “This seems like a lot of effort to evaporate water. Why do you not simply throw the water upon the ground?”

Argie wagged a finger at his strange new friend. "I told you already. Burning Man is a Leave No Trace community. If I were to throw the water on the ground it would leave all the soap and greasy food particles that made it through the screen. Multiply that by the tens of thousands of camps and you'd have a pretty messed up desert when we all leave in a week."

"So everybody is expected to police their own camp." He continued. "What gray water I don't evaporate I will cart out with me in the bottles I empty. And everything that accumulates inside the plastic tray is folded up with the plastic sheet and hauled out when I leave."

Satisfied that the morning's activities were cleaned up, Argie made a scan of the area, then assembled the last of his camp. He put up solar powered yard lights to mark his camp's perimeter and a string of multi-colored, battery powered lights along the front edge of his canopy.

In front of the canopy he hung a shade tarp that had as many gaps as it did strips of cloth. The nearly constant wind of the Black Rock playa whispered through the openings as he staked the ends down.

He strung a line of solar powered lights through the edges of the shade tarp to give a nighttime reference point. As they worked Argie realized the shade in front of his canopy was already an inviting spot in the growing heat.

Gene had watched dozens of bicycles go by while they finished assembling camp and couldn't help but notice Argie's bike when he moved it in front of the canopy.

Argie shrugged. "I'll walk with you if you want to see if we can find you a yellow bike."

"A yellow bike?" Gene asked.

"Yea." Argie answered. "They're green."

"A yellow bike ... that's green." Gene tilted his head quizzically.

"Yea." Argie said with a smile. "Come on, I'll show you."

He walked his bike alongside Gene as they headed in toward Central Camp. As they walked they marveled at the unique artwork that already peppered the landscape.

Having been here before, Argie took them around the perimeter of Central Camp twice before he spotted one of the green 'yellow bikes' that were the burner's version of a taxi.

He pointed out the bike to Gene but before he could get his new friend to understand what he meant someone else had claimed the bike.

Luckily it was not more than a few minutes later that Gene spotted an official unclaimed green *yellow bike*. In moments they were riding together across the playa, checking out the many pieces of art that were scattered hundreds of yards apart.

By the end of the first day they could barely move their legs.

“I would think a genie would be in better shape.” Argie groaned as he massaged his aching thighs and calves.

“Riding these machines you call bicycles uses muscles that are never used in hiking cross country.” Gene answered. “And I told you before that in my form as you see it I am as normal as you yourself are.”

He gasped as he worked at a particularly hard knot of muscle. “It had been weeks since I had been out of the library where my current master had lain my bottle. And before that I had done nothing more than the duties of a valet ... for a master who seemed to grow less and less active.”

“When the man who meant to entomb me for all eternity came for me, my master was lethargic in his mind and body and I was hampered by the last order the last holder of my bottle gave me.”

Argie waited a moment then asked. “What was that order?”

“Get back in the bottle.” Gene said sadly.

Argie realized he didn't have his finger on the ceramic bottle he had found in the desert when Gene answered.

“What happened then?” He asked softly.

My bottle was stolen and a new braid of hair was tied around the top while I was helpless.

If he who intended to entomb me for all eternity had not lost my bottle in a windstorm far worse than the one where you found it, I would be buried till the end of human civilization.

“Bummer!” Argie exclaimed.

They pretty much rested the night of their first day then explored all the next day and most of the second night.

The third day was spent mostly around their home camp as a sandstorm blew till sunset. Along with the camp next door they hosted a gathering of wanderers that night, sharing the drinks that Argie had bought just for that purpose.

The next day they wandered the playa again when Gene found another unused yellow bike. That evening they dropped the yellow bike off at Central Camp and got in line for their daily bags of ice.

That night Gene showed Argie how to create a light sphere.

Friday morning he showed Argie how to turn the light sphere into a fire spark.

By that night Argie was convinced that the passenger he'd picked up really *was* a genie when Gene showed him how to access the meteorite that he called a Tear of Heaven.

Argie didn't get any sleep that night.

The next night was the main burn and Argie used one of the spells he found in the Tear to stay awake another night.

He paid for it the next day by falling asleep just before sunset and missing the Temple Burn.

He woke up on the morning of Exodus with the camp half deconstructed.

“I was hesitant to do much more till you awakened.” Gene said as Argie struggled to comprehend what was going on around him.

Gene turned to gesture at the camps being dismantled around them. “It appears that most are leaving, so I began taking down your camp as well. I have only begun so it will be easy to replace if you are staying.”

“No ... no.” Argie croaked. “I was going to leave today.”

He looked up blearily. “What the hell happened to me?”

“You drained your body of energy to the point that it shut down.” Gene answered calmly. “It happens when one is new to abilities he is not used to using.”

“Tell me about it.” Argie mumbled.

He groaned and moaned as he moved about slowly. “I feel like every muscle in my body has been squeezed through a ringer.”

“That is another effect of using the Awakening for extended periods.” Gene informed him helpfully.

“The effects are usually made worse with the use of alcohol.” He added unnecessarily.

Argie decided it was best to just endure, so he chugged a sports drink with a couple of aspirin and took a nap.

When he awoke with the sun directly in his face he was surprised to find his camp completely dismantled and stored in his Jeep as compactly as he could have managed himself.

Half in a daze he managed to drink more fluids and down three sandwiches. Walking around helped somewhat and soon he was ready to join the Exodus.

“Uh ... what do you intend to do?” Argie asked Gene.

Gene shrugged. “As long as you retain possession of my bottle I am compelled to accompany you.”

“OK ... yea ... whatever.” Argie grumbled. “In that case, you’re driving.”

He squinted an eye at the man in buckskin. “You do know how to drive, don’t you?”

“I am always eager to learn something new.” Gene said with a smile.