

Chapter Ten



I was feeling less than human, and it terrified me.

From the tingle in my fingers to the ache in my shoulder, nothing I could think of bore any resemblance to what I imagined my life was going to be like. Such a short time ago, it had been enough to get through a day without feeling lonely or despairing. I had hardly felt human then, but that was a pale nothing to now.

This was the great adventure I had read the promise of in a hundred books. I was through the looking glass now, and everything was backwards. *Take a girl*, I repeated to myself. There was really no more Maggie Stuart, I guessed, no more lonely Maggie sitting on the steps of the toolshed at recess, no more Maggie doing her homework alone in the library, having understood fully exactly how little she could do and still get away with decent marks. There was no Maggie giving Jan an awkward hug in the evening, afraid to ask how her day had been in case it echoed her own feeling of not belonging.

Thinking about it in this frame of mind, I had left very little of value behind. A broken family, a father not even a memory, a difficulty with strangers that was only amplified with people I had met before.

There were possibilities here like there had never been before, and this too made me feel less than human.

I had always imagined, back in the other world, that eventually things would make sense to me and I would find out how to play the games which seemed to come so naturally to everyone else. Now, alone of everyone I knew, I had been offered the chance to change the rules to suit myself. I had this power...

...and of course, nowhere to go where I could use it.

An inhuman animal, caged and chained. A freak. A hostage. What was I?

All I knew, as Hunt had whispered to me, was that I was special, and that made me happy, even if I was a prisoner. That made me happy.



The next time Char sent for me, it was Hunt and not Damon who came.

“Lesson time?” I asked, but he was deadly serious and shook his head. “Char,” I said.

“Yes.” He unfastened the shackles one at a time. When I was free, he grabbed my arm and twisted it behind my back. I gasped, and then again as pain shot through my forearm.

“Blood,” he said. “You understand now. My security. Don’t try anything. I have a hold over you.”

He put the knife away with one hand, first holding it up to his face so I could clearly see the drop of my own blood along the blade. Reaching out, I could tell the lips of the scratch on my forearm had already sealed and the blood was hardening along its edge. It was no bigger than a paper cut, and I blocked off even the tiny throb of irritation it caused me.

I went with him passively but angry. This was what was always going to happen, he would always have one more trick, one more card.

At the throne room door, he released my wrist. "That was dumb, Mags," he said, leaning to whisper in my ear. "Book, candle, and chalk. Blood is just blood on its own. Don't believe everything you're told."

I twisted away, but he kept a hand on the back of my neck and forced me through the doors. "Your Highness," he said.

Char was there, the Dark Lord on his throne. "Leave us," he said aloud.

Hunt bowed low and did, pulling the doors shut behind him.

"Come," said the spectre.

I followed him, crossed the room to the dais and circling it. The room had a second entrance. Coming near, the carved archway was hideous and wonderful, full of little faces and whole people in the most abject suffering and fantastic contortions.

I laughed, memory sparking. "Bosch." I had seen photographs of a Hieronymus Bosch diptych in one of Jan's art books. How appropriate, my Devil had a 'Fall of the Damned' in the room he never seemed to leave.

He seemed happy with my appreciation. "This is one of my great treasures," he said.

I turned to him, surprised. Somehow, he seemed less tall than usual, a more manageable, less supernatural height. "It's amazing," I said, and meant it.

"There are more treasures. Few are here. My wealth is spread over the whole earth."

I wasn't sure what to say. It didn't sound as if he was bragging, exactly. "You're lucky," I said, then, deciding to take a chance, went with another instinct. "I'd love to see other things."

"I would like to show you," he said, sounding almost genial. There was a huge difference in the meeting, compared to every prior confrontation.

What's the game this time? I wanted to say. I don't get it. But instead I joined him in the contemplation of the work of art before them.

A movement caught my eye, and I started. The faces – this was not a carving frozen in stone. I stared. At the level of her eyes, a pair of eyes rolled at her in pain and fear. It was the carved image of the old woman from the Dreamworld, the one who'd given me the sketchbook and whispered the *encouragement*, "*A great talent you have there...*" "Oh my –" I said. The whole arch was swimming now, in the water rising in my eyes. A thought came to me – was this the way the Burnt Man watched his victims? And, urgently, Jason!

My gaze roamed the little faces; and then I found him. He was where I had looked for him, his mouth pulled into the attitude of a scream. "What are you doing to him?" I hissed. Decorum had left the audience.

The Burnt Man watched with me, as Jason screamed and struggled, a shifting shape in stone. Then, the eyes of the carved Jason closed and he was still.

I hardly dared to breath, needed desperately the assurance Jason was all right. I needed, even more, an explanation of what I had seen. The little stone people were slipping into solidity again, as if they had never moved at all.

I turned at last, when it was clear I would find no more answers in the stone. Char was looking at me with frank fascination.

“You have great talent,” he said simply, echoing my Dreamworld benefactress.

My eyes widened, and I said, “I did that?”

“Not only did you make them live, you directed them. Look again.”

I returned my gaze reluctantly to the archway, afraid of what I might see. It was still – and curiously, in the place where the likeness of Jason had been was a completely unfamiliar face. Checking where I'd seen the woman from the Dreamworld, there was another small face, an old woman to be sure, but not familiar. “I made him appear.”

“You called up his image,” he said. “When he has completed the trial I set him you will see him again.”

My eyes filled with tears, relieved beyond expectation. “Can I see him now? For real?”

The Burnt Man looked down at me. “What if I said the only way you would see him again would be if you said goodbye to him when you did, and promised to stay with me forever?”

The question caught me completely off guard and I waited, hoping he would repeat himself. He did. “Will you stay with me, Marguerite? You said you would like to see my other treasures.”

I continued to stare, uncomprehending, until he reached out for me. I pulled my sore shoulder away, and his hand stopped its approach. “Stay – here?” I said.

He watched my face closely. “Stay here?” I repeated. “In this dungeon? A prisoner for the rest of my life? No sun, no moon, no sky, no – no pizza out at a restaurant, no movies, no school, no mother –”

But then, my mother was dead. I ran out of steam. “Stay here?” I said, more to herself. “And what about everyone else? People – people have already died.”

One of his long, black-clad arms swept up and indicated the way back to the dais. *Offers and counter-offers*, I thought. *Come on, Maggie. Play*. What was there to lose now?

They circled to what I thought of as the ‘front’ of the room. “Sit,” he said, an invitation as much as a command. He sank himself into the depths of one of the central black thrones and indicated the one at his side. I, instead, folded a leg under me and sat on the edge of the platform, one foot resting on the second step. This wasn't a good position, for comfort or for status, but the thrones frightened me.

What would I sacrifice to see the others safe? He hadn't threatened me yet with what he'd done to my mother, but I suspected he was only waiting for the right moment to spring that on me too.

I might as well find out how much bargaining power I had.

“All right,” I said. “I'll stay with you. On one condition.”

He was amused. Not the most auspicious reaction, I told myself. “Which is?” he asked politely.

“You have to let my friends go,” I said. “If it's me you want, you can have me. But leave them out.”

He laughed. Maybe he held all the cards after all. “Marguerite, I'm surprised.” He lowered his voice conspiratorially. “What if I told you what I told them? As they are the only ones who can release themselves, so are you the only one who can release yourself.”

I didn't understand. “They're in the Dreamworld?” I knew that much, but what was all this about releasing?

Increasingly agitated, I stood and paced down the steps to the level floor. From his direction, I felt a warmth, like a fire, gathering into itself. It took a moment to identify it, to realize what it was. He was gathering his power from wherever he stored it, just like Hunt had been teaching me, in case I tried something.

Deliberately, I opened my hands to him, the tingles staying separate in my fingers and toes, making no effort to confront him.

“Then tell them,” I said. “Explain it. Let them go, and I’ll stay willingly. Your captive will stop believing she ever wanted to escape.”

He smiled then, feral and horrible. I had the distinct feeling this current interview was at an end. “It’s not simple like that, Marguerite. Farther in, this time, is the only way out. You have understood this from the first. Your ‘friends’ –” the word was heavily laden with sarcasm “– are more than security for your good behaviour. Even Mr. Saunders has become indispensable.” Then, more brusquely, “No, I’m sorry. It would be impossible.”

I stared; from my seat below him, his face had become consumed by an ugly, bestial smile. His eyes were lost in the shadow from the back of the throne. “What if I offer to stay unconditionally?” It was a struggle, but I forced myself to smile. The muscles in my face twitched as I carried the expression to my temples and eyes.

There was no reaction from him at first, then as slowly as the faces on the arch had come to life, he rose out of his chair. He came toward me slowly, a thin trickle of power accompanying him. He was using none of his magic, not bothering to disguise his mode of movement or make it seem anything but a steady, controlled walk. Even so, I could feel his signature, the echo of his nature, however faint when he was doing nothing with it. The anticipation of his approach was even worse this way. I tensed, steeling myself for flight, or a battle, I didn’t know which. A flicker in the light surrounding him made me think he had swept out with his arm to strike me, and I shied but no blow came. Off balance, I crouched, waiting.

Someday, he said, the first words directly in my mind during this meeting, *You Will*.

It was my turn to laugh. *Oh, I Hardly Think So*. Bravado had got Hunt so far; let’s see what it would do for me.

He continued, closer, more menacing. *Even If You Could Escape, I Would Be There With You Still, In Your Mind Like A Cancer, And Every Time You Went To Sleep, I Would Have You Again. Accept It. Now And Forever, You Are Mine. I Would Prefer The Arrangement To Be Willing*.

Sensing again he was going to hit me, physically or with his mind, I threw my arms up in front of my face. But again, no blow came, and when I lowered her arms, he was gone. Through the great doors, opening slowly on their own, I could see the silhouette of the Hunter.



If he had been able to calmly analyze his situation, Jason would have been impressed at how long panic can last before a mind shuts down. He had no such thoughts. For one thing, buried and immobile but obviously not dying, he had no way of marking any passage of time. But in time, that fact became irrelevant.

Slowly, he turned inside himself. The only thing he was aware of as his body became increasingly more numb was the pathetic pulsing of his muscles as he struggled. Impossible, unthinkable, to believe he was buried for good.

What kind of a test was this? His muscles strained and tensed, unable to shift the confines of his prison as much as a millimeter. What kind of a test? All he could do was to keep trying.

First, because he could physically endure no more, he began to give up. He stopped struggling. But he continued to resist in his mind. There was no way he could let the Burnt Man win. He would not

give in. Let them keep him buried forever. He would stay defiant until the end.

And time passed as Jason sank deeper into himself and started to go a little mad.

His release depended on him. The Burnt Man had made that clear. It wasn't a question of waiting him out. If he didn't do something, the Burnt Man would keep him here forever. He would be entombed forever. What was his defiance worth? Was it worth this, to be buried immobile forever and nothing entering his senses from the pressing walls around him except the dank smell of earth?

He relaxed his body fully now. *Take me out of here, you bastard*, he thought. He seemed suspended in the single instant between two breaths; nothing needed to go in or out. There was no air in his body to make a sound, no place for a sound to go. He thought harder, willing himself to be heard. *You win!* he shouted in his head. *You win. Let me out. I give up.*

There was nothing, no change. *What more can you want?* Jason wanted to scream. He was losing touch with his body. It seemed to him he was falling and it was only with a great effort he could force himself back into the black place he lay. His skin had almost stopped being able to sense anything. It was an enormous struggle to feel a twitch, an itch.

This is resistance, too, Jason told himself. Stopping himself from wanting to be conscious was more difficult than the fight to keep his senses working. All resistance must stop.

His intentions of fighting the Burnt Man must be put aside. To escape, he must submit totally. The idea he must give in so he could fight later was a kind of resistance; that too must go.

He fell slowly, into a void of his suppressed thoughts. Give in. Give in. It was much like going to sleep. No one would have been able to tell him a week ago, a day ago, that in grave, mortal danger, Jason Lawson would consciously choose to drive himself into the back of his own mind rather than face up to his situation.

He fell, and then fell faster. Even knowing he had succeeded barely registered, and then he realized he was falling actually and not just in his mind. The smell of earth rose up, as sailing his nostrils, and he impacted the same moment as an explosion in front of him sent him scrambling back. Dirt rained down on him, filling his mouth wetly. He spat, struggling to his feet. Above, it was an overcast day. In front of him, in the distance, lay the flat grey ribbon of the highway.

"No," he whispered.

Behind him, Maggie Stuart collapsed, and Jason was off and running. Across the gravel, scaling the fence, and onto the green, inviting verge which separated him from the highway. Remembering, he reeled to a stop, and heard laughter. A dark figure stood silhouetted on the top of the bent tower.

"What's so funny," Jason said, dull and numb. Horrible, *deja vu*.

"You found our minefield." Him. The Burnt Man.

Jason echoed himself, "No." *Resistance will keep you here. Submit. Don't fight.*

He fell to his knees, facing the highway again, his back to the park. "I won't fight," he whispered. "Do what you have to."

Behind him, the ground exploded. Jason threw his arms over his head and fell forward, not bothering to protect himself from the clods of earth raining down, already promising not to resist if another beating was coming. "I give up," he breathed, and the world around him fell away.



Aaron had never considered psychology as a possible major when he got to university, but, he thought, he could probably manage a Ph.D. in boredom by the time he was done with all of this. It was

hard, and getting harder, to think of anything besides his current situation. School seemed a billion years, and a billion miles removed. Very hard, to focus on the lessons of history, or the sciences, or even on current politics when you were cut off completely not only from all news of the world but from conversation. Psychology was a last resort to find some lesson in the madness.

No one bothered him for most of the first day he spent in the prison yard. There were guards, so it wasn't like he was actually physically alone, but it was painfully obvious no one spoke in this place. The one time he had tried to open his mouth for anything except to yawn or eat, he had found himself flat on his face with a mouth full of gravel and tough weeds, a rifle butt jammed in the small of his back. They kept him there probably an hour. He hadn't tried to talk again.

When evening came, the sky slowly turned a deeper shade of dull grey, but the lights above the yard came on the same time and there was very little difference in what there was to see. He had already taken stock of the entire enclosure. First, the fence had no gates, not even a suggestion of one. It was a simple expanse of chain link, four meters high, topped with four strings of barbed wire. That was not the limit of the defenses, however. There were also five metal towers evenly spaced inside the fence, and guards in each of these with rifles. Escape was inconceivable. That wasn't the way out. So what was?

Besides, outside the compound was a featureless expanse of barren ground without so much as a shrub or tree to break it up. The idea of escaping into that didn't have much appeal, even if it had been possible.

Inside the compound – a small cabin with a wash basin, toilet, and tap at one end, a door at the other, and within the walls, a single cot. No need to guess where he'd be sleeping tonight. At least there were no chains, or handcuffs, or shackles in sight. At least.

And by one edge of the fence, which was roughly rectangular, so he supposed it was fair to say it was 'at the end of the yard,' there was the house.

It was his house, and this was the only constant nag for him, the thing that proposed to keep him unsettled all through the silence. Seeing the house was what had prompted him in the first place to attempt to speak, to ask "What's my house doing here?" perhaps. Maybe just to shout.

White siding, pale shutters, pale bricks below the paneling. Even some of the landscaping around the house had come; he could have imagined some huge-handed person picking up the place like a toy and putting it here, most of the grass and trees having fallen through the enormous fingers long before. Not like a cyclone, no Dorothy. Just a big child with a bad sense of 'one of these things doesn't belong' creating an unsettling juxtaposition.

Without the house, he had imagined a concentration camp, or forced labor camp. Siberia. The Second World War. Maybe that conclusion was just the shock of seeing Mr. Sterling dressed up in that provoking uniform.

It wasn't much of a test, thought Aaron, given food finally, this neither warm nor filling, and sitting on the hard ground to eat. A trial, perhaps, but not a test.

There had to be more options here than in the cell, chained up. There had to be. Or not, since now he was not only in the catacombs but deeper, in a dream of prison within a prison.

"Aaron! Dinner!"

He stood, brought to his feet by the voice, and by the fact it was familiar. Without recourse to speech – it had been so long and his tongue wouldn't obey him – he faced her silently. *Mom*.

Mrs. Scribner stood on the front stoop of her house, hands on hips, arms swimming in their standard brown wool cardigan. "You've spoiled your dinner, I see," she said severely, indicating his near-empty tin plate. "Still, it'll save a bit of time. He can't see you for long."

She beckoned, and Aaron followed her inside. A guard took his plate, silently, and butted him toward the house with a rifle stock in the back of the knee.

In the front hall, she let him catch up. Standing separate from him, no move to be familiar, no more affectionate than to a stranger, she hissed at him. "I thought it would be me, you little ingrate. After all this time, all I've done, you'd rather look to him than me. If I've instilled no fear, did I miss out on respect?" Aaron cringed, and stared, the harsh tone something he'd never heard before in his mother's voice, and it distorted her almost beyond recognition. "Go to him. But see if I ever love you again."

On the door to his father's study – his mother's was in the garden, a small house of her own built in the shade of the bottom of the yard, something else left behind by the careless giant fingers – a sign, on the door to his father's study – *WARDEN*.

He knocked, tentatively. "Dad?" he managed, and as soon as it was out, he realized it was probably inappropriate to be so familiar.

No one bashed him on the head or threw him to the ground. Instead, his father's quiet voice, muffled by the wood: "Come in, Aaron."

He was expected. It didn't surprise him. Here, then, is where the test starts. And the lead-up? all the boredom? Was there something he could have done to precipitate this confrontation? Too late to make a difference now, but couldn't any scrap of information be the key to his release? The Dark Man had said as much. The mind was where his battle was to be fought, and the inclusion of his parents fueled this belief. For Aaron Scribner, who else would do for sparring partners except the people who were raising him? Except, for some reason, he had discounted his mother, and she would be in part left out, and he couldn't imagine what it was in his mind that had allowed this to happen.

He opened the door and stepped through.

Except for decoration, the room was much the same as he remembered. Bookshelves, the large desk, inherited from a grand-uncle, the green glass lamp. In the leather chair behind the desk, Mr. Scribner was much the same as well, urbane and composed, likely to be disaffected unless you knew him well or managed to hit on a good topic. But the personality, the family, had been stripped away. No pictures of him or his mother, or the cousins and aunts and uncles. No diplomas. No flowers or knickknacks, not even the 'World's Best Dad' plaque Aaron had made at summer camp years ago when he was little enough to do such things.

"Come in and close the door behind you, Aaron," said the man behind the desk. "She brought you in?"

Aaron cast a glance back toward the door. "She said you didn't have much time."

"Aaron Scribner," said his father distantly, flipping up a page on a metal clipboard and not rising. "You are charged with a very serious crime, and I want you to know you aren't going to get away with your plea. We're not interested in your delusions, only with your confession. And no matter what she said, I am not going to be through with you until I hear it."

"What crime?" This was a surprise. He had already been a prisoner after doing, so far as he could tell, nothing.

"Now you will say you don't remember the trial, as you have already claimed not to remember the crime. You don't remember being convicted of murder in the first degree?"

Even this wasn't enough to really throw Aaron. He had become used to the idea, from Mr. Sterling and what Maggie had told him, of play-acting taking place in all facets of their respective imprisonments. "I don't, sir," said Aaron, adding the honorific knee-jerk fashion. It was something he had never used with his father before.

"I suppose you remember, at the very least, the sentence handed down to you?"

Aaron shook his head, a bit dismissively. "I know what's going on here," he said. "I understand this 'test' and I understand how what's going on in my own head is being manipulated and adding to the substance of this place."

Mr Scribner inclined his head, eyes gazing at his son blankly. "Is that so," he said, implying either he didn't believe Aaron or wasn't really listening.

"Yes," said Aaron. "You're going to try to destroy my belief in what I know happened. You're going to attack my logic."

"Not at all," said Mr. Scribner, Warden Scribner. "You're going to do that for yourself." And he laughed.



There are worse things than boredom, Aaron had discovered and discovered now again. Mr. Scribner hardly looked at him, except for a glance here and there before returning to the clipboard in front of him to scrawl a few notes in his jagged handwriting. The strongest impression Aaron could pin down for himself, wilting under his father's obvious disapproval, this stranger's obvious disapproval, was that this was how it must be for most people meeting Professor Scribner, legendary steel-trap and vicious brain, mouth more likely to cut to the quick than hands to offer a friendly grasp. Aaron had enjoyed, and knew he enjoyed, the intimate company of a very brilliant set of parents, but where his mother was characterized by intellectual generosity, his father was a true elitist and believed in purity before comfort. Was this why he had all but eliminated his mother from this part of the fantasy? His father was the more difficult, and perhaps the less desirable, of the two models.

The first questions were easy, especially because Aaron had no way of answering them. How was he supposed to talk about his movements of the past days or weeks in terms of events he was sure had never happened? All he could do was stubbornly repeat what he knew: this was a kind of dream or hypnosis, directed and subservient to his own mind, but insubstantial none the less.

"You will accept your penalty," his father told him as the final point in another long series of questions leading nowhere.

"Would that get me out of here?" said Aaron, practical as ever. He could handle anything if it would get him away.

"Yes. But the distinction is important. If you accept the punishment, you will be released. If you merely submit, you will stay and we will continue."

Aaron sat. There was a folding chair, for him, he assumed, but until that moment, he had held out on making himself comfortable. "Until I accept?"

"Until you accept."

Aaron took this in. "What is the punishment I'm supposed to face?"

His father smiled, and referred to his notes as if he knew very well what the sentence was but delighted in presenting it officially. "Death by hanging."

He couldn't help himself; Aaron smiled. "Yeah, right," he said when he could.

"Part of accepting the sentence," said Mr. Scribner, with far too much relish for Aaron's comfort, "is to accept you will in fact be killed."

"I think I'm going to be here a very long time," said Aaron, mostly to himself.

"I expect you are," said Mr. Scribner, answering him directly. "That's part of the reason I am

being so frank with you. You came into this Dream full of healthy scepticism and a formidable logical defense, and you came in consciously understanding and evaluating. To take you apart, we need to convince you of a large number of things, not the least of which are that you are here, you are in mortal danger, and you are facing me, your father.”

“Sell me on the fantasy,” said Aaron.

“If you like.” Mr. Scribner set the clipboard down, as if this now marked the beginning of business. “Remember our long games of chess, Aaron. This will be as intense. We must come to a difficult understanding, and this will take time. Neither of us will leave this room except to go there—”

Aaron followed his father’s gesture, out the second storey window of a house which shouldn’t be looking down on a grey prison yard, and shouldn’t especially be looking down on a group of green-clad soldiers busy in the process of erecting a gallows.

Seeing it, the solid dark beam of the upright, the platform spreading over its boxy frame, Aaron had his first real twinge.

“Good, good,” said his father. “We’ve begun, I see. Please. . .” He indicated Aaron should pull his chair closer to the desk, and the boy did, so they were sitting directly opposite one another on either side of the table top. “Not so easy to disbelieve in your guilt when you get a shiver like that, is it? You must be repentant about something. Hiding something.”

Aaron snorted. “You’ll have to do better than that.” A knot clenched in his stomach told him he wasn’t totally convinced of his own invulnerability. Hadn’t experience taught him the opposite, in fact? His enemies had killed before. What made him think he was safe? What use could there possibly be in keeping him alive?

“First step,” said his father. “You committed the crime. You must confess.”

“I did not do it. Therefore I should not confess.”

“You *should* not confess?” Mr Scribner said. “You could entertain the possibility as a conditional?”

“I don’t know what those conditions would be,” said Aaron. That was logical, but it was a bit weaker than what he should have said, that he *would not* confess. A big difference, and his dad hadn’t let him get away with the sloppiness.

“I’m satisfied to leave it there. Second step. You committed the crime. You might confess.”

“I did not do it. I don’t want to die. I’m unlikely to confess.”

“Excellent.” The warden clasped his hands. “We’re making real progress now. You are unlikely to, but no longer see it as a mere conditional.”

Aaron fought to keep his temper in check. Bullying would not help him, the Dark Man had said that as well. Logic alone would take him through. What kind of logic was it though that dwelt on convincing him he wanted to die? Logic told him he couldn’t want to, and therefore, the whole test was impossible. And yet, had he already conceded something by letting his father get away with the suggestion he *might* confess?

“That’s not really what I meant,” he said.

“That doesn’t really matter,” replied his opponent. “How do you know you didn’t commit the crime?”

“Because I didn’t,” said Aaron, peevishly.

“Proof, boy,” said the warden.

“I have no memory of it,” said Aaron. “I don’t have a clue even who I’m supposed to have killed. I don’t remember coming here, and I don’t remember any court passing a sentence on me.”

“But I do,” said Mr. Scribner, “so the question remains – how do you know you didn’t commit the crime?”

“I wouldn’t,” said Aaron, knowing it was not a good argument. “I would never kill anyone.”

“And that’s where you’re wrong, son,” said his father, almost sadly. For some reason, this sparked a memory: Aaron heard his own voice telling Jason about the dog, then Maggie talking about her early morning visitor who had picked her up by the chained wrists and shook her – Damon. He had said it himself - given the chance, he would have killed him.

“Damon. Was it him I killed?”

“Is that whom you think you killed?”

Aaron shrugged. “If it had to be someone, he seems like a good candidate.”

“Is it he whom you remember killing?”

“Look!” said Aaron, voice going up. “I don’t remember killing anyone, Damon or otherwise. But if I had killed someone, that’s who I wish it could have been.”

The warden smiled. “Now we have a conditional crime to add to the conditional confession. All we need now are the conditions.”

He had been caught in his own eagerness, Aaron realized. All perfectly logical, but still damning. Through the window came the noise of tapping hammers. What would come first, his confession or the completion of the gallows?

Maybe he would confess out of sheer boredom. But that wouldn’t fulfil the conditions, would it?

“To review,” said Mr. Scribner, “you didn’t, therefore you won’t confess. You entertain the conditional possibility, but you are unlikely to. You wouldn’t kill anyone, so you shouldn’t. You might have, but you need a reason.”

Aaron nodded. “That’s about it.”

“One more,” said his father. “You might have, and I command you as your father to confess.”

Silence between them. In his father’s eyes, shining wetness. “I don’t know,” said Aaron. “You’re not really even here.”

The reply came almost as breath. “How do you know?”

He didn’t, of course he didn’t. Things were still clear; there was nothing to be confused about. The logic of not confessing was perfectly plain. So why was he wavering?

“I could have done the murder here, couldn’t I, and not outside this whole Dreamworld place, right?”

“Of course.” The warden sounded somewhat relieved.

“So confessing here wouldn’t mean I’d done something out there.”

“You will die here by the rope whether or not your crime goes beyond this place.”

Aaron bit his lip. “And you say you command me?”

“Aaron,” said his father in familiar tones. This was his father, not some impersonal warden like the man he had greeted. “Logically. Think logically. You are my son. I love you. Would I ask you to do anything I didn’t think you should?”

Aaron slumped in his chair. This was something he hadn’t thought of. Logic and love in the same sentence, or rather, pleading for the same sentence. Hammers rang.

“I didn’t do it, but if you’re going to order me to confess –”

“You still must believe and want to confess,” said Mr. Scribner, turning earnest and intense. This was a side of his father Aaron knew well. “And don’t forget,” he continued severely, “the conclusion we agreed upon: you might have done it and just have no recollection of it.”

From there, it was directly downhill for Aaron. At no time did he feel his ability to think logically was threatened, but at the same time, he found himself slowly drawn to the inexorable conclusion that before long, he would have a rope around his neck.

And his father coddled this view, and although Aaron knew this was what was happening, he was powerless to prevent it, drawn on by his own sense of what was correct.

“To review,” said his father, “you accept you could have done it, and you are willing to confess for my sake.”

“That’s right,” said Aaron wearily.

“Not good enough, you must know,” said his father. “What’s going to happen when you get the noose around your neck?”

“I suppose the test will be over,” he said. “I’ll be back in the catacombs.”

“Wrong,” said his father. “They will pull the trap. Your neck will break. You will die.”

“And then?” said Aaron.

His father smiled ironically. “This is not a good time for theological debates.”

Aaron felt a shiver run up his spine. What if this was the end, and the test was to see how fast he could get himself killed?

“I’ll go,” he said, suddenly, surprising even himself. “Maybe boredom is enough. Maybe wanting to please you is. But I’ll tell you, if I killed that bastard, I’m glad and I’m more than willing to die for it.”

“That’s the spirit!” Mr. Scribner came to his feet behind the desk. “You’ve agreed to the punishment. Now confess to the crime.”

With a weight lifting from him, Aaron sprang to his feet. “I killed that bastard Damon, to get him for my dog, for disrupting my life, for Jason, hell, for Maggie and for Scott too. And I killed the Dark Man too. And if I hang for it, at least the world’s rid of them.”

“You don’t have to be a slave to a single, narrow idea of reality to be the servant of logic,” Mr. Scribner joined.

“Not if it means you stay locked up,” said Aaron. “This is a kind of freedom, isn’t it?”

There were no bells or whistles or stuffed animal prizes. Aaron wondered what he’d been expecting when he found himself vaguely disappointed. His father led him gently down the stairs and out to the place of execution. His mother was nowhere in sight. Gently, Mr. Scribner lay the rope around Aaron’s neck, and it was only a gentle snap he felt when the trap fell away beneath his feet and the noose grabbed at his throat.

Even as he recognized the sharp wrench that killed him, Aaron was aware of an overwhelming feeling of intense satisfaction. Damon, and the Dark Man. One or either would be enough.

Then, he saw his father, but it was the Dark Man himself instead, standing where his father had been, but looking at him with his father’s eyes, speaking with his father’s voice.

“There are a number of serious misconceptions we should clear up, Mr. Scribner,” said the Dark Man. “One is that there was never any crime. That was a falsehood, start to finish. There was also never any trial or sentence, or need for confession. Despite what has obviously been a total failure of your mind to protect you against a combined assault of irrationality and sentimentality, I would have to say,” and he inclined his head, after which the world slowly began to darken out of existence, “I would have to say – I’m quite impressed, Mr. Scribner.”

And he was gone, but then, so far as he was concerned, so was Aaron.



“So,” said Hunt, when I was chained again to my rock. He hadn’t spoken at all on the way back from the audience. “What did you learn at school today?”

“He wants me to be here willingly,” I said. “And he’s afraid to hurt me. And he’s wary of what I can do. He doesn’t know how much of a threat I could be.” I shook my head. “But – *but* he doesn’t feel any need to make compromises. He seems to think I’m going to come and do – whatever it is he wants me to – all on my own, so he’s not trying too hard. It’s so complicated.”

“Still, you understand some of your advantages over him. It’s how you use what you know that’ll count in the end. Jason’s on the way back,” he continued, no break to indicate he knew he had changed the subject.

“How can someone – centuries? – centuries old be scared of a thirteen year-old like me?”

“Char was young once too, Mags,” said Hunt, lightly but with a certain amount of unease. His eyes were wandering. Were we not supposed to touch on this subject?

I wouldn’t let it drop. “Is he just a person then, who started out like me, not knowing anything about magic?”

“All people have a certain amount of ability in the way you do,” he said. “Some of the strongest can find ways through the cracks of the world to gain influence and more knowledge. Knowledge is the true power, and your kind of power makes that easy to get if you want it. Given time, a single person with the foresight and the dedication, and the raw talent can do almost anything.”

“Even live forever. I wouldn’t have thought that human beings were so powerful,” I said, laughing.

Hunt grabbed my wrist and twisted hard. I gasped, and when I looked at him, he was smiling. “What makes you think that was what I meant?” he said.

“Next lesson,” he continued, releasing me. “Purity of heart is not all it’s cracked up to be. Forget the part of the fairy tale where the maiden sits chastely and waits for the monster to be repulsed by her goodness alone. Or for the unicorn to come and lay its head in her lap.”

“Hunt,” I said. He fastened one shackle around my wrist and stopped, the other waiting in his rough palm. “Why is he letting you help me? What does he want? Why are you helping me?”

“Is that what I’m doing?” he said, grinning crookedly. He snapped the lock on the other shackle home and gave me a quick pat on the shoulder. “Hedging my bets, Mags,” he said, “Just like I told you.”

I stopped him leaving with my hand on his arm. “Can we have another lesson?”

“You’re not tired?” he said, pleased.

I humphed. “When all I have to do all day is rest up?”

“All right then.” He paused, the keys for the shackles in his palm. “First, a lesson. Then a practical trial, if you promise to be good.”

He hoisted himself up on the rock opposite me. “Now,” he began.

He told me that my power was an extension of my will, and with practice, anything I could think of doing would be possible to accomplish just with my mind and the surge of energy. There was always a physical component to everything I did – not necessarily arcane gestures, but there would always be at least a tensing of muscles. I had already noticed this, but hadn’t remarked much on it. It was, he said, just a fact and not something to worry about, just something to know.

“For me,” he explained, “anything I want to do, I have to either find someone who’s done it before me, the long way, or invent a way myself that mimics what happens for you. If there’s a pattern or spell written down, it means someone before me spend years of research and experiment and hundreds of hours of perfection. In its final form, I have instant access to a method, but I still need all my own

experience to tailor what I can read to what I have to do to get the magic to work.

“You bypass all of this.

“What *you* have to learn is control.”

“That’s what he tells me too,” I said, a little wearily.

Hunt looked at me curiously. “What do you mean by that?”

I shrugged. “I figure that’s what the Dreamworld was all about. That and teaching me he’s going to win, no matter what I do.”

He sat forward, intense. “You believe that?”

I laughed sourly. “Of course not. If I did, would I have begged you to come here? If it was that easy for him to do what he wants to do, he would have. I have a chance.”

“A chance for what, do you think?” he said, then slid down off the rock. “Time for the practical component of this course,” he said, busying himself with the shackles.

He changed that subject a bit quickly, I thought. It’s like he can’t resist goading me, but things slip out he doesn’t really mean to say and he tries to guide me away. Or is it all more tricks?

He was asking me now about Jason – had I know him much at school, was he a decent guy? I answered his queries automatically, much more concerned with what Char had in store for me. Hunt, I decided, was trying to steer me away from any discussion of who the Dark Man was, and what he wanted with me.

The shackles fell away at last, but Hunt still kept hold of my wrists. “I may not be able to stop you from using the power now,” he said, “but I want you to understand an escape attempt would be futile and harmful. Physically, I’m still a lot stronger and quicker than you and I can hurt you easily. Then, there’s where you would go even if you got away from me. I’m under no illusion you could find your way out of this labyrinth of passages. And don’t forget to consider the others.”

I nodded, a little annoyed. It had crossed my mind to try to make a run for it, but being caught in my thinking made me defensive and eager to deny it. “I’m not stupid,” I said crossly.

“Of course not,” he said. “And not really impulsive either. Maggie likes to think out her options before acting, doesn’t she? I knew I could count on you not to do anything brave and stupid.”

Cowed, I said nothing.

He grabbed my wrist, painfully. Angry, I sent a flare of energy there, making the skin hot. He pulled away, shaking his fingers although he had made no cry. “Now,” he said, “throw me against that wall.”

So that had been the first part of the lesson. I stared at him. “Against – the wall?” I repeated.

He waited. I wrung her hands, letting one ball into a fist and pulling a bit of extra power into it. Fling him – it would need two steps, I imagined. First pick him up. Then move him through the air. I flexed her fingers again.

“What’s taking so long?” he said, angry. “I told you to throw me against the wall.”

“Just wait,” I said, brow furrowing. Anxiety flooded my stomach. I could kill him. It was the same feeling I’d had leaving the Dreamworld. How much power was enough, and how much was too much? It bucked, surging through me, eager for release and I felt like I was being consumed by it from the inside. How much was enough? to follow Hunt’s order and not to bring the roof down?

“Do it!” he shouted, and I broke down.

“I can’t!” I wailed. “What if I killed you? What if I destroyed the tunnel?”

Hunt shrugged, anger gone. Another act. “Char didn’t have to teach you to control yourself. You have it built in. Lesson’s over.”

“But –” I began.

“I think you’ve learned enough for one day,” he said. He snapped the shackles back on my wrists.



Jason returned moments later.

“I don’t blame you anymore,” Jason told me as the guard chained him and left, and kept on before I could reply. “I’ve finally seen what we’re up against. You’re no more at fault than any of us are. He’s the enemy.”

There was nothing I could think of to say, and I wondered why Jason hadn’t remarked on Mr. Hunt. I turned to fill in our teacher – but the hall beside me was empty. “Did you –” I said to Jason.

He stared at me uncomprehending.

No, of course not. Hunt the chimera. “I’ve been experimenting,” I said.

“With –” he asked, and flexed his wrist by way of finishing the thought.

“The power,” I said. “The shackles stop me from getting to it too easily, but – Jason, you’re not going to believe this.”

“What?”

“Mr. Hunt. He’s here.”

“So?” said Jason, and I could see he instantly regretted how short he was being with me. His experience in the Dreamworld must be bothering him. As, I supposed, the Burnt Man had intended. I hoped he’d talk about it; I felt awkward trying to introduce the subject. “I mean, as a zombie, or what?”

I overlooked his change in tone. “As a free agent, I guess,” I said. I rattled the chains. “He’s got keys. He’s giving me lessons, on how to use my power. He – I don’t know. He’s all mixed up in this, not like Mr. Sterling. He’s known the Burnt Man from before, calls him ‘Char.’ They’re old adversaries.” Even as I said it, I wasn’t sure. It was a misrepresentation, of course. Hunt acted like an old retainer more than like an enemy. No need now to worry Jason unnecessarily.

Jason gave a soft whistle. “That puts a new twist into the works.”

I nodded. “Jason,” I said, more quietly, hoping Char, if he was listening, wouldn’t hear. “The assembly, remember? Do you think you have this power too?”

He sat back. “The thought has occurred. I don’t know. What does it feel like? I mean, you *know* you have it, right?”

“Yeah,” I told him. “A tingle, spreading out all over. And I can reach – beyond myself – I don’t know how to describe it better. Like I did when you were scared when we landed in the helicopter. Could you feel that?”

He stared. “I suddenly felt less tense, and then, when you went under, it all came back.”

“That’s because Char was doing the same number on me, except to make me afraid instead of to soothe me.”

“Crap,” he said, appreciatively. “No, nothing like that. I would know if I could do that.”

“But still,” I pressed on, “you’ve had a lot of weird things happen. You must have some kind of power.”

He looked at me strangely. “I don’t know if this is important, but I got the feeling he did, the Burnt Man.” He told me about Char’s glowing ball, and how it had gone dull when he plucked it out of the air. “But for Aaron, it burned his hand.”

I tucked the incident away, not knowing how to interpret it at the moment. “Maybe you stop

things from happening, like I start them,” I said.

Jason was thinking of something else now. “I want to know what they’re doing to Scott and Aaron.”

“You’ve seen Scott?” I said. “Hunt said they put you in the Mirror Room. That’s where I was too.”

“All three of us, on that big bed. I hope they don’t have to go through what I did. I didn’t think I was going to make it.” He listened. “I think food’s coming. You start to get a feeling about these things.” Indeed, there were footfalls in the corridor. “I woke up, beside the two of them, and I swear I thought they were dead. I couldn’t wake them up.”

I looked at him with growing concern. I felt a hint of his mental state, and he was extremely agitated. “What should we call it?” I said.

“Call what?” he replied, confused.

“Our meal. Dinner, lunch?”

He breathed out, smiled faintly. “I just woke up, so it should be breakfast.”

“I think I already had breakfast. How about brunch?”

“Okay,” he said, in the spirit of it, “and I’ll just pretend I slept in.”

The meal came and Jason tucked in with his wooden spoon, the only kind of cutlery we were ever given. “Thanks,” he said into the soup. “I needed to lighten up for a bit.”

“No problem,” I said. I began eating, going back to my earlier train of thought about my slipping humanity. If anything kept me human, it would be Jason. I felt warm and almost happy, despite everything.



Scott lost count of the number of times he went through the routine, and through the destroying pain. His mind was a slave to the loop; he couldn’t ever remember to get the hat off until Mr. Hunt told him too. He couldn’t leave it outside the school yard and he couldn’t throw it anywhere but where it always went. He tried everything, from stalling to running into the school yard at full tilt, trying to avoid the teacher and Peter. As his muscles grew more and more leaden, he realized his physical ability to change anything would soon be completely gone.

When Mr. Hunt yelled at him now, he charged, grabbing the older man’s arm. “You do it!” Scott shouted. “You get the hat!”

Hunt disengaged himself with next to no effort. “Boy, the hat.”

Scott barely kept his feet. His knees were buckling, as much in exhaustion as in an attitude of utter defeat. What was left? The pain for himself. Over and over. Testing his endurance, perhaps? He looked at Peter.

The boy smiled at him, thin and frail and so white. Scott thought again of the smell of burned flesh, his own, and of what it would be like to have to watch Peter fall back, blackened and dead. It was unbearable. Mr. Hunt, watching him, nodded, smiling encouragingly.

“Why don’t you get the brat to do it?”

Scott’s eyes welled up and he held his hand out to Peter.

“Peter,” he said, feeling low and cowardly. He couldn’t take another shock, he couldn’t. If it wouldn’t kill him, it would certainly destroy his mind. He couldn’t think, so he couldn’t think of this as a reasonable gamble, that if he was right and sacrificing Peter would get him his own freedom, he might

win Peter's freedom as well.

Peter's white fingers touched his own, and he knelt. "See my hat, Peter? Can you get it for me?"

"I can get it for you," said Peter in his small, clear voice. "I can get your hat."

He took a few steps toward the fence, and paused, turning back to Scott. "Will I get hurt?" he said.

"No," Scott lied, eyes streaming. "You'll be fine. I promise."

"Then why are you crying?"

It was too hard. Scott reached out, wanting to grab the little boy's shoulder and drag him back, give him a hug, tell him not to be scared, but he couldn't stand the thought of another shock. Angrily, letting his voice climb, he shouted, "Just do it, Peter. I'm warning you."

He saw the look of betrayal cross the pale face and watched the long fingers reach out. Peter whispered, a sob, "Scott," none of the glorious music about it, just a hurt, deserted little boy.

Scott screamed a warning then, but it was too late and he saw now what Peter had seen all those other times, the body stiffening and shaking, and the horrible sweet smell. Peter's fingers had somehow managed to lock in the fabric of the hat and he hung there, suspended and unable to fall, by the locked muscles of that arm and that hand.

Because he knew how terrible the thing he'd done was, Scott forced himself to watch, crying and choking miserably. He wasn't spared a moment of Peter's agony, and when the body finally fell to the grass, Scott fell too, aware of an overwhelming, shameful sense of relief. You, his mind told him, are alive.



Scepticism, where Arabella was concerned, was not only a good idea but also pretty much necessary for survival. Damon had learned this by trial and error over the years. It was one thing to be accused of not trusting anyone. It was another all together to be completely gullible, and he preferred to err on the side of caution.

So, even though he had given some consideration to the idea his sister for once had given him a legitimate warning, it came as a total surprise to find the Hunter pawing through his possessions in his private apartments.

"Hello," said Damon awkwardly. Hunt had heard him come in, Damon knew. But, in complete arrogant disregard, he had ignored him, the owner of the room, and gone on with his appraisal.

"Not going to get mad, are we, Damon?" said Hunt. "Arabella would have had me to the floor with a knife in my neck by now."

"Well, lucky for you I'm not my sister," he replied. He moved closer to the other man. If he wasn't up to stopping Hunt, at least he would watch what he was doing.

"I'm not really here to rifle your precious - knickknacks," said Hunt, still paying more attention to Damon's drawers than to Damon. "I just promised your sister I would keep an eye on you, and to be fairly unsubtle about it as well. That was an important part of her directions, if I remember correctly."

"Give her my thanks," said Damon, beginning to feel more rancour. "Now would be a good time."

"I don't think so," said Hunt. "We need to have a little talk."

Damon clicked his tongue and settled himself on the edge of the bed, trying to look comfortable as possible. "I hope that isn't just your classy euphemism for roughing me up. I've had quite enough of

that from Aria.”

Hunt smiled. “She said you were getting teeth.”

“Yeah, well.” Damon shrugged. “I’m fed up. She doesn’t get it. I’m no better off than she is. I’m definitely not stealing Father’s affection. He’s got none to give as far as I can tell. Not for me, especially.”

Hunt moved closer, sly look on his face. “You’d like that, though, wouldn’t you, Damon? Someone to love you? Affection? Although – I don’t see any reason for you to need your father for that. Maggie – did you hear what she calls him? The Burnt Man. He who sucks up oxygen and replaces it with ash.” Hunt was studying Damon’s face in a way the other man didn’t exactly like. What was he implying? That Maggie – it hadn’t been a terribly clever segue, but then, Arabella had after all wanted him to be unobtrusive.

“Look, Hunter, I know what you’re implying, but we’re not like that. You should know by now. We don’t go soft and sentimental for people like you. Our nature – by nature we don’t.”

Hunt gave a faint but none the less unpleasant smile. “Of course, young Damon. That’s not what I meant at all. ‘My son has quite an effect on you,’ your father said – that’s what I meant. When Maggie was brought to him crying – at your hands, I believe it was. No, I know the children of the Dark Man are hard as nails, but a little human girl can hardly be expected to have your resilience or self-sufficiency, surely not your callous attitude towards affection. I’m just thinking of the girl. You may be her first crush. I hope you’ll be careful.”

Damon flared, but at the same time wasn’t sure to what he was reacting so strongly. “What’s your interest, Hunter? Marguerite’s welfare at heart? I don’t think so.”

“You speak your mind a little too freely,” said Hunt, “with too little consideration. You come late to this game. I think even I’ve been playing it longer than you, and I can’t boast your lifespan. So remember, others have hands to play even if you have wasted your time in pondering and fun. If you can pretend you’re not interested in Maggie’s safety, that’s fine with me. But you can’t deny something goes through her head every time she sees you. I don’t know what you’ve done, Damon, but think it over. She’s coming into her own, Char’s going to see to that. One way or another, there’s going to be a price to pay.”

“And you suggest I make sure it’s payable to me,” said Damon sourly.

“Not at all.” Hunt widened the nasty grin. “I expect you’ll pay and pay. A hundred times over. And your sister will be a Queen.”

He turned, tossed some of Damon’s belongings to the floor and left, whistling and chuckling softly. Damon was irked, severely, and not all of it centred on the fact the Hunter thought he was little enough of a threat to turn his back on. He had been right. There was rotteness afoot in the catacombs. Maybe it was time to pay Maggie another visit. Or maybe it was time to remove himself completely, return to one of the other palaces. It was a time of waning power, he knew, like other lean eras before. All but this place would stand deserted. He could secrete himself and wait out the fireworks and disasters. There was no doubt in Damon’s mind there would be disasters. Aria was just too strong, and dangerous when not in favour. He, although not an outsider, realized he was a prime candidate for being the near-innocent caught in the crossfire. But then, there was Maggie to think about, wasn’t there?

Stupidity. The Hunter was trying to get to him, manipulate him. Maggie wasn’t his concern. He wasn’t even on speaking terms with her.

And until his head told him otherwise, that’s the way it would stay.



“It’s funny,” I said. “I find this all less oppressive than I did before. Do you think I’m getting used to all this?”

Jason chuckled. “You know, Mags, I think I am too. I mean – there are good things about it. No homework.”

“No cold rain, when you get stuck outside for gym class.”

“No Mrs. Donaldson.”

“Oh, yeah. There’s a big bonus.”

“I thought you were doing okay in her class.”

“I am,” I said. “Doesn’t mean I have to like her. She never says anything to anyone. Just talks around them. Rudest woman I know.”

“I thought it was just me.”

“Yeah, right,” I said. “Think again, Lawson.”

I flexed my hand, feeling the tingle there. “You know,” I said, “I think I’m pretty lucky.”

He guffawed. “You’re a sick puppy.”

“No, really,” I said. “In comparison. I’m so glad I’ve got the power, and I can feel it. I – think I’m less scared than I would be. . .”

“Less scared than me,” Jason said quietly. “I hate when you do that, Mags. I can tell the moment you switch into your ‘serious’ mode.” He heaved a great sigh and rolled over on his shelf. “So tell me about yourself. Let’s not waste all this heavy atmosphere.”

“Where do I start?” I said. “There isn’t much, you know. I had all my tragedies early on, and now I’m just waiting out the aftermath.”

He whistled. “Very heavy. Very bitter. You’re a quiet thing usually, Mags. You got still waters?”

“Well.” I got myself comfortable. Maybe I was stalling. “When I was a baby, we lived in Greece with my father. Things didn’t work out. No one in either of their families really approved of their marriage to begin with, and from what mom says, they had second thoughts too, almost right from the start. It wasn’t a good relationship. Or a particularly good time. And a baby put a lot of strain on things.”

“You can’t blame yourself for anything like that.”

“No, I know,” I said, “but you have to be a bit objective. Nick – that’s my dad – he liked to travel a lot, and it was hard, first with a pregnant wife, and then with a kid as well. So he suggested she go back to Canada and find a place for them to live, and he’d follow with me. Only he never came.”

“Took you and ran?” said Jason.

“Disappeared totally for about a month. Then Interpol got him, and my mother found out for the first time he had this whole string of previous convictions. She still kind of wanted to work it out, I think, but finally decided to divorce him instead.”

Jason was silent for a while, then said, “Wow. That all must have been rough.”

I laughed quietly. “But that’s what I meant about aftermath. I don’t remember any of that. I don’t even have a picture of my dad. It’s Mom, and what she says and does that affects me. I don’t have any memories of it at all, but it’s still around every day.”

He nodded. “I know what you mean. I think everyone – no, maybe not everyone has stuff like that.”

I looked at him. “Yeah?” I didn’t believe it for a minute.

“Yeah.” He didn’t say anything for a moment, then, “I never really told anyone about this before, okay, but I’m going to tell you because if anything happens to us down here, I want to have talked about it once in my life.”

“Serious,” I said.

“Serious,” he agreed.

“You can tell me anything,” I said, “and if we ever get out of here, I’ll make myself forget. It’ll never cross my lips.”

“Okay,” he said. “Here goes. Okay – it’s not like this is something I have to deal with every day, not like yours or anything, but sometimes, it makes me careful of what I say, you know?”

“Jason,” I said. “You don’t have to tell me anything, if you don’t want to you don’t have to.”

“No, Mags,” he said. “That’s not true any more. We’re stuck in this together, and I’ve been kind of a jerk for a lot of the time. We need to know we can trust each other, and besides. . . You’re different from how I thought you were. I want to tell you something very big for me.”

I nodded, accepting at last, and understanding what kind of a gesture it was. He’d as good as said he liked me. Then, sitting back with my elbows propping me up, I listened.

At the end, I reached out, and my hand could just touch his across the stone corridor. “Thanks, Jay,” I said. Thanks for being my friend, and thanks for sharing. Thanks for being here.”

“You’re welcome on all of those except the last. You can thank the Burnt Man for that.”

“Yep,” she said. “Jay –”

”Uh-huh?”

“Nothing.”

“Maggie?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s good to have friends around down here.”

“You can say that again.”

“It’s good to – sorry. Forget it.”

Giggles. “I think I’m nine again.”

“I’d throw my pillow at you but I’d probably put it where neither of us could get at it.”

“Jay? I know we just had brunch, but I think I’m falling asleep.”

“Me too. It’s okay.”

“I wonder how Aaron is.”

“I don’t want to think about it.”

“Understand. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

“Do you think they’d bring us milk and cookies if we asked?”

“Do you think they stock milk and cookies? Doesn’t strike me as the kind of thing they’d bother with. Can you imagine Mr. Sterling the zombie, drooling milk out over his uniform?”

“You think he’d drool?”

“Probably.”

“I wonder how his poor orange-brain is.”

“Don’t know. Do you think he’s still mad at you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

“Maggie?”

“Yeah?”

“Just trying to get the last word. Goodnight.”

“ _”

”Better. See you tomorrow.”

Even without a change in light, night came, and with it sleep.



He struggled out of the Dreamworld like he was climbing cobwebs, slipping and falling right through for every precious inch of progress. At last, he opened his eyes and found himself in the Mirror Room, a multitude of Scotts blurred into fuzz by his tears.

Aaron Scribner lay by his side, and Scott shook him but couldn't wake him. His breath was slow and shallow, and his glasses had slipped right off his face. They lay tumbled on the covers at his side. As Scott watched, Aaron began to breath more deeply, then coughed and came to, hand clutching at his throat and a far away, terrified look in his weak eyes.

Scott grabbed at the other boy's hand and pushed the glasses into them.

“Scott. . .” he began, but got no further. It shook Scott enormously to see Aaron discomfited. What had happened to him? If it was anything like his own experience –

“I know, buddy,” Scott said, and they put their arms around one another and cried.