

Chapter Eleven



Aaron was returned while Jason and I slept, and he didn't bother waking us. I guess he figured he needed to rest as much as we did.

Even so, he woke first and waited until a meal came and we were disturbed out of sleep.

"Okay," he said, when we had gone a good ways into the meal in silence. "I'll bite. What have you two been doing while I was away?"

Jason and I exchanged a look, then he said, "Nothing." If I'd already sized up Aaron Scribner as almost preternaturally perceptive, here was proof that Jason was equal to the task if he wanted to stonewall.

Aaron pushed a breath explosively through his lips. "Secrets. Take 'em to your grave; see if I care."

"I knew you'd understand," said Jason, and laughed. I smiled, and Aaron gave up.

"Anyone want to hear what I've been up to?" he said. "Or has there been any progress on the escape ideas?"

Jason said, "Tell us what happened," and I agreed.

When he was done, Jason said, "This just makes it more important to get us all out of here."

"Ssh—" I said, extending my hand to silence them.

"I don't—" Aaron began, but then he did. Far off down the corridor, a subdued, almost melancholy whistle.

"Hunt," I whispered.

We waited, and soon our teacher emerged into the tunnel.

It had the feeling of a high noon, no one speaking, everyone waiting for a warning twitch to send hands flying to guns. Finally, it was Hunt who broke the stalemate.

"Scribner," he said, "right? I never had you in my class."

"That's right, sir," said Aaron, slightly dazed.

"Gang's all here," Hunt said, then fixed Jason with his stare. "Or not, right?"

"Last chance, Hunt," I said suddenly and stridently. I rose to my knees. "We're going. With or without your help we're getting out of here." I extended my hand, willing the power to rise in it. *Be a tap*, I told myself. *You don't have to let it flood out, just give a trickle and get the job done.*

I was gratified to see the keys moving in Hunt's hand, trying to pull themselves away from him. Then Hunt smiled, taking a firmer grip on the metal ring. He held them up at eye level, index finger hooked around them and said, "How about now?"

“I’m not in the mood for lessons!” I snapped, trying to increase the trickle to a stream without the dam-burst threatening. The problem was I was fighting both the dampening effect of the shackles and him. Pressure had to be just right – “Just give me the keys, and I’ll go. I’ll take care of Char on the way out if that’s what has to happen.”

In answer, Hunt held the keys closer and took an even firmer hold on them. “You want them? Take them.”

I thought I was going cross-eyed with the effort, not of using the power, but in trying to contain it. “I can’t,” I said at last and let the power ebb back to storage.

Hunt shook his head. “I’m sorry, Maggie. It’s beginning to look like you’re more of an enemy to yourself than Char is. Boys.”

Almost out of sight, he turned. “Oh, how’s that boyfriend of yours, Mags? Word around is Damon’s looking to keep you for himself. What do you think of that? Would he go against his father?”

Tersely, I said, “No.” Was I being passed around from family member to family member like a prize? What was supposed to happen to me?

Hunt guffawed, making me think it had just been a nasty joke at my expense, and left, not looking back.

“I really hate. . .” I began quietly, sinking down.

“Don’t sweat, Mags,” said Jason. “We’ll find another way.”

“What use is it?” I said furiously. “I could take the roof down, but I can’t pull a couple of keys out of a guy’s hand.”

“How do you know you could pull the roof down?” said Aaron.

“You don’t know what this feels like,” I told him, flexing my hand. “I could do more than that. Control is what he was trying to get me to learn, Hunt was and the Burnt Man was. They know how dangerous I am.”

Aaron stretched. “I hope you’re right, Maggie. There might be other explanations for what you’re talking about.”

I looked at him.

“Well, for example,” he said. “Maybe Hunt and Char are both trying to scare you out of using this – thing – so you won’t be able, won’t be willing to help yourself. So they’ll win.”

“It’s worked,” I said. “I can’t go into it with the shackles on, all that resistance, without feeling like it would take a nuclear explosion to do anything effective.”

“You moved the keys.”

“But I couldn’t get them away. Without the shackles, easy as pie.”

Jason shrugged. “Then we have to get the shackles off.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Right. You figure it out, and I’ll fly us out of here.”



Hours later, we were still talking, and all but Aaron were sick of it.

“Let’s go back to the ball,” said Aaron. “I’m sure that’s the key.”

“Aaron,” I said wearily. “Can’t we drop this for now? I mean, there’s nothing more we can do right now. I vote we get Mr. Sterling in here. I’m sure between the three of us, me with what power I can squeeze out and you two with your persuasive abilities, we can convince him to take my chains off.”

“Jason?” said Aaron, looking at the other boy to break the deadlock.

“Don’t look at me,” said Jason.

“We’re talking,” said Aaron, “about what could be our only hope, and it’s you. This isn’t some kind of fluke that happened once. There’s evidence all over you have some kind of power, and it’s very different from Maggie’s and we have to explore it.”

“Bull,” said Jason quietly and crossed his arms.

“Okay, what?” I said. “There’s the ball.”

“Don’t forget what you said about the singing. It affected everyone but Jason. And were you not affected because you didn’t go to assembly at all or was there something more? A interesting question, but even there, Hunt intervened to stop you from getting there, on purpose or inadvertently.

“So what I’m suggesting is that Jason has some kind of dampening effect, like the shackles, on what other people are doing. And he also can pick up things that normal people can’t hear.”

“You calling me a freak?” growled Jason, and grabbed Aaron’s foot. Because of the other boy’s longer chains, Jason was able to pull him right over onto his section of the shelf and get him into an awkward headlock. “Noogey for the man, what do you say?” I squealed with laughter, and Aaron fought for his dignity.

“Noogey me, I’ll noogey you!” he shouted, but dignity ended up swamped in fits of laughter and all three of us traded facetious insults and character assassinations until the steam for merriment ran out.

“Maggie and I were just saying last night that the biggest problem with this place is you can’t have pillow fights. One wrong throw, and you’re pillow-less,” Jason said, having released Aaron and lying back on his foam bed.

“Right,” said Aaron. “You two get all the important thinking done.”

“Priorities, Scribner,” I said. “Got to have them.”

The spirit of frivolity drifted away, leaving the prison tunnel cold again. I felt a draft on my neck and drew the blanket around me.

“Look,” said Aaron, serious again. “We still need a plan.”

Jason was quiet for a minute but both Aaron and I were drawn to looking at him. Finally, he said, “If you think there’s a way to use my power, if it can do anything, I’ll try.”

Aaron nodded, thanks. Another resource, something else to work with. You could see his brain working. *This*, he thought, *was the key. It had to be.* “If Jason has a nullifying effect –”

” - sporadically nullifying - “ I put in.

“ - what would happen,” he continued, bulldozing my interjection, “if you tried using your power while holding hands?”

I looked at Jason, unsmiling, and let fear deliver a cowardly response to my lips. “I’d kill him,” I said.

“Crap,” said Jason, even as Aaron nodded, acknowledging my sureness. “No, man,” he said to Aaron, “It’s my life. I know how this thing feels. You two don’t.”

It was my turn to flare up. “Bull, Jason. You know as little as I do.”

“Hunt said –” began Aaron, but I, anticipating, cut him off.

“Hunt can say what he wants. He doesn’t have quite the vested interest we do. And I’m not letting anyone bully me into doing something that doesn’t feel right. This is our lives. Hunt doesn’t want to help us any more than Char does.”

I had a brief free-fall into despair, thinking about Damon. I had been so sure at one point that he would be an ally. It seemed so unlikely now, after the coldness of him when he had taken me last to Char. No, we were on their own. More important, I was on my own.

Jason saw me go, slipping into my thoughts, and threw his pillow at me, regardless of consequence. The shackles rattled and I jumped like I'd been asleep. The pillow landed safely beside me on the shelf.

"Tell me just what we've got to lose that's so precious," he asked me. "Tell me. Nice little cell to rot in, nice lighting – not the sun, mind you, but hey. Can't really complain, can we?"

Aaron shifted, coming on side. "Let's do something. I'm tired of sitting around." Then, they both looked to me.

I bit my lip, scanned their faces. It was interesting, in that moment, they had decided to defer to me. This hadn't happened before, really. What was so unique in this moment, striking me so strongly? Possibly, I thought, it was because I was never deferred to in normal life. As far as I remembered, my opinion had nearly always been passed over. Jan treated me like an invalid sometimes, but that was a parental thing. I had no close friends to trade respect with. Being with Jason and Aaron was all like living a movie script where people paid attention to each other and actually considered each other's opinions when they plotted together to regain their freedom. Easily, kindly, they were waiting for me. It wasn't out of fear, either, despite the power. Was it? But no, there was no fear there. I would know. Even with the restrictions of the Burnt Man's shackles, I would know. I smiled, easy and happy, my brows tight but the rest of me filled with joy.

"I hate to gamble with your lives – you understand the stakes –" I said, "– but I think Jason's right. God help us.

"The only question now is, can we do it?"

Jason rolled onto his back and tried sliding off the shelf, but the chains weren't long enough. Then he lay on his stomach and stretched for me.

I began to shift herself, then paused. "Should I throw the pillow back?"

"Don't stall," said Aaron. "Lots of time afterwards if we fail, and if we succeed, to hell with pillows. I hate the foam ones anyway."

So I lay down as Jason had and extended my hand. Our fingers met and overlapped.

"Piece of cake," I said.

I couldn't stretch far enough to take his hand, but even this way, barely touching, I could feel him trembling. Now he was scared, and Aaron as well. But so was I, and that was reassuring: something else for them all to share.

"Okay," I said, "brace yourselves. Here goes."

Without more preamble, I marshalled the tingle, drove it out of hiding. It resisted like water, liquid, changing form and refusing to be channelled. I could feel the shackles like a physical presence in my mind as well as over my wrists. They were resisting me. Jason's hand strained towards mine, stickiness of sweat between our fingers, and I felt his power for the first time. I had overlooked it, missed it before. Or maybe it *was* his power which had repulsed my attempts to calm him, and not Char at all.

Jason yawned like a black chasm. He was acting like a powerful magnetic field, pushing my power away from him and helping me shape it. It took all of my strength to keep my fingers against his. I was hardly aware of Aaron, sitting up and encouraging them.

The explosion came before I expected, like a sneeze released before it presented itself even as a possibility.

I wondered if I'd lost consciousness for a moment. The shackles were scattered in fragments around me. Jason and Aaron lay across from me, shackled and still. Jason was bleeding from a wound on his head, a trickle from above his hairline, slumped and almost off the rock, held on only by the shackles,

and with one hand still outstretched, reaching for the floor.

Horror flooded me. *Had I killed them?* Free now, I reached out tentatively, only an iota of my previous effort required to touch them.

Yes, they were there, faintly. My hands were in my hair and at my face, pulling and clutching. I hadn't known such despair ever. Shattered trust, my friends, nearly dead, I had the capacity to destroy casually, in an attempt to help. . .

Somewhere at the back of my mind I knew, I was meant now to escape. It was funny, they'd never actually discussed what I should do if I got free – that was probably so they could avoid discussing what could go wrong.

Escape. But my thoughts were full of Char. Even as I pulled myself off the rock, cursing myself, hating what I was doing, I thought of *him*.



I thundered through the corridors, blinded by tears, ignoring the guards I passed as they ignored me. One sometimes would look up and after me as I ran, but no one tried to stop me and I doubted they would have been able to. I was swollen with the power, heady with confusion.

At first, I was intent on finding the threshold where Char had greeted me so long ago, but my feet were taking me on another path, a familiar path, and I, never more desperate for direction, followed where they wanted.

He was sitting when I burst in, not on the dais on the throne but down by the wall, at a desk incongruously topped with a green blotter and covered with paper. He was also wearing small gold-rimmed glasses which made him look like some professor, not like my awe-inspiring Burnt Man.

"Yes?" he said, rising and putting the glasses aside. He came toward me, hand sweeping behind him in a dismissive gesture which winked the desk and chair out of existence.

"You do paperwork?" I said, my tone sounding stunned even to me.

"Sometimes," he said. "It's a way to keep track. It's relaxing."

And I crossed to him, every muscle in my face tensed and screwed up. What was I doing here?

"You do paperwork," I said again, not quite as dully. I tried to think of Aaron and Jason lying unconscious in the tunnel, all because of me. Scott here, because of me. Everything because of me. But everything I thought of only increased my conviction I had done the right thing, coming to him, because if I was at the centre of everything, it was no more than he was as well.

I steadied myself. I locked my eyes in the distance between us. His face –

"I –" I said, "I – think I'm –"

He waited, saying only, "Yes –"

"You knew," I said. "I had the chance to escape and I came here. You said I would."

"Yes," he said again.

I turned away, agitated, and crossed to the dais where I climbed the stairs to stand by the throne he had indicated to me in our first meeting. *I would have offered you* – he had said, and shown me the entry to his empire, whatever that entailed, however far it stretched.

"I know," he said, and he was quietly by my side. "I feel it too. You may not have felt this way before – I haven't for a very long time. I need you, Marguerite. I want you to stay with me."

I sighed, and closed my eyes. It would be good, to fall into his arms and let him embrace me, if that's what he wanted. It was insane after all that had happened, to want to be close to him and drawn on

his strength, to have him give me a father's affection or something else – but maybe it wasn't strange at all. Maybe this was what he had been doing all this time, convincing me to want to be with him. Maybe this was his manner of courtship, nothing more. And it was rough, very rough, but hadn't I emerged from all the battering and tests better than before? *Take a girl*, Hunt had said. Maybe what he had been doing all this time had been for my benefit, to make me strong, to develop my powers under duress, to let me fulfil all my potentials – and now, if he wanted me, it would be because I was special, I was special after all. Hunt – he had said – had suggested it – and I was just realizing now. The whole idea was terrifying. Could I be in love with him? Was that what I was feeling, all this need and all the attraction? Was it love?

“What shall I call you?” I said, dumbly. I collapsed into the nearest throne, feeling trapped. This too was frightening, because as soon as I sat, I was aware of being comfortable. The view of the room from the seat was attractive somehow, and that was repugnant. *Too much, Maggie*, I told myself. *Trains of thought please disembark here, any one will do. Anything. Give me something to say. Totally overwhelmed. Need a plan.*

He closed the space between us another meter without seeming to move. His voice stayed level and consistent in volume. *What a useful thing*, I thought, *to be able to talk normally in a shopping mall even over great distances. Maybe I should –*

“I have been nameless longer than named,” he said, his hand now coming to rest on the arm of my chair. I shifted, trying not to. Wasn't fidgeting a sign of weakness? One long white finger tapped, swung in the air, began rowing the hand toward my wrist. *He never goes for my hand*, I realized, *always for the wrist, for the shoulder. Wherever he can grab and hold*. I shivered, he noted it. I sensed him changing gears, trying to make me more comfortable?

“Your Mr. Hunt knows me as Char primarily, although as that among others. It is as good as anything I have been called. Perhaps you will discover your own name for me in time. I after all have taken the liberty of addressing you always as Marguerite.”

“I don't mind,” I said, surprising myself. “Maggie is comfortable, but Marguerite is –”

“Marguerite is what?” he prompted, the hand inching closer, the one long finger descending now from its last tap to the skin of my wrist and lingering. . .

“More me,” I finished, and found I believed it. I was less Maggie than I had ever been. I found also I was becoming less tense, relaxing into the idea of being with him. The touch of his finger was cool on my wrist. “What shall I call you?” I said softly. “I can hardly go on thinking of you –”

“– As Char.”

“Or the Burnt Man,” I found myself telling him before I could stop myself.

“No,” he finished for me. “Both emotive and appropriate but hardly affectionate. Yes, of course I know what you have chosen to call me,” responding to my unguarded surprise. Very little was being hidden right now on my face, I guessed. All the confusion, the mixed desires were there for the reading. No, he couldn't read my mind for my exact thoughts, but my emotions must be pouring off me like heat off a stove.

“Char,” I said. “No, I will find my own name for you.”

“In time.”

“In time,” I repeated. I had thought, shackled in the prison, that if I ever acquiesced to the Burnt Man, something in me would rage. I had thought my stomach would churn, some piece of me rebelling and tearing me at the eleventh hour out of his grasp. What was this I was doing then, wanting to be here, running to him, expecting his touch with pleasant anticipation instead of revulsion? Relishing it, almost. I was frightened.

My nostrils flared, eyes filling with tears. “This is impossible,” I whispered. “Aren’t you –”

His hand moved to my face and touched my chin gently, the cool smoothness of it running along my jaw line. I turned my head to meet his touch, hardly aware of what I was doing.

“Your enemy? Too old for you? You tell me, Marguerite. You tell me.”

Char turned away from me, his elegant body seamless as his clothing, every gesture laden with meaning and grace. What was I feeling? My teeth closed around my lower lip, the slight sensation of pain doing little more than staying me from the brink of tears. There were shivers in my spine, my legs were shaking. If I tried now to stand, I couldn’t believe my body would obey me.

“You are so –” I started, and then was at a loss for words. So beautiful? So frightening? So – what was he? I knew that some element in my brain had shifted, another step taken on whatever road I was on. I had escaped my bonds. I had broken his hold on me, and I had run.

Straight to him.

To free my friends, surely. That was all the motive I’d needed. Only with his word would they all be free. I wasn’t strong enough to do it on my own, not with Damon and Arabella in the wings. And Hunt, too. Who knew what he would do?

I had come to beg for their lives, for their release.

Then why had I had let him touch my face and enjoyed the knowledge that I was special to him, *loved*? He would place me above his own children, give to me the throne by his side and together –

Together –

My hand looked terribly small as I reached it toward him. In proportion, it was much like his, the fingers well-proportioned and strong, the tendons prominent. A lot of tension there. My fingers touched the fabric of the cape on his shoulders and took a handful of the material, searching for the arm beneath.

“What do I call you?” I asked again, smiling now. My eyes had left their long focus and settled now on his face. He was handsome. The irises were rimmed with red inside his black pit eyes, but there was something very familiar about him now. I tried to remember the pain of his grip on my shoulder, the pain of being battered by him, but nothing was immediate to me now. It was like I had come through a fire and been burnt clean of everything but raw emotions. “You’re not doing this to me, are you?”

“No –” he said, narrowing his eyes in query, and then understanding. “No, Marguerite. If you are feeling – anything – then it is your own. I don’t manipulate emotion.”

“Except through tests, by lesson.”

“Yes, except by lesson. If I have taught you to love me –”

Then his face was there, the chin pressed to my forehead in embrace. My hands were in his, my hands, not my wrists. Feeling him against my, I was suddenly aware of my own loneliness, of my smallness. My own father was more a stranger than this man. I had never had a father. Who loved me? Who in the end loved me? Was I loved after all, by my mother, by – who? Was I unable to accept love? *Trains of thought*, my mind begged. *Something come into the station. I’m floundering*. Everything was emotion. Logic was foreign. Mom. Mommy.

Everyone who was supposed to love me had deserted me, or was always otherwise preoccupied. And now, with Jan gone, everyone who had ever claimed to love me was dead. I had nothing, no one. Except the promise of something dark and engulfing.

Another click, something fitting into place. The comfort and warmth he was surrounding me with drained. Char whispered something in my mind but I was unable to understand. Flooding in on me came all my old fears, the dams of my defenses useless for the moment. I had built my walls so carefully – *don’t let anyone close because they’ll leave. Don’t let anyone love you because they will betray you.*

Don't let anyone embrace you because they only want you to do something for them. Most of the people I had ever let into my life had left on a revolving door.

I pulled away.

“What?” he said, the hurt evident in his voice and his face.

I put my hands to my head to stop the headache exploding there. “I can't – Can't be the – No, it's not right. I wish – Maybe if I keep – But no –”

He moved away, just slightly, but enough to give me back a sense of space around myself. His hand hovered by my right arm, fingers poised.

When he spoke again, it was in the quiet insistent manner of their early meetings, when he told me, *This will all be yours*. “Maggie,” he said, the switch from the formal Marguerite suddenly more intimate than anything I could remember in my life. He called me Maggie but it was a new Maggie. Marguerite's pet name, not a child's nickname. Maggie. “You will come to me. You will be with me. You need me; you may not understand now but you do. We are meant to be together. If you lose me, you will have no one ever in your life. If I lose you, I will never be whole. We are two of a kind. You could travel a hundred centuries before finding me again.”

But none of it made much sense to me. The whole experience had become overwhelming, every sensation. The tactile notion of him as a creature that could, and had, touched me. The things he was saying. I had learned to think in only one kind of absolute – the absolute need for self-reliance because no one else could be counted on. Even my own mother was an emotional basket-case half the time, dooming me to live in a past that wasn't even mine. It was impossible to understand Char.

“Nothing,” I said, countering in the only way I could what was a frightening emotional load, “is forever. Not even you. Not even my hopelessness.”

He seemed to take pause. For an instant, I thought he would laugh, say perhaps, “The next round to you. Touché.”

But his face clouded, the coals that were his eyes beginning to burn again and the darkness around them deepening until I felt I was looking into twin caves with fires lit far inside.

“Char,” I said, realizing I'd had blundered, crossed some line, and hoping to lessen the damage with his name. “Char. . .”

I was on my way at last to escaping, maybe, but it felt like a mistake. If he no longer wanted me to be there, maybe he would let me, let us all go. But it felt like a mistake.

He took no notice, gave no indication he had even heard.

Like everyone I had ever thought I was capable of loving, he would desert me in the first moment of discomfort. Jan loved me, she had said so, but Jan had also said, more times than I cared to count, “Not now, Maggie. I have problems of my own today.” Even my own mother. But my mother was dead. What could I expect from this stranger? Not having a response from him was worse than the most hideous anger.

“No,” I said, a whisper of fabric, of a breeze. I stood and the room grew around me. He was a thousand meters away, distorted and looming. The power grew, building through my guts stronger than ever before. Here it was, my resistance. This is what I should have told Hunt. My life has made me untrusting far too young, and I am flawed. That is my protection; it is my strength and my weakness. I was vaguely aware of his hand glancing off my upper arm – there was no pain even though my skin was laid open – and knew deep in my mind an echo of my own charging was taking place by my side, but anger, escape, these were what drove me. The echo of his hand on my face was swallowed in the noise of the increase.

When this explosion came, it was a sonic boom, a compact, enormous retort and an after-shock, and then silence.

Maggie was slumped over the stairs, head nearest the floor. She bled from her temple where she had hit the steps, and the sleeve of her white dress was oozing crimson from her shoulder to past the elbow.

Char stepped outside the bubble of energy he had enclosed himself within and stared at her. Outwardly calm, inside he was shaken. The thrones, symbols of his power for centuries, were shards, the ebony wood broken and sheared off as though the wood had been quick-frozen and shattered like ice.

He lifted her into his arms. One finger acted as scalpel, shearing away the fabric from her right arm, the one that had been closest to him. From just below the shoulder to just below the elbow, the flesh was sliced. This was his doing, an unfortunate, accidental glancing blow. His protection of himself had injured her. She had no defense from him. It gave him pause.

He kissed her gently on the forehead, and bound the sleeve around her arm to stop the bleeding. A taste of the battle to come. The wound on her temple was superficial, but the arm could be dangerous. Distraught, excited, overcome, he buried his own dark head in her neck. Like a bellow, the summons raced out through the still corridors.



When Damon arrived, his father stood tall and poised below the dais. Maggie was motionless in his arms, the wounded shoulder a shocking red against the white of her robe, her hand hanging down limp. The blood had clotted but had not yet begun to dry. Her face was pale, and her mouth hung open.

He took in quickly the destruction of the thrones and the lingering echoes of power, the signature of a huge discharge of energy. Char's face was glowing darkly, full of power, so the expenditure must have been Maggie's. Maggie. What had happened?

Take Her, said Char. She Must Recover. She Must.

Damon nodded. Not dead, but injured.

Put Her In The Low Room. She Will Be Safe With Little Peter.

He stretched out his arms and transferred to Damon the burden of the girl's body. *She Must Not Die*, he said.

Damon took Maggie and hugged her close to his chest. "I'll take care of her," he said. He turned to the tall sliver of light marking the throne room door, but a pulse of strangely excited energy from Char made him pause.

There was no sound from his father, but as Damon shifted Maggie to lie more comfortably in his arms and took her out of the room, he knew something momentous had happened.



Many kilometers away, Jan Stuart, her forehead hot under John Tamblyn's hand, gave a cry of mortal agony. "She's gone!" she howled. "I can't feel her anymore. She's gone!"



I stirred back to life, and realized I was lying with my head in Damon's lap. Around us, pillows

were heaped in piles and we seemed to be sitting on a series of steps leading down to a pool. I couldn't make sense of it at first; it was like nowhere I'd seen before in Char's kingdom, and yet Damon's presence must mean I was still in his power.

Damon looked down at me, his eyes showing concern. As I stirred, a face popped into view above me, a pale child's face topped with hair so fine and while it could be spiderweb. I drew a breath, and the face drew back in fear.

Damon called out softly, "Peter, don't be scared. Bring some water." I heard a whisper of fabric as the little boy flew off, I supposed for a cup and water.

In a moment he was back, and Damon held the cup to my mouth, raising me on his lap enough to ensure I didn't spill it all over myself. I drank, Damon letting the liquid slowly over the rim and into my mouth. Even the small effort it took to swallow felt almost beyond my current strength.

"I cleaned the abrasion on your temple, and your shoulder," he said. Raising my hand awkwardly to my head, I felt a small amount of blood matted into my hairline, then turned my head to look at the other wound.

I could feel the the cut on my upper arm throbbing only faintly, so the look of it was surprisingly nasty. There was a yellow bruise beginning to spread under my skin, covering the entire side of my arm from shoulder to elbow, and the wound itself was ragged and deep. It wasn't bleeding, but it was angry and jagged. It looked like I'd been inexpertly flayed. I sagged.

"My father wanted me to investigate your condition. Is that all right with you?"

I nodded, and he began. I could tell it was not easy for him to do, that he wasn't sure how correct he was when he finished. He just wasn't in practice for this sort of thing.

"You seem to have lost less blood than I had feared," he said at last. Blood loss would explain the feeling that I was barely strong enough to raise my head.

"— So tired —" I managed.

"Ssh," Damon told me, sending Peter for more water. "You've exhausted yourself. Father's sent me to take care of you. How does the arm feel?"

In response, I flexed my hand. "It's gone. I can't feel it." I meant the power, not the arm. Damon nodded.

"You've drained yourself temporarily. It happens. I saw what you did to the throne room."

"— I? —"

"The thrones — shattered. That'll be a hard one on Char. But the echoes — That was a lot of power you decided to throw out."

"— Care to talk about —" I said weakly, struggling.

"What was that?"

"You're going to ask — care to —"

He shook his head gently. "I won't ask you to talk about it if you don't want me to. It's between you and my father."

"— No," I said, trying to sit up. He held me down, shushing me, but I pressed on. "No — how do you fit in? What's going to happen to me?"

He looked at me for a moment, searching my face and touching the dark hair matted to my forehead. "I don't know."

"— Did Hunt mean? Taking me for yourself?"

"Hunt said what? Me?"

"He said Damon — keeping her for himself."

Damon squinted at me. “No,” he said. “Whatever he said, he’s just trying to get you worked up. There are powerful games being played here. Some of them aren’t games anymore at all. I don’t want to put myself in the way.”

I nodded with more relief than understanding. He hadn’t been mad. He hadn’t demanded anything. He was – nice.

As if to seal that thought, Damon bent and placed a kiss on my forehead.

“I’m thirteen,” I protested groggily.

“I know,” he said. “Just to let you know I’m here.”

The pale little boy crouched by me, pressed against Damon, his legs all skin and bone. He made me think of a bird, fragile and quick. He seemed wild, at the very least. I stretched out my hand to him, sure every instant he would start and run away from me.

But although he watched me nervously, he let me capture his hand and squeeze it. “Thank you,” I said. “Do you have a name?”

“Name,” he repeated. His voice was high and unsure, an old man’s voice emerging from a child.

“Tell him yours,” Damon suggested in my ear.

“I’m Maggie,” I said. “What’s your name?”

“Peter!” he said, grabbing my hand more firmly to help him to his feet. “Maggie. Peter.”

“Why don’t you sing something?” said Damon, and Peter nodded, enthusiastic about the idea.

There was something odd about the boy, I thought, beyond the fact of being an albino. He seemed unused to people, but not at all put off at having his home invaded, if this was his home. It was, I realized, like he was on holiday, or enjoying some special treat. He must be very lonely much of the time.

And then Peter opened his mouth and began to sing softly. I felt tears streaming down my cheeks, beautiful melody overwhelming me. I turned her face to Damon’s, beaming. “The singer – I heard him –”

Damon nodded. “In the school.”

“In my dreams,” I said. I squinted. “I feel like it’s not – all natural. Is it not all him?”

Damon reached his arms around me and pulled me closer. “See, your power’s still there. It’s just tired. Peter has his own kind of magic. The spell is in the song.”

I smiled, mouth open, listening. When Peter stopped, I motioned for him to go on, and this time, I hummed with him. After a minute, I began singing counterpoint with him, aware that my voice was untrained but sweet and perfectly passable.

When we stopped, Damon gave me a quick squeeze. “That was fun,” I said. “That was wonderful.”

Peter came right up to me now, and turned around so he was sitting up against me, his back leaning on my chest. I gave him a hug and he pulled my arms around him like a blanket.

Damon smiled, but quickly I saw the smile fade, and understood. This was false, and dangerous, because it wouldn’t, couldn’t, last.

“I have to go away for a while. Will you be all right?”

“Of course,” I said, smiling very sweetly at him. It felt false now. How strange, to have gone from utter comfort to utterly alienated in a matter of seconds. “Can you find out how Jason and Aaron are?”

“I’ll do what I can,” he said. I could see he meant to be abrupt with me, to cancel out the effect we were having on each other. Instead, he smiled back, and kept looking back at me over his shoulder all the way to the door.



Jason and Aaron were conscious and dizzy.

“Why did it work on her and not on us?” was the first thing Jason said, staring disconsolate at her broken shackles.

“Don’t be dumb, Lawson,” said Aaron. “She was only trying it for herself.”

“Why didn’t she get us free afterwards?” said Jason, and they were both silent.

“Yep,” said Aaron finally, as if washing his hands of the whole situation.

Jason stared at the empty shelf across from him for a while before speaking. “You know what she said, when we were alone?”

“When was that?”

“Before they brought you back. I was talking about my parents and trips and stuff like that, the good things I can think about so I don’t go crazy down here. She said, I can’t trust anyone, not my family – what there is of that – no security, no friends.”

“I can’t imagine that,” said Aaron pensively.

“That’s about what I told her. No wonder she ran. I hope she finds a good place to go.”

“What a guy,” said Aaron. “You’re chained under an abandoned quarry at the mercy of Dr. Frankenstein and the zombie squad, and all you do is heap good wishes on the one that got away.”

“Yeah, I know.” Jason looked down at the ground.

Aaron repented immediately. “Forget what I said,” he told Jason. “That was out of line and petty. I like Maggie. She’s smart, and she seems like a good person. I can’t believe she has no loyalty at all to her friends.”

Jason bit his lip. “Yeah, I guess. Is that what we are?”

Aaron laughed, the sound thin and a bit unconvincing. “Not like any of us have a lot of choices, right? I bet she’s on her way to the police right now, or figuring out a way to beat that Char guy at his own game. Pull yourself together, guy. Look at what we’ve made it through already. The rest will be a piece of cake.”

Jason nodded. “Piece of cake. Why did you have to say that? Now I’m thinking about food again.”

“Should we try something else?” said Aaron.

“Any ideas?” Jason asked, and boots echoed in the hallway, coming toward them.



Hunt had not been aware of the significant disturbances in the catacombs, but when he tried to do his usual rounds of exploration and surveillance, he ran into a dozen of Char’s armed soldiers camped out in one of his favorite hiding places.

“Just passing through, boys,” he said, moving away from them to make a hasty departure back into the main spur corridor. “Go ahead with what you were doing.”

He didn’t make it, although he could have. They surrounded him and two took him by the arms. He let himself be led. It was better not to have this kind of this happen, to avoid being treated like a prisoner at all costs, but it was less than his life was worth to start a fight, or give Char any reason to doubt him. He went with them quietly.

They took him to Char’s throne room which looked curiously forlorn as they approached, the great bronzed doors standing ajar. It was difficult to put his finger on the reason for the impression, until

he realized the four great thrones which had stood in the centre of the room on the dais were gone. There was no sign at all of them.

Instead, in the centre of the dais stood Char, head bowed, looking like a carved male caryatid desolated by the loss of its building. Hunt's first impression: there was something very wrong.

But Char raised his head, and there was a glow in his face Hunt had not seen there often, only really in the antiquity of their acquaintanceship than in more recent times.

He crossed the floor most of the way to the dais before stopping and cocking his head at the Burnt Man.

"You look like the proverbial cat," said Hunt, starting to grin. He hoped he was reading the mood right. He had, after all, been escorted here by armed guards without explanation.

"Which proverb were you thinking of, Hunter?" said Char, his voice quiet but golden.

Hunt, more certain of his host's mood now, said, "The one with the cream. Not the one that got killed, or the skinned one."

"Good," said the Burnt Man, nearly a laugh.

Hunt began, "To what do I owe –" and then dropped off. There was something in Char's face which stopped him.

"I've invited you here," said Char, "to explain some things to me. I'll give you at least the freedom to choose which things those will be. But you know more about the doings in the catacombs than you have told me, and I will have that information. Barring that, I will know your secret." He indicated that Hunt should approach, and he did so, warily. The good humor, he guessed, would not for long include him.

"What are you keeping from me so coldly, old friend? Every time you enter my presence, you close like a book. Tell me, and maybe I will help you."

"I don't like," said Hunt, "the way your family keeps claiming me as an old friend every time they want something."

"There's not much to like in this world," said Char, his glamour darkening dangerously, his pleased content becoming something unearthly. In one swift, small movement, the arms beneath the cape moved and flung the fabric over Hunt's head. For a moment, everything was black. Hunt had no time to struggle even before he felt the hiss of the material again over him and the light came back.

They were no longer in the throne room.

This chamber was much smaller, and furnished comfortably. "Sit," said Char. "Welcome, Hunter, to my private apartments."

If Hunt had one fear, it was to be trapped. Automatically, ignoring Char's invitation, he began to move through the several connected rooms, looking for a way out.

He went through Char's lavish bedroom, a cave with a rounded dome summounted with colored glass in patterns, lit from behind – but no way out. There were several rooms with couches and chairs, an office – but no doors besides the connecting ones. The colour scheme through it all was gold and silver and brilliant crimsons, greens, and blues. Had Char learned his tastes from the ancient Egyptians, wondered Hunt, or was it maybe the other way around?

Finally, in the midst of all this wealth and comfort, he returned to stand before Char, unable to enjoy any of it, blinking.

"You will sit," said Char, fixing him with a steady, red glare. When Hunt still wouldn't move, a small push from the Burnt Man's mind sent him unwillingly into the softness of the low couch behind him.

“Now,” said Char, “we’ll talk.”

“I have nothing to say,” said Hunt.

“Unusual. For you, most unusual. Why don’t you tell me something about what you’ve been doing in the years since I saw you last. How long has it been? I think – close to fifteen years?”

“Not quite that,” said Hunt.

“Enough time to age?” Char nodded, no smile. “Fifteen years is the same span for both of us, but so much more of your life than mine. What have you seen? Surely there must be something you’re willing to tell me.”

Hunt tried to make himself more comfortable on the couch. A private audience with Char was draining, even when the questions weren’t directed precisely at him. Being the focus of Char’s attention didn’t suit him, and he tried to divert the other man.

“I’m not sure I understand this, eminence,” he said. “Why did you bring me to your private rooms, when formal audience chambers have always been fine before?”

Char sat down across from him in a low-backed chair, curved and bright in contrast with the man’s straight lines and blackness. “Hunter, where have you been? And why do you think I shouldn’t want to make you comfortable? Shall I offer you refreshments? Would that loosen your tongue?”

Hunt breathed out, defeated. The only reason Char had brought him here was to let him understand he could be kept prisoner as long as the Burnt Man desired, and that sooner or later, he would be forced to reveal what he was hiding, or stay here the rest of his life – or in a less pleasant place.

“Why don’t we have some of those refreshments first?” he suggested.

Char looked at him for a moment, and then nodded, smiling just a little. “Fine, my Hunter, we will again prolong the inevitable.”

Hunt sat back as a table appeared between them in response to a motion from Char. “Now you’re being a good host,” he said, then, as he served himself from the dishes on the table, got down to some serious thinking.



Scott woke to the sound of a duet in progress. Instead of waking up refreshed, glad to be back with Peter, he felt heavily tired and at the end of his patience. He didn’t even feel he’d been a part of anything important. Just another game. All he knew was again he had been made a fool of, not even a single chance to escape. That fact alone made him angry, because it made him feel stupid. His mind told him: Aaron would have found a way out; Jason would have escaped. They would have found a way to beat the test. It was ridiculous, but it made him furious. Even the sight of Peter on his return, unharmed and oblivious, did nothing to the feeling he had betrayed the little boy in the most cowardly way.

He hauled himself up on his elbows as one of the voices dropped out of the melody. Peter, the other singer, kept on but came at the same time up the risers. His companion, also approaching, was Maggie Stuart.

“Scott –” she said, and Scott recognized what Peter was singing now; the song had changed and it was Scott’s own name melody. A greeting. Bad temper won out over happiness, and Scott pulled himself to his feet, sourness reigning supreme, avoiding the hand she offered him. “What the hell are you doing here? Don’t drag Peter into any of these stupid games of yours. You’re putting him in danger just being here.” Determinedly, he blocked out the sight of her bruises, the torn and bloody sleeve hanging at her side, the enormous jagged cut down her shoulder.

She was taken aback, and her mouth twisted shut.

He said, “Peter—” and took the little boy into his arms. “They didn’t do anything to you, did they?”

I was confused by Scott’s obvious ire, but tried to be polite. “Are you all right? What have they been doing to you?”

He glared at me. I had been singing with Peter, singing. But I hadn’t stolen him away, that was quite clear by the reception he was getting. Peter’s thin arms wrapped themselves around his waist, and Scott hiked him up, transferring them to his neck.

“What do you think? It’s been a vacation. I asked you what you’re doing here.”

Before my introduction to Char’s realm, I had been pretty good at holding my temper no matter what happened. I often thought no one in the world knew anything about the way I thought since I conceded so frequently. But I had learned down here to be forthright, because experience had taught me it got me farther. Who knew how long the lesson would last? It was enough that down here, for now, a tough Maggie took the day.

“What the hell reason do you have for talking to me like that, Saunders?” I spat. “I’m a prisoner as much as you. You don’t think I enjoy being slapped around and chained up? I would have killed a couple of days ago for as much freedom as you’ve got here. A pool? Heaven. Your own choice of food? When to eat? Pure joy. You have a lot of nerve.” I turned away. “I’ll just set up camp over in the far corner, and you can let me visit when you decide. I want to sleep. I’m exhausted.”

Scott listened, and it seemed to make him a little less sulky to know someone else was in as much discomfort as he was. A bit quieter, he said, “You seen Jason?”

“Yeah,” I said, continuing across the room, step, down a step, down another step. “I asked Damon to check on him and Aaron. He should be back soon. I hope.”

Scott looked slightly ill. “Aria’s brother?”

“That’s the one,” I said. “I got into a fight with Char. The Burnt Man. That’s the only reason I’m here. I guess he thought shackling me up might be bad for this.” I turned to expose my ripped shoulder.

“Yeah, nasty,” he said quietly. Then, impressed, “You got in a fight with her father?”

“It was less of a fight and more of a blow-up, I guess,” I said. “But I’m worried about Jason and Aaron.”

“Me too,” he said. He sat, and so did I, ten risers between them. Peter lay his head on Scott’s knee and promptly fell asleep.

Scott stroked his com-silk hair, then looked over at me. “It really unnerved me when he did that the first time,” he said.

I smiled. “He never did that to me.”

That seemed to be good enough for Scott, who now was willing to forgive me at least in part for invading his friendship with the little boy. “So,” he said, “what do you think about Arabella, because she scared the heck out of me.”

I shrugged. “I haven’t met her. I guess she’s avoiding me.”

“That’s weird, because I never met Damon.”

“That is weird,” I agreed. “Maybe she’s avoiding me, and he’s avoiding you.”

“Great. How’s he? Because I can’t imagine anything worse than her.”

“He doesn’t talk much about her,” I said. “He’s – well, sometimes I think he’s a nice guy and we could be friends, and other times, I realize how old he probably is.”

“If you know, don’t tell me,” said Scott. “I think that having the two of them in the same room would be a very bad thing.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

Scott shifted, holding Peter’s head carefully as he did. “So,” he said, “you been swimming yet?”

“Uh – no,” I replied, glancing down at the inviting waters of the pool. “I don’t have a bathing suit, naturally, and these are my only clothes.”

“What do you have to hide?” he said, a bit too ribaldly for my taste, but I answered in kind.

“Nothing much yet,” I said, “but I will someday, and I don’t want anyone telling tales.”

He made a hrrumphing noise and nodded. So much for the light part of the conversation. So far, I found him neither as forthcoming nor as fun to talk to as Jason and Aaron, but there was nothing to say I might not like him better under other circumstances. There was nothing to say I wouldn’t like him as little either, but I’d give it a chance if the time ever came. Quite obviously, his first concern was for Peter, and I didn’t fit in except as an interloper.

“This is stupid,” he said, startling me out of her reflections. “This is Peter’s place, and he pretty clearly welcomed you in. So who am I to complain? And it’s stupid for you to sit way over there. Why don’t you grab some bread and we’ll make a meal? I’m so hungry. I’d go for it, but –” He gestured helplessly at the spiderwebbed hair and the head on his leg, and I nodded.

“Sure.” I thought perhaps Scott would have found an excuse even without Peter. No sense being antagonistic, in any case. With Scott bending over his small friend, pretending to be otherwise occupied, I went to put together a dinner for them.

I reached down into the cold water larder and cringed in pain. Peter had made it look easier than it was, at least with my arm in the state it was.

“For Pete’s sake,” Scott swore, which struck me as slightly ironic. He lifted Peter’s head off his knee and onto a pillow, and came down to help me.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Yeah,” he replied shortly.

After they ate, he fixed up a sling for me out of a cannibalized wall-hanging which relieved the pressure on my shoulder.

“Nurse Saunders at your service,” he said in a squeaky, Monty Python-drag voice, and some of the tension between us went away.

Still, *It’s going to be a touchy recovery*, I thought.



It was by chance Aria caught sight of her brother on the way back to Maggie, carrying with him some ointment for her arm and the news that Jason and Aaron were fine and sleeping soundly and naturally.

She followed him at a discreet distance, cursing Hunt for not being on hand to do her leg-work for her. It was out of her way to trail him, and grunt work anyway. She should be pursuing her own plans, not divining Damon’s.

Then, her outlook changed. He went, instead of on some explicable errand, to the top of the stairs leading down to what she thought of as her domain. This was no pointless assignment from Char but a full frontal assault.

She, as she told herself, would never have allowed herself to be followed so easily. Damon didn’t

have the heart, or the stomach, or the sixth sense for power. She would have known he was there, and the only reason she would have let him follow would be to lead him into a trap.

Aria let him go down the whole staircase before her, to be safe, and sure she would have no trouble catching up with him on the lower level. And it transpired just as she expected – except that while she watched, pressed into the shadows of the stairwell, he had opened the door to Peter’s cave. If the lower levels in total weren’t her kingdom, Peter’s cavern was for certain. And anything that concerned her kingdom concerned her.

Damon slipped inside, leaving the door ajar. First mistake, she thought.

“Well, Scotty, my boy,” she told herself quietly, “looks like I’ll be paying you another visit sooner than planned.”

She cupped her fingers around the red ring, curling the other hand into a fist, and proceeded.

She leaned flat against the outside of the door where she was invisible but could hear what happened inside the room.

At first, the sounds were inconclusive, but she stretched out a thread of power, careful not to graze the slight vibration that was Damon. He was stronger than she had ever known him; must be stealing from Char even now.

The first voice she distinguished was Peter’s, the clearness of it cutting through the air. He was laughing and repeating the word ‘water’ over and over again. Then, she could hear Scott’s growl. He had quite the low timbre for a boy whose voice shouldn’t be changing for another year or more. Now, Damon spoke, and she heard the words clearly. She panicked momentarily, thinking her power was overreaching itself and she had set up an inadvertent link between them. But no, and in a moment she understood. A girl’s laugh joined the other speakers, and with it a flutter in what she had taken to be Damon’s power signature. Not just Damon’s, but the girl’s as well, her father’s new favorite, Damon’s lady, and in such close proximity to her brother she had been unable to sense a second person –

That was enough, and she came around the door, planting her feet firmly apart, and said so.

“What is enough?” said Damon, trying again to sound in control and big-brotherly.

The act was even less effective than usual, coming as it did from someone seated with a girl’s head on his lap. Peter, naked as usual, was just out of the pool, and Scott was sitting near Maggie and Damon, looking like up until a moment past, he had been enjoying himself.

“Quite a sweet little party you’re having here,” said Aria, totally ignoring Damon’s comment. “Am I welcome? I hope so, because I make a very poor overlooked guest.”

Maggie sat up, freeing Damon, but he only turned toward his sister, staying seated.

“Actually,” he said, “I think the party is pretty much perfectly attended without you.”

“And I’d say the party is over,” she snarled, then smiled, all sugar.

I stood, awkwardly. “You’re Arabella,” I said.

“Very good,” replied Aria, dripping sweetness. “And you’re Maggie. What a dubious pleasure to meet you at last.”

I understood my presence was not at all welcome in Aria’s mind, and with what Scott had told me, any suggestion I might develop of Aria’s being a nice person was bound to be false. It was only sensible to operate on the offensive, or at least to look for a way to diffuse a possibly dangerous situation. Here we were, all in one room, all the forces of power except for Char. There was enough potential animosity here to do more than shatter a few shackles.

“Likewise,” I said at last, waiting for an inspiration. There must be an opportunity here to grasp.

Something struck me even as Arabella crossed down the risers toward us, using her power to buoy her up so her feet barely touched the ground.

“I think,” I said, having what I hoped was an idea, “we could all help each other.”

Aria paused, amusement breaking through the storm of her expression. Damon shuffled back onto his heels but stopped short of actually getting up. “I’m listening,” she said.

“There’s no reason for anyone to get displaced,” I said. What did I know? There was age-old rivalry between the siblings, Aria used to be the favorite but currently was in trouble, Damon felt his father didn’t care about him – I myself was Char’s personal pawn and a danger to them both –

“No, there’s no reason,” said Arabella.

“Maggie –” warned Damon. Then – “Arabella, I would think very carefully if I were you before I did anything rash.”

“Please –” I said and all eyes were on me. I realized I was using some of Char’s glamor now, something I seemed to have developed fully without knowing it. Even as I felt it working, I knew it gave my hair and face a darkness which hadn’t been there before, an aura. I didn’t know how to turn it back off. But I knew that, unintentionally, I was giving Aria the very danger signals I was striving to avoid transmitting.

“I don’t want whatever Char is offering. I don’t. At the end of the day, I’m still a thirteen year-old girl, and power or no, that’s what I want to be. If you and Damon will get us out of here, I promise, I’ll use my power to stay away and keep myself hidden from him.”

Arabella looked at me, head tilted. “You’re suggesting we join forces against our father?”

“No!” I said. “Just to remove an obstacle. You want him to focus more on his own family, and I’d be pretty happy too if that’s what was happening. I’m just suggesting you work together for your common interests.”

Damon, not Aria was the first to laugh. “Maggie,” he said, “I don’t think you understand. It’s been war here for years, longer than you’ve been alive. We’re not talking about a playground spat.”

“It pains me to agree with Damon,” said Arabella, “but you’re out of your league, missy, and the sooner you realize that, the sooner Char will suck you dry and end this whole charade.” Seeing a flicker of confusion in my face, she pressed on. “What did you think?” she said, “he was your dark prince, rescuing you from the boredom of eighth grade? You’re a battery, and he’s going to run on you for a while. That’s it.” She laughed. “Poor baby. And –” she snarled, showing teeth, “you should know not to offer something the other person can just *take*.”

“That’s enough, Aria,” said Damon, rising now. “Don’t scare her.”

“This is true?” I said, incredulous. Everything I had thought was wrong. My life had been over since the moment Char stepped into my life.

“Oh my goodness, baby,” said Aria, laughing again. “You really thought it was something else, didn’t you? We never know our place until it’s too late. Sorry to shatter your illusions.”

“Give it up, Aria,” spat Damon, putting himself now between me and his sister. “Don’t make this any tougher.”

“For who? For her – or for you?” Suspicion flowed quickly over Aria’s face. “Hunt warned me you were getting fond of this little worm. Was he right? Even you wouldn’t be that stupid, idiot brother, would you? Save her from Char and – oh, you wouldn’t dare.”

“What?” I said, confused, looking from one to the other. Behind us, Scott and Peter had crept down the rest of the risers to the pool and were crouching, wrapped in each other’s arms as the conversation escalated.

“She means,” said Damon, “do I want to join with you, like Mother and Father did, power to power. It would give me an advantage over her, although it’s totally out of the question. She’s seeing threats everywhere.” There was something in his face as he regarded me akin to pleading.

Arabella laughed, bitter and ironic. “It doesn’t matter any more,” she said slowly. “You’ll never beat me again, no matter who you ally yourself to.” Just as slowly, she raised her fist so Damon could see the ring with the red stone on her finger.

Damon hissed, recognizing it immediately. “Where did you get that?”

Arabella moved in toward him, cupping her hands together to make a small red light that glowed between her palms. “Mama’s ring,” she said. “Buried with her, believe it or not. No idea why it didn’t come to me. I was her favorite, you know, just like I was Father’s. You’ve taken that away.”

“You did it to yourself,” he said quietly. Then more energetically, the full horror of it reaching him: “You defiled her tomb! You –” He stopped himself. Aria was the hothead in the family, remember. He was the diplomat. Smooth her anger. Let her bully him. The situation was more than explosive, it was nuclear. There had to be a way out even here; he just had to find it.

“Yes, of course.” Arabella threw her hands up, laughing crazily. “But without this, you will never be a match for me. And even if Father decides to disinherit me, he’ll have to fight to get it back.”

In one swift movement, she focused her power through the ring – the red stone glowed bright, casting its reflections around the room. She pointed her fist at Scott, and he dropped to the side of the pool, stretched out full length along the steps.

“And now for you, dearest brother. The ring shall be your undoing.”

I raced to Scott, to hold on to Peter who had started to wail soundlessly, prodding the bigger boy with desperate futility. I reached a bare flicker out to Scott and found him unconscious but just fine otherwise.

“Fall to your knees, worm!” shouted Aria, triumphant as Damon mustered an ineffectual assault against her which she deflected easily. “It’s a bit late to start practicing, silly Damon. I have years on you. And I have – goodness, I have Mother’s ring. How ever could that have come about? It must be a sign – yes, that must be it – telling me the time is right. *My* time is right – and *your* time is done.”

With a howl, she drove her brother flat onto his back, the red glow of the ring encircling his body.

“The question remains – how?” snarled Arabella, circling him, fist outstretched, the light keeping him pinned. I screamed for her to stop again but Aria ignored me. “How? One of Mother’s specialties, perhaps – yes – I remember –” The ring erupted with crimson and Damon was enveloped, as in fire. He writhed, any scream he might be uttering lost in the cloud of power. His body, within the light, turned a shade of purple, then almost green, and Aria released him with a final jab of energy. He fell, rolling down two levels of tiers and clutching his throat.

“Take a long time to die,” Aria whispered, but there was something new in her tone. My fingers digging in to the unconscious Scott’s shoulder, I looked into Aria’s eyes and saw no sanity there. “Take a long, long time to die. No power on earth can save you now.”

Arabella, strides long and careless, moved away from her brother’s body. He twisted on the stairs, in obvious agony. Aria pointed a long finger at me as she came. “You – stay put. No – I don’t care what you do. I’ll take care of you when I get around to it – last – after you watch some other fun and games.” I scrambled away from Scott, heading for Damon. “Stay, run,” said Aria, and cackled. “Whatever. You can’t help him any more than anyone else – which is not at all.”

My spear of energy reached Damon before I did physically, but as soon as the battle was joined, I knew it would be lost. The illness which had entered him was magical and shifting, and I no sooner got to

grips with a piece of it in one part of his body than it began to consume another. If what was embedded in Mr. Sterling's mind was like hard flecks of orange pit, this was like a stain made of quicksilver spreading and increasing in momentum, turning all that was Damon into disorganized mush. I couldn't even delay its spread. I reached out to him, but he was unconscious already, which was something of a blessing because the pain would be gone at least. I started to cry, my entire body frozen, every muscle dead and numb.

Arabella, meanwhile, had reached the pool. Peter had slid in to sit on the shelf at its edge, bony knees protruding just above the water's surface.

"Want to play a game, Petey?" said Arabella, smiling her sweetest. The boy was shaking, refused to look at her. Even without knowing what was wrong with her, he knew something very drastic had changed and he was terrified. "Here, Petey," she crooned, handing him her long knife, slender blade first. "Here, Petey, we're going to play a game called *Red*. Do you see anything red?"

He pointed to her ring, ignoring the blade. She pressed it gently toward him, telling him with her mind so I could hear clearly, *Take It, Take It*.

"Very good, but I'm thinking of something else." She pointed at Scott. "It's inside him, and you can use this to find it."

His eyebrows twisted down into the tops of his eye sockets, begging her to be something different again, something familiar. But she was relentless.

"Stop!" I yelled, torn between staying with Damon and going to Peter. "I'm warning you, Arabella. One is enough." Beside me, Damon writhed, head lolling.

"Why don't you stop me yourself," said Arabella, hissing, "instead of being a stupid girl making idle threats?"

Instead, summoning every ounce of power I could muster, I threw back my head and called for Char.