

## Chapter Twelve



They had been travelling almost a day with nothing. Jan sometimes thought she had a pulse but was always able to put such brief flashes down to hope. If Maggie was still out there, she wasn't transmitting. Or, if she was transmitting, Jan could no longer receive.

Jan sat sullenly in the back seat of her own car, Nick finally allowed to drive because she couldn't be bothered, and couldn't in any case keep her mind on the road. Tamblyn followed them, and they slowly traced out the boundaries of the area inscribed on the map.

Twice today, Tamblyn had flashed his lights, and at that signal, they had pulled over to investigate buildings near the road which looked suspicious. Neither yielded any clues.

Noon had come and gone with Jan refusing to eat and Nick feeling ashamed of his ability to be hungry in crisis. This had led to an argument, and Jan's announcement she was too tired to help, and since all she was was some kind of broken antenna, she was going to sleep in the back of the car until there was something to do. Leaving her off somewhere was of course out of the question, just in case Maggie came back on line – after the antenna crack, he had begun too to think of Maggie's call in terms of a finicky, hard-to-tune and often off the air radio station – and besides, she would never have agreed. Tempers were not so much short as shorted out.

The detective was not an easy-going man to begin with, and Nick found himself, who should have been the least likely candidate for leadership, making all the suggestions. The other two followed him sullenly, but they did follow.

As the sun passed overhead and accomplished much of its descent into the west, Nick too had begun to feel like what they were doing was futile. He flashed his brake lights to John and they both pulled over.

"Let's call it a night, okay?" he said to the other man. "Jan's just getting frustrated and we're not getting anywhere. Pretty soon it's going to be too dark to drive."

"We haven't covered nearly all the roads," said Tamblyn, terse and edgy.

"No, of course," said Nick. "But look at her."

Jan, in the back seat of the car, was staring out into the sunset, toward the west. Her face was blank.

"All right," the detective conceded, relenting. "Have you been this way before? What options do we have for a place to stay?"

"There's the –" Nick began, but that was as far as he got. Jan was out of the car, walking toward the west, face now rapturous. One arm pointed along the axis of the sun's setting.

Nick ran to her, the detective close behind. Nick put an arm around her and stopped her, and

although she let him, he could feel her gently moving in the direction she was indicating.

“Jan?” he said softly.

“Like an arrow,” she said. “Strong and brilliant. No haziness at all this time. This is incredible.”

“Maggie?” said John.

Jan turned to him and smiled. “I can feel her now.” Then her face clouded. “John,” she said, “it’s different. I don’t know how, but it’s different.”

Nick looked at the detective over her shoulder, but he was fixed on Jan. “Come on,” said Nick, turning her gently toward the car. “Let’s go find her.”



An hour later, they stood together by the grass verge separating them from the quarry. The great excavated hole loomed pitchy and strange as night fell. They had made a brief attempt to find another structure that could hold the missing girl, but it was futile. The darkness concealed everything useful. In the end, the decision was made to camp out, instead of driving what would probably be an hour for a hotel, and they brought the car blankets out of Jan’s trunk. Tamblyn called in to the station on his cellular, asking for back up to arrive in the morning. It was obviously too dark to do anything effective tonight.

Jan was satisfied for now, with the feeling of Maggie all around her. Tamblyn had told her not to worry; in the morning they would be able to make a thorough search of the whole area, with her as bloodhound, and Maggie would be found in no time.

She curled up in the back of her car, almost too excited to sleep as outside, rain began to fall.



They had eaten mostly in silence, Hunt breaking it only to comment on the food or ask the names of dishes. Char had exotic tastes; Hunt suspected that many of the foodstuffs to which he was being treated were no longer prepared anywhere in the world.

Finally, over some kind of syrupy ice concoction, Char again began to press him.

“You are trying to wear me down, old friend,” said Hunt, wearily. “You think persistence will win me over, get you in my good graces.”

The Burnt Man laughed, shortly and full of warmth. “Indulge me, Hunter – although you are already doing so by calling me friend. We have much in common.”

“Yes?” Hunt rose.

“Sit,” said Char, and darker, “I insist.”

Hunt complied, raising his hands in defense. “You can be very persuasive, I know.”

“If you know, why will you not answer me?” The Burnt Man set down his spoon and studied Hunt’s face. “I understand the game you are playing, so please admit it is unnecessary. You do not wish me to know how much you desire to keep your secret hidden, so you say little. You wish me to believe this secret is less important than it is, and you seek to divert me. But you know every time you mention the secret to devalue it, I will be more convinced of its importance to you. And so, even though you try, I am more aware than ever that this secret stands between us, like a physical thing, in this very room. Tell me, Hunter.”

There was little more for Hunt to say in protest that wouldn’t confirm what the Dark Man had already decided. “It’s nothing,” he said anyway, and sat back on the couch. “Nothing. There’s no way it

could ever affect you. It's just my own stupidity and arrogance coming down on my head. I'll survive."

Suddenly, the Burnt Man stiffened, and Hunt drew a breath between his teeth in anticipation of some punishment. But the other man rose and stood stock still, as if listening.

"What?" said Hunt in a whisper, hardly daring. Char's glamor had darkened again, like his eyes when he was furious: black gleaming somehow red, and dense enough it hurt Hunt's eyes to look at him.

Unexpectedly now, the Burnt Man threw back his head. The cape, in some breeze that didn't touch the other man at all, whipped around him, fanning the room's light like a candle in a draft. Then, he began to howl, hideous and unearthly music, not a single note but many at once and increasing in volume until Hunt had to cover his head with a pillow to protect his eardrums.

"Char!" he was screaming, but the sound was swallowed up in the cacophony.

And everything ceased, sound, flicker, and Char's presence. Hunt was alone in the room.

He was unhappy, naturally, at being trapped in an exit-less room who knew how many miles below the surface, but even alone he didn't feel like letting his defenses down. Instead, he made a disgruntled circle of the table, picking at some of the leftover delicacies. "He'll come back," he said, and settled in for a wait.



All light ceased for a moment in the Low Room; then Char was there, black cape in a frenzy. I was still beside Damon, still calling. Char looked at me, I returned the gaze, and in an instant, he knew everything that had transpired.

The Burnt Man threw open his cloak so it enfolded the whole of the room in its blackness. I felt his outburst of energy, and knew I was being torn out of the cavern. I fought to stay, but the darkness receded and I was in the Mirror Room, the door bolted against me. I tried using the power but it was dead inside me, that odd property of the room I had noticed before still functioning, and I threw herself against the mirrors weeping bitterly.

Scott and Peter found themselves in the stone-shelf prison room across from Aaron and Jason. Peter screamed at the shackles rose up like snakes to grab one of each of their wrists. Scott was no longer asleep, but found he could not speak until he had Peter firmly in his arms, assured at last the other boy was safe.

Aria was banished to a tiny, enclosed pocket deep in the rock of the bluff and surrounded by Char's magic. She had the presence of mind to shut herself in a bubble where she could breathe, and sat rocking, the red ring burning on her finger.

Char, in Peter's cavern, came down the risers deliberately until he reached Damon, each step increasing the swell of emotion in him.

"My son," said Char, and held him in his arms, hastening along the illness until Damon was dead.



Above ground, morning broke in a haze of light rain. Nick was taking his turn to rest, sleeping under a blanket in the back seat of Jan's car, while John Tamblyn and Jan Stuart scouted the quarry with a feeling of futility. The promised back-up had not arrived. He had called in several times, but the morning dispatcher seemed notably dense and denied official knowledge about anything. Morritz was not in,

probably in transit, because there had been no answer at his house and he was not at the station. Morritz often conveniently forgot his cell at the office. And to top it all, it was raining, but not really raining, the air full of that insidious kind of mist that dampens and depresses without even offering the hope of a rainbow.

Jan's attention was drawn back again and again to the sinister hole in the middle of the quarry. Like it had looked to Maggie, the pit seemed bottomless. They had climbed a slight rise to get a better look at it, but it refused to divulge any of its secrets. The verge of grass had seemed too wide and too inexplicably sinister to cross on foot, and no access road was visible. The sun, hidden in a drizzle of dark clouds, was no help at all.

Finally, Jan returned to the car for some water, and called out to Tamblyn, "John! Let's see if there's a road up to that cliff, see if we can get an overview."

Tamblyn nodded absently, but at the same time, he agreed with the sense in the same notion. He hung up the cell phone, cutting off the dispatcher in mid-sentence, and shouted back, "I'm coming."

Leaving Nick dozing fitfully in the back, they pulled out again onto the main highway. Several false attempts later, they found the dead-end access road that led through the wooded areas around the quarry up to the cliff top.

From here, parking at the end of the gravel road, they could see two parallel highways, one away from the cliff and the quarry past a line of trees and a corn field, and the one they had used to arrive, beyond the quarry and a thick stretch of grass. "Look," said Jan, pointing to the former of these two.

In the distance, up from the south, a string of police cars and support vehicles stretched along the highway. "I'll go down and guide them up," said Tamblyn. "You be careful until I get back."

He went a few paces then stopped, and started off again at a run with some new objective. Jan followed him, and halfway to the area of dense bushes, caught a glimmer of white. She reached the detective and helped him remove the camouflage from the white Honda hidden there.

"Hunt's car," said the detective, tension in his voice. "That confirms it. We're in the right place."

"Mr. Hunt?" asked Jan. "Maggie's teacher."

Tamblyn nodded. "We go way back. He's looking for Maggie too, only it looks like he's probably found her."

"He won't hurt her, will he?" said Jan, and told Tamblyn everything that had transpired in the house.

Instead of being furious, he took it in stride. "I could be mad," he said, "but I don't see how knowing any of that would have changed what happened, except I wouldn't have accused Hunt of being behind the whole mess; could have saved myself some trouble. Don't worry about it. He never listens to me anyway."

Knowing Hunt had been there before, Tamblyn woke Nick and gave him his badge, sending him down to bring the backup up the road instead. "We're close," he said to them, and something in his eyes told Jan that the danger had increased.

Nick left, driving Tamblyn's car, the maroon sedan sending up a wake of water in the puddles forming in the ruts of the road. Jan walked slower into the drizzle and began a slow survey, trying to digest the new information.

"Stop!" John shouted. Jan recoiled from the terror in his voice.

"What's up?" she asked quietly, trying to force calmness on herself.

"Message from him. Can't you see?" He indicated the small crater a short distance into the grassy expanse. It looked to Jan like something, probably a dog, had gone messily digging for bones.

She followed his finger. It took her a moment to see what he meant. “It’s booby-trapped?”

John nodded.

“And those are markers?” She didn’t point, because now she could see. Three small rocks in a row, indicating a direction. And further on, another three, and another. If she hadn’t known where to begin, she wouldn’t have found the trail. “Who? Hunt?”

“Who else?”

Jan shrugged. “And why?”

John laughed, short and humourlessly. “We’re the cavalry. I just hope our reinforcements arrive before Hunt does whatever it is he thinks he’s going to need me for. I don’t relish the idea of being his only insurance policy.”

Jan, thinking of the lines of scars on Tamblyn’s arms, nodded in agreement.

The edge of the bluff was a long way from the end of the road and they found nothing of significance most of the way there. But, following Hunt’s markers, about a hundred metres from the drop, they discovered the concrete well Hunt had entered through. It was all but invisible until they were right on top of it, surrounded as it was by a bank of grass. Even from a helicopter, Jan surmised, it would be nearly impossible to see, just a short, irregular patch of black. Descending silently the short flight of steps, they found the elevator – apparently non-functional – and the door to the stairs – locked. Unable to do anything else, they paused to look over the bluff edge down on the quarry.

From here, the great hole lost none of its mystery. They simply weren’t close enough to see down into it. From here also, they got a better sense of its size and its oddity. There was something very un-quarrylike about it, seen from this angle. Natural disaster seemed to have had more of a hand in its creation than men. “Must have been one heck of an explosion,” said John, and Jan said nothing, not even to nod. It was like the signal from Maggie, and the minefield, and the stairs, simple explanations could no longer wash for her.

It was all unnatural, no matter what she wanted to pretend. She wished for a moment that she was with one of those men who had an explanation for everything, no matter how inexpert. It bothered her almost past bearing, to see an elevator in the middle of nowhere like that, and she didn’t know what it meant. Maggie was here too, all around her, as connected with the elevator as she had been with the hole.

Now the police were arriving, led in the charge by the maroon sedan. Tamblyn tried to explain the situation to his back-up while Jan marked out a clearer path through the mines with deadwood from the edge of the trees. “I don’t know what to tell you to expect,” he was saying as she returned, “but be prepared for anything. The important thing to remember is we don’t even know if we have the element of surprise on our side. For all I can tell, they could know we’re here and are just waiting for the right moment.”

“An ambush?” asked an officer, and Tamblyn shrugged.

“Be prepared for anything,” he repeated.

Noticing Jan, he excused himself and went over to them. “Find anything more?”

She shook her head, but left out any elaboration. She was feeling overwhelmed and tired, and above all fragile emotionally and mentally. The drizzle, she imagined, was the only thing now keeping her sane, the only thing she could recognize unreservedly for what it was.



I heard the door, and jumped to my feet, leaving the bedclothes rumpled. I had managed a few

hours' sleep, I guessed, not enough to be rested but enough for a second wind.

A thousand reflected Maggies followed me, and I mustered what I could of my energies without any sense I would be able to use them. The lock on the door had resisted my best efforts.

The door opened. It was Hunt.

"Hi," I said, perplexed.

"No time, Mags," he said, weary and drawn, his fingers never leaving the door handle. He rested against the frame.

"Why no time?" I asked. "For who?"

"All of us, I think," he said. "Look – I'm not here to help you. I just want to warn you. Char is berserk. Aria's gone – I don't know where he's put her. And whatever he's got planned for you is going to happen very soon."

I was silent, biting my lip. "What am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know, Mags," he said. He was distant. "I did what I could for you, just like we agreed. This was inevitable, everything. Damon –"

My hands came together. "He's dead, isn't he?"

Hunt paused, then nodded.

"Oh, god," I whispered. "I knew, but I didn't want to know. He's dead."

"Goodbye, Maggie," said Hunt abruptly, and I lunged forward, grabbing his arm.

"What do you mean, he's berserk? What's going on?"

"Maggie," he said, withdrawing, holding the door like a shield between them. "This is the end of the road for us. It's been fun, kid, and I admit I had high hopes."

"What is he going to do?" I blurted. "Is it like Arabella said, he's just going to steal my power and kill me? Is that all this was? What about his promises? What about our conversations?"

Hunt shook his head, and closed the door. I felt my legs give way under me and buckled to the floor.

"No way," I whispered. "I haven't given up before, and I won't now. Bring on the next round." But I didn't even convince myself.



Jason, Scott, and Aaron didn't sleep but sat conferring and comparing notes. Peter was content to doze in Scott's arms after they had found a way to make their joint chaining comfortable.

But besides Scott finally being filled in on the Burnt Man, and beginning to understand as much of the situation they were in as anyone, nothing was accomplished. There was no food, and Jason for one thought they had been forgotten. "There's something going on, and we're not going to even be part of it," he said.

He was wrong. Sterling showed up with a bunch of very serious looking guards.

"I guess this is it," said Jason, and their shackles were removed.

Peter was lifted off the shelf by Sterling, but his feet never touched the ground. Midway to the floor, he vanished into thin air, an echo of song left ringing in Jason's head. "Did you hear that?" he said quietly, but a cuff from a guard silenced him. No, they wouldn't have. This was his burden, the unpredictable fluctuations of his senses.

Scott, in the same moment, called out Peter's name.

"Leave it, Saunders," Aaron hissed.

The three boys were grouped together in the centre of the passageway, guards hemming them in on each side. Then the men stepped back, leaving them corralled between rock shelves. Again, Jason reacted to a noise only he could hear – a kind of build like an airplane engine warming up. He watched as Scott and Aaron disappeared, and then a heartbeat later saw the room around him fade and knew he was going too. This power of mine, he thought, caused a lag. He didn't need any more confirmations there was something odd about him as well as Maggie – but when it was a creature like Char he was dealing with, the lesson seemed more poignant.

And it was Char, who met them albeit distantly. He stood on the bare dais, hands folded around Peter's neck. The Burnt Man was motionless but glowing with a brittle, charcoal glamour. They had been brought to the throne room, to the entrance, and something big was about to happen.

Aaron glanced around, understanding for the first time how many people Char had in his thrall. All around the vast perimeter of the room were his guards, both men and women, although Aaron didn't think he'd seen women before among the Burnt Man's troops. All were dressed in Char's take on a military uniform, dark green, nearly black, sombre black buttons and trim.

There was a tug from Char, so subtle none of the three boys could discern or resist, which pulled them into a triangular pattern with its point away from the centre of the room, Jason lagging slightly behind the other two boys. At the same time, several people stepped forward from the outer ring of guards, splitting their ranks on the far side of the dais and filed out of the room by the bronze doors. And all this time, Peter sang.

"What the hell is going on here?" said Scott quietly, unable to keep silent any longer, but if the other two heard him, they gave no indication. Each felt, even in proximity to the others, totally alone.

When Scott thought he couldn't take any more suspense, Peter's song changed, a wild intensity entering it. Peter's voice, Scott understood, was making magic – and he could almost, after listening for a while, understand what the song was doing. It didn't surprise him when a blur appeared in the air in front of the arrowhead of boys, or when it resolved itself slowly into the crouching figure of Maggie Stuart. She straightened slowly, also unsurprised. Inevitability was heavy here, because this was what it had all been about, and here would the final moments of the confrontation be played out.

She surveyed the room much as the others had, giving them a weak, tight smile when her gaze passed over them. There was, Aaron saw, something very hard about her all of a sudden, and wondered how Damon would haunt them all, even the ones who hadn't been present during the siblings' fight.

"Welcome," said Char, and all music, all noise ceased.

His hands released Peter and the boy, a slender white spectre, left the dais and came slowly to take my hand. I was trembling, and could not control the way my hand shook as I accepted Peter's fingers and twined them in my own. The Burnt Man was different again; his moods seemed as variable as the sea. Gone was the gentle professor who had greeted me from his accounting. Gone too was the straight, tall, movie-actor Devil from my dreams. In their place was a Burnt Man who was all rage and longing, and although I couldn't understand why, his draw for me was the same as when I broke her shackles and came here. There was a war in me, because I had been betrayed in my beliefs about him. He had, just as I knew he would in my heart, built my trust in him just to prove again no one could ever really care about me.

Was this the lesson? Don't trust, because you will be betrayed? But how could I believe that, when Jason had looked at me so encouragingly when I had glanced at him just now? I was their only hope, and they were all counting on me. In a way, so was Mr. Sterling, and every one of the people in this

room who might be unwillingly enchanted into Char's service.

I walked beside Peter through the axis of the room, looking never at Char but instead around the walls and over the faces of the guards at the perimeter. It was strange how plain this room was, the walls sloping together, stretching into darkness up to an unknown summit, the floor plain and polished. Nothing felt completed, as if Char had been in such a hurry to build he had made no allowance for comfort or furnishings. It was bleak, and sterile, and everything made me nervous.

He, I thought, glancing only out of the corner of my eye at him, was overdressed. He needed a movie set, a castle, a penthouse apartment, not an enormously bare stone chamber. This was a warehouse, an empty warehouse, not a monarch's audience chamber.

We reached the steps, a girl in white, one arm bared and bloody, and a boy with white hair, and I went on alone toward the vise-grip fingers he had outstretched to greet me.

He was a different man than before. There was no doubt, as I let herself look at him directly for the first time. His eyes blazed, more red than black, and the whites seemed to have been swallowed up. He had lost both Damon and Aria in a single hour – both his heirs non-viable – and he was rushing along whatever he had planned for me. That was what came off him, unprotected and uncensored. I was reading him as I never had been able before, his emotions strong and pounding against me. I sank to my knees, not even feeling the command he was sending me until his fingers touched my throat.

It was only the second occasion on which he had really touched me, bare skin to bare skin, barring only the interview where I had been injured. His hand locked like a clamp on my throat, sending echoes of ache into my ripped shoulder. I forced myself to stare steadily into his eyes instead of screaming like I wanted to. His flesh was icy, sweeping shivers down my spine.

"I could crush your life with this hand," he hissed, and I rolled my eyes, hoping I looked brazen.

My voice came out as a croak. "Then what would you do? You need me. You've admitted it. If you didn't, I'd already be dead." I wondered if I should spit in his face, but maybe that would push him over the edge again. He had been berserk in Peter's cavern, and Hunt had said the same. If I had thought before I was starting to know him, here was the proof I was wrong. He was a stranger. All I could be sure of was that he needed me, because he couldn't trust Arabella any more. Damon was dead, Arabella a traitor. He had no heir.

A thought startled me even as I gasped for another breath – he blamed me for Damon's death, as much as he did Aria.

The strangest part about the whole thing was the silence, I thought. The room was full of people – and other beings – yet it felt like a broad empty space. If I exhaled – if I could have exhaled – I imagined I would see my breath in front of me in a white cloud like I was alone on a wintry day. I had never been the centre of anyone's attention before, not with a whole crowd bound completely under a spell at whose nexus – was me.

I heard a scuffle, and knew the boys had tried to make a break – although what they thought they could do was beyond me. The real fight was mine. Theirs didn't last long, and I used a trickle of power to try and sense what had happened. What I got back was the faint but unmistakable scent of blood. I had never been able to discern bleeding before, and couldn't imagine why not. It didn't occur to me that, even here, especially here, my abilities were still expanding, more of my potential being realized.

Char's fingers shifted on my throat, and I was able to swallow and turn my head slightly. There, on the left of the dais, surrounded by guards were Scott, and Aaron, and Peter, and of course Jason, who looked in the worst shape. Jason's eye was bleeding. I admired his courage, and his face told me that his concern for me had transcended his discomfort. I tried to smile but only succeeded in grimacing. My

weight was being support mostly by the Burnt Man's hand, bruising my windpipe.

I looked back at his face, and he smiled, and twisted me around to look at the throne room's back door. This raised anger – he was taunting me with that conversation where they had been so friendly and amiable. Another betrayal.

Or not. A light flickered in the doorway, and a man carrying a torch emerged, seeming to have appeared just beyond the arch. A struggling figure followed, held by two black-clad guards. I swallowed again. The man with the torch was Hunt.

They led the prisoner to the steps of the dais. It was Arabella, obviously by her shape and size, but her head was covered by a bag and cords were bound around her neck. Her hands were shackled behind her back. Hunt handed his torch away and back-handed her hard across the face.

“What is that for?” I yelled, shocking myself with the vehemence in my tone, managing somehow to escape my constricted throat.

Hunt looked up at me, and steadily stared into my eyes. I didn't want to break the contact. He was trying to tell me - what? Just to be steadfast? To use my power even now, even if it would result in an explosion like last time, this one maybe to wipe out everyone in this room? Or just that Arabella was my enemy, and that I should be happy he had struck her?

The Burnt Man released his grasp on my throat and I fell to the dais, gasping for breath. In the back of my mind, I felt a sharp intake of air – and looked over to Jason. His eyes were wide.

*I can feel you*, I thought. We were connected somehow. Jason nodded slowly. He had heard, or sensed what I was saying. I looked back at Hunt. He took Arabella by the elbow and wrenched her to the ground. The Burnt Man kicked me with the toe of one pointed boot and hauled me to my feet with a cold hand clenched on one shoulder. “It begins,” he thundered, and the entire room began to shake.

Peter grabbed Scott around the waist. The dais in the centre of the room began to vibrate. Five cracks appeared in the floor, radiating from the dais like arms, and they widened and grew.

“Hang on,” yelled Jason, reaching out for Aaron to steady him.

Like five petals of an enormous flower, the floor split. The dais on which the Burnt Man and I stood descended, and the petals of the floor separated from it and dropped. The guards retreated automatically against the wall except for the five who joined the Char on the platform. Hunt, still on the floor, tried to get to the platform and succeeded in grabbing the edge with one hand. Scott and Peter slid down the floor slowly toward the dais together. Aaron held Jason's foot as they fell. Arabella, deserted by her guards and helpless in her bonds and her blindness, tumbled, silent.

The floor sections swung back from the dais. Another floor appeared below the first, and the children one by one fell the several feet down to it. Arabella hit and lay still. The dais descended until it was level with the floor. Hunt rolled clear, stood, brushed himself off.

I felt the outpouring of energy from the Burnt Man cease, and looked around at my new prison. This room was even greater in area than the audience chamber. The floor had swung away from the dais past the vertical to form the walls of this place, sloping away from the centre at an angle. The guards were ringed around the mouth of the cavern on the upper level as if they were in the balcony of some bizarre theatre – or arena, I corrected myself. We were in a kind of bottle, a pentagonal circus.

One of Char's hands was still digging deeply into my shoulder, but the other one now caressed my face. His voice, richly echoing in my mind: *My Empire Is Yours. Give Yourself To Me Willingly And All This Will Be Unnecessary.*

I fought, twisting my face away from his cold touch. “I'm thirteen, you bastard!” I spat now, not in his face but at his feet. Maybe that wouldn't anger him so much. “Damon was right, old man.”

He rose, roaring, lifting me by my shoulder. His free hand gripped me under her opposite arm, and he mostly threw me at Hunt. "Take her," he bellowed, "Before I kill her myself."

Hunt clasped me in his arms and led me to the centre of the room.

The definition of the dais had disappeared seamlessly into the cavern floor, but at the centre of where it used to be, where the Burnt Man's throne had once stood, was a metal staple like the one in the stone tunnel, and like before, there were a pair of chains with shackles attached to them curled around the staple.

"Not again," I said softly. "Can't they trust me to stay in one place?"

"Shh," whispered Hunt, holding my head close to his chest and one of my arms twisted behind my back. "It'll all be over soon, one way or the other."

"That's what I'm afraid of," I said. "What did he do to Arabella?"

The Burnt Man's chuckle sounded in her mind. Hunt touched the side of my head with his fingertips, then wrenched me to my knees with a ferociously painful jerk on my injured arm.

I gasped. "You've been his man all along, haven't you?" I managed.

"You have to know who to trust, Maggie," said Hunt, shackling my wrists. "Yourself, for one. No one, for second."

He pulled on my arms to test the chains and walked away. I struggled to my feet and found I could only half-stand. "The chains are too short, goddamnit!" she yelled. Without turning, he laughed. I closed my eyes.

The Burnt Man raised his hands over his head, and rose from the ground. "Come, Hunter," he said, his voice a thread of sound but clear as a bell inside my mind. Hunt rose into the air to the balcony ledge above, and the other guards dragged the rest of the prisoners out from the centre where I was chained.

I saw now that there were more brackets set into the floor about two thirds of the way from me to the walls, evenly spaced in a circle around me. The others were being led to these. Scott tried to break loose and follow the guard that had Peter, and was knocked to the ground by his own captor. Peter screamed, a high pitched wail, and began Scott's name-melody.

The Burnt Man thundered, and the sound of Peter's singing was swallowed into the air.

Scott looked up to where the Burnt Man hovered high above my head. "Stop this!" he screamed over the rising noise. "Leave him out of this! He's only a kid."

"So are you all," said Char, and laughed. The guard clasped the chains around Scott's wrists. Across the circle, Peter was chained similarly. Aaron struggled uselessly and was locked in place, and Jason as well. My eyes filled with angry tears. Whatever was about to happen, they shouldn't be subjected to it. If it was me he wanted, he should leave them out of it.

"Father!"

Arabella's voice, always before so sibilant, was hoarse, muffled by the covering on her head. She pulled herself away from her guard and stood defiantly, her blind face turned upward.

"Leave me out of this, Father. I'm your heir. Use me this way and your empire dies by your foolish pride."

The Burnt Man laughed. Arabella's body tensed. "Uncover my head at least. Give me that dignity."

The hovering spectre motioned with one hand and the ropes around Arabella's neck fell away. Her guard pulled the sack off her head.

Arabella shook her loosened hair and once more looked up at her father. "Give me the girl," she

said, her voice once more carrying her former clarity and control. “I can strip her of her power without all of this.”

“You are in no position to make deals, child,” said the Burnt Man, and the chains leading from the staple rose up by themselves and wrapped securely around her already bound arms and pulling her to her knees before attaching themselves to her wrists. “This girl is more than you will ever be. And soon, she will one with me forever.”

And finally, after all the clues, after all the insights missed, I really understood. It was what Arabella had accused Damon of wanting me for, what Hunt had implied. *This ceremony*, I told myself, *is my wedding*. Funny, I always pictured flowers and veils and lots of family members to get drunk and make fools of themselves at the reception. The white dress stirred around my ankles. At least the colour of the dress is right, I thought, even if it’s missing a sleeve and a little worse for wear.

And Jason and the others – the wedding party. Arabella, I supposed, the maid of honour.

“I will not take this humiliation!” Arabella’s voice contained desperation now. I looked away. “Are you forgetting Mother’s ring?”

“I have forgotten nothing.” The Burnt Man reached out a hand, and a red glow surrounded Arabella, rising from her bound hands. “The ring can be controlled as easily by me as by you. It will not serve you against me.”

Arabella laughed chillingly. “What about her?”

The glow focussed itself, but in the same instant, a spear of darkness shot from the Burnt Man’s hands and pierced Arabella. She collapsed in a heap. The glow faded. “Stupid girl,” he said. “Warning me instead of taking action.”

“Stop it!” I looked. It was Scott, straining against his chains.

The Burnt Man ignored him. *Quiet, Scott*, I thought. *We’re all in over our heads. It’s much better if he doesn’t notice you.*

I looked around the circle. Jason was sitting up on his knees, his face turned up toward Char. Scott was crouched, his hands defiantly before him. Peter cringed, sinking into his pale hair. Poor little boy, I thought. Arabella was not dead; she stirred weakly. I guessed that, whatever the ritual, it would be useless without live participants.

I completed the circuit, and got a surprise. Aaron was looking directly at me, and when he met my gaze, he gave me a weak thumbs-up. I nodded. She thought that Jason would be my strength, but Aaron was there for me too. I would do whatever I was going to do for him and Jason, and keep their faces before me at all times.

Then Scott raised his head and looked directly at me. He whispered but reaching out with her heightened senses I heard him clearly: “Get him, Maggie.”

I looked up then at the Burnt Man, fixed his image in my brain, and closed my eyes. His voice came to me, a sensual, sleek whisper meant for me alone. “What are you thinking, Bride?”

“Bride of Frankenstein,” I whispered back. “Bride of Dracula. Bride to the Burnt Man. I don’t think I’m old enough for marriage, do you? Maybe in the Middle Ages, but not here.”

There was silence from above, the kind of noisy silence that comes when a director removes all the sound from a film, unnatural and thick. Damon had explained to me the concept of siphoning energy and how he and his sibling had put it into practice. Char was weakened, whether he knew it or not, by the separate treacheries of both Damon and Arabella – but how much? Still more than I could handle, or Hunt would be mine instead of his. The time for hedging bets was over.

I felt the void above her grow. He’s expanding himself, I realized, making room to use all the

power he'll need. If I lose this battle, I will be his, completely, eternally, he says. I'm not going to let that happen.

I looked up, feeling hope surge back into me. "I'm ready, Char," I whispered.  
 "Good," said Char, and raised his hands once more.

Hunt, on the upper level, took a long knife from inside one of his boots. The Burnt Man was for now occupied. It was time to prepare for the end. Deliberately, he forced the point of the knife into the centre of his palm. Hot blood dribbled between his fingers to the white marble below. His scream was swallowed in the Burnt Man's silence, and no one paid him any attention.

The bottle of the room below Hunt was a vacuum: no sound, no movement, for a moment that seemed to hover forever. Then, in a crashing wave of sound, the bubble exploded.

Fire erupted on the floor of the arena and ran in streams between the prisoners forming a five sided star around them with me in the centre and one of the others at each of the points. Vaguely, I could see Hunt crouching by the wall on the upper level. He gave me a thumbs-up, like Aaron, and there was a knife in one of his hands, red with blood or just the crimson light, I couldn't tell. The fire brightened until I could hardly see through my squinting eyes. A noise like a hurricane came from above, and I looked up to the Burnt Man.

For a moment I thought my sight had become blotched with sun spots somehow. He hung, still as on firm ground, directly above me. His hands even from this distance radiated their coldness to me, resonating in my bruised windpipe and in the shoulder I had almost forgotten was injured. I felt a sucking sensation as he drew his energies in. Dancing in my vision were the sunspots surrounding him. As I watched, the blurs grew and multiplied.

And began to come into focus.

Strange, horrific beasts. Each was easily larger than a man, and as different from the next as snowflakes. Some had strands of waving hair like cilia. Some had more than one head. Each new grotesquerie blossomed into existence bellowing its life, some with deep roars and others with piercing shrieks. I didn't need to look at Peter to know he was screaming – although no sound he made could penetrate the denseness of the cacophony above.

Blood! the cry rattled through me, the harsh echo of the Burnt Man's thoughts the only warning I had. The shapes of the beasts hanging in the air wavered and distorted almost in the same moment the cry had reached my ears. And then they exploded, their mid-air existence cut short, into bullets of flesh and dark blood raining down in gouts like tar and covering the walls of the chamber. The children in the circle were splattered.

Only I was saved completely, the black blood sliding harmlessly away from me over the shield I threw up as my arms flew over my head in a warding gesture. It was a purely reflexive action – but suddenly I had hope.

But what if I could use my power only sparingly? And what if the only way to win through this was to go all out? These shackles on my wrists – there was so much power in the room I couldn't tell if they were inhibiting me or not. But it was as Hunt had said: I was her own greatest enemy when it came to using my power.

The shield was ebbing away, but it was no longer necessary. I took a breath and started to make a secret reservoir inside myself, just like the Burnt Man's but hidden, I hoped, from him.

It was all in the lessons. I had been taught – what? Because now the trick was to do the opposite

of what he wanted, what he had tried to train me to do. Hunt had tried to overcome my fear of the power, and that must be the key.

The power throbbing in the room jumped in intensity, and the centre of the vibration was the Burnt Man. I turned to face him.

His body was enveloped in a glow that changed colour as I watched, spanning the spectrum from red to blue to white. I felt the heat of him on my face and steeled myself. My power raced to my fingertips pulsing in his changing, all my reserves marshalled at once and threatening to explode without my direction. I reached out with my mind to all the others, seeing lines of power glitter between them outlining the pentagram in golden light.

I felt Arabella join in with repugnance, felt Peter's joyous voice, Scott's fear and anger, Aaron's steadiness, and Jason's surprising affection. He liked me after all, after all his cruelty and disgust at the beginning of their imprisonment. Here, in Jason's mind, I found my greatest ally. Here was a well of deadness, a resistance to power, his formidable natural defences. With his approval, I crashed through the walls like a juggernaut. My power and Jason's – his an almost anti-power – swirled and fought, and finally came to a kind of precarious balance. I could hold him only so long as an ally against the Burnt Man before we destroyed each other. I used him as an anchor, the only hold I had on my own slippery power.

Above, the resonance grew to a fever pitch. He was a sun, burning with a horrible light and heading for nova.

Suddenly, with a rush of heat and energy that threatened to overwhelm me, the Burnt Man's coat of light exploded toward me. I pulled myself back from the others, dimming the connections of fire between us to a dull red and forced every scrap of my stolen forces back toward him.

It wasn't enough, and I felt his will crumbling mine and felt my body begin to weaken under the onslaught of heat and power. *Hold on, Maggie*, I told myself. Then, the injustice of it all jumped into my mind. There was more at stake here than my personal survival. There were four poor kids who had been dragged into this nightmare, three of whom had only committed the crime of knowing me. It wasn't fair.

What was he tempting me with, after all? Because there was temptation as well as threat. To be special. To be powerful. To have control for once over my destiny. To be wanted.

In my heart, I had never believed I was only a disposable resource to Char. A resource, yes, because it was obvious now he was less powerful than he had been in the past. Everything confirmed that. But he wanted me forever, not just to use and throw away.

But did I want what he wanted?

I turned to thoughts of escape.

The nature of Jason's test, and Aaron's and Scott's, those had been that they could only succeed, only escape, if they submitted totally to their situation. They were being taught not to resist.

So they must now resist.

I had been taught the same: I would always lose, no matter what, but that the losing wasn't a failure. He had tried to make me believe losing was the first step toward gaining all the rewards he was tempting me with.

If this was a wedding, some kind of joining ceremony, what was I expected to do?

My scalp was burning hot, hair sopping wet and streaming. Char's power was filling the space I had created, straining its bounds. Something – I had to do something quickly, because in a moment, I would be overwhelmed and he would have me. This I was sure of. The stream of power would pass through me to the others, binding them together, the lines between them reflecting the spell back and

forth, magnifying it.

The first step was to stop resisting, to let the power reach beyond me. To swallow up my friends. And they, who had been conditioned to submit, who didn't have my power, wouldn't even be able to fight.

The only thing to do was something – unexpected -

I stopped resisting, and let Char's power enter me, and become part of me, and felt his thrill of triumph. He thought he had already won. But I wasn't finished. As I had felt him do, I opened myself, expanding the already gigantic void inside me, not bothering to hide it, a well to fill with will. I giggled, felt his energy pressing from inside me, trying to escape along the lines of power he had created, to the innocents around the pentagram, and to his own daughter. My emotions boomeranged.

"It's not fair!" I screamed, trying to hear myself over the roar, and drew the raging power in, containing it. With a snap, I let go of them all, all but Char. Scott, Arabella, Peter, Aaron, and finally Jason. I severed the bonds between me and them. No longer would Char use them. This was between the two of them, no one else. Around my feet, the fire of the pentagram died away and a black smoke rose from the places where the lines had run. Jason screamed a warning, feeling the connection he had with me ebb away. Vaguely, I saw his outline blur in the haze of light growing around me.

The forces pulled at me, and I felt I was being drawn out of shape, like I was elastic under the power I was trying to hold. But nothing would escape.

I could feel the connection still with Char, holding me to him by a line of force. Like fishing, I thought. Just like fishing.

I felt anger well in me, and with the fury came a new reserve of strength. "I'll beat you at your own game!" I screamed and pulled back. The unexpected. Above me, the Burnt Man spread his arms, trying to hold on to the line that ran between them. I was merciless, and yanked. The line came free and his power, all of it, poured into me.

There was silence for an instant, Char hovering over my head, the remains of the fire still burning in its paths stretching out from my feet, dimming into lines of charcoal. Then I heard a noise in my ears like crashing surf, like a jet engine warming up right near my face. The Burnt Man, his glow nearly gone, turned in the air to face me, cloak billowing, and slowly began to fall toward me. His teeth were clenched, his eyes full of fury beyond reason. I felt him reach for me and his voice bellowed in my mind.

The jet-engine noise crested, and I realized what it was. I couldn't contain the power I'd taken away from him after all. It was too much.

"Maggie," he chanted, "Maggie, Maggie, come to me, join with me. I will make you a Queen to rule the universe. Take the throne I offer you; take the place of my dead wife, one with me in mind, in heart, in power."

And I was with him – the Dreamworld, I recognized. It was the room, with the piano and the gold and glass. *He thinks he can buy me off with wealth*, I thought – and then she saw him.

*Nothing so crass*, he said, and smiled shyly. He was younger, much younger, Damon's age – then it was Damon. *It was me all along who you began to grow fond of*, he told her. *It wasn't Damon in the apartment, it was me. Maggie – I didn't lie to you that night. I treated you with all the respect and affection I truly feel for you. It's not a question of stealing your power; don't you understand? I sought you out, you alone, from all the billions of women in the world, because you alone possess power to equal mine. Only you could be my true consort. As once she found me, I found you. You alone.*

*Flattery*, I said, and sat on the piano bench, that marvellous view at my back. Damon – I remembered him so well - his head on my lap, his kindness. So what if he had imagined me some kind of

dream creature? He had behaved very kindly, very humanly toward me. Who was to say the Man before me was incapable of human emotion, was incapable of love? Was she ready for marriage? Of course not, and yet –

He moved toward me, capturing the distance between himself and the piano bench. His hand reached for my face, and I stood, my head only as high as the middle of his chest. He laughed gently, tilted my face with the fingers that caressed my chin. *I love you, Maggie*, he said. *If it's a father you need, not a lover; I can be that too. Nothing stands in the way of your dreams. Take your legacy, take control of your power. Love me, and I will cherish you.*

*You're lying*, I whispered. *It was Damon. It wasn't you.*

His eyes filled with tears. *Yes*, he whispered back. *When he died, a part of me died too. I captured some of his memories in his last moment. I felt his affection for you. It belongs to me now; he gave it to me as a gesture of love. In life, we never shared anything. At his death, I finally became the father he wanted.*

*You lied*, I said softly, but my accusation had lost its conviction. His face was so sad – his now, not Damon's. I hadn't flinched when he'd reached out to me this time. His hand touched my throat, and this time it was as warm as a human hand, easing away the memory of the icy chill.

Maggie swayed on her feet, her eyes closing.

Aaron Scribner watched with exponentially blossoming alarm, as Maggie's knees buckled and she collapsed on the ground backwards, twisted over the awkward shackles. Her body was surrounded by a strong white-yellow glow, making it impossible to see her expression – but he was sure, just for a moment, that she had been smiling.

Aaron, feeling numb, dropped to his knees, then fell forward. The pain, bare knuckles scraping on the rough ground, had the desired effect. "He's winning," he screamed, and saw the faces around the circle, previously hazed, hypnotized by the battle raging in the centre, uncloud – and Jason, the only one of them who seemed able to stand straight, spread his arms wide.

"Feed me!" he yelled, and something fell away from him, some kind of shield, and suddenly he was blazing almost as brightly as Maggie and the Burnt Man in the air above, a hot reflection of their brilliance. Without realizing what he was doing, Aaron reached back toward his friend, and felt something seeping out of him. Scott, his attention fixed on Peter, felt Jason's face on him, and let go, slumping over. He watched as Peter opened his mouth, and a Maggie-melody poured out, no need to explain to Scott Saunders who he was singing for. Out of Scott came a tumble of something he couldn't define, and everything, the contributions to all three of them, swam through the thick air to Jason, who drank it all in like a syrup.

Surrounded by white and glass, I was dimly aware that the balance of power had shifted – but could only really understand what I saw in the Burnt Man's face. He still looked a little like Damon, but the fury in the eyes was older, wilder, had nothing to do with tenderness. *I'm thirteen*, I reminded myself. *I haven't even finished public school. What do I want with omnipotence and a kingdom beyond reasoning?* I laughed, and found in joy it was easier to hold the power than in anger.

I looked around the room, and finally turned to the window. Char's hands were still holding me – but not so I couldn't make a complete circuit and see Jason Lawson's reflection in the dark glass. He shook his head – and it was enough. With an anguished scream, tearing out of my throat, I smashed the Dreamworld to pieces and flung it away like so many scraps of fine white paper. I opened my eyes, the

real ones this time, and found myself prone, crumpled on the hard ground, staring up at the pulsing stream of light that ended in the ball of brilliance surrounding my enemy – my bridegroom – my –

And without another thought, I blasted all I had stolen back at him.

He hovered, endlessly, as I poured all his power into him. He was falling toward me still, but getting no closer. The stream buoyed him up like a fountain, and with each wave passing from her into him, he burned brighter and brighter. The light was brilliant as the sun on a cloudless day, but tinged, somehow tainted and stained as if the light was putrescent.

Far above, Hunt had drawn his own pentagram in blood and in the centre had laid his brother's ring. That was enough – his strength was ebbing, and he sank down, his eyes closing.

The airplane noise had begun again. Peter had his hands over his ears, his mouth open in some melody caught inside the greater sound. Scott crouched, dividing his attention between Peter and Jason, who lay on the ground unconscious. Arabella had shrunk into a ball, and a faint red light coming from her ring surrounded her. Aaron had eyes only for Maggie, and he stared as the light from above turned her hair silver, letting her image burn itself into his memory. He felt the final response from the Burnt Man – a tiny lapse in Maggie's power that seemed like an instant of time that held nothing, like a skipped heartbeat. Maggie screamed.

The Burnt Man exploded.

The guards standing in the bottle and on the ledge above were blasted to their knees. Hunt, like Jason, was unconscious, the wound in his hand leaking a pool of blood that had all but obscured the circle and star he'd drawn.

The unnatural light flickered and was gone, the only illumination remaining being that from the torches, many of which had gone out in the blast of the Burnt Man's destruction.

A fine powder settled on my head and arms. I coughed and barked, clearing my mind and releasing the tension built up in my stomach. My forehead pounded – adrenalin. It'll take hours before I'm truly calm, I told myself, trying to be flippant, and feeling like screaming again. Worse than a car accident.

I rolled over onto my side, and from there was able to get to my feet to survey the damage. The easiest thing to notice was the utter silence. The world was holding its breath, waiting for me, for my next action to set it free. I saw Peter, crouched, thin legs wrapped by thin arms, rocking like an eighty year old autistic. Scott was bent over, halfway to his feet, but staring at me with as much fear as relief. Aaron, still on his knees, nodded, gratitude, I guessed, and gave me his weak thumbs-up. Arabella, not a full participant in the conflict, was its casualty from what I could tell, lying curled around her manacles, one hand frozen in a claw at her throat.

But Jason lay still, not moving, and I strained at my bonds, trying to reach him.

It was crazy – that with such a great exertion, such a victory, that I was still a prisoner. But then I felt a tickle in my fingertips, and realized what had happened.

All the power, my own newly awakened might, and that of the Burnt Man – it was all there. I had been large enough to contain it after all, and after its explosion, it had returned to me, like a dog coming home to its master. It was wounded though, weak and tender, and I sensed that I had been drained then refilled with too many impurities to be potent. Like the recipient of a transplant or infusion. Maybe my body would work like a filter over time, straining the liquid of my magic into homogenous form again.

All around the perimeter, the guards, Mr. Sterling among them, were still. *Like clockwork soldiers whose innards have run down*, I thought. Let's hope their owner left the key behind.

A movement from above caught my eyes. A rope snaked over the edge of the balcony, and Hunt's face, white and fragile, appeared.

I'd won, after all. His loyalty should by all rights belong to me now. I breathed deeply, felt my heart race, flexed my hand to take hold of some of the power that surged through me irresistibly. With a thought, I snapped her bonds and started to turn in place, looking over my five companions in the circle – Arabella, Peter, Aaron, Scott, Jason. An instinct surged the panic in me again – the power raced down my arms and legs like ice-cold shivers and I whirled back to Arabella.

"Well done, little girl," said Arabella, her hand unclenched, her face relaxing. The full lips pursed. Scott was staring, frozen, as if she was a snake curled by his feet. The girl who had laughed with him about sibling rivalry, she was gone. Even the hard calculating heir to an empire had vanished. What filled the eyes now was insanity. She was perhaps the last of her kind. She had seen her father destroyed. She was a fratricide, and for all he knew, she had been driven out of her mind.

Long dark hair loosened and like a mantle around her shoulders, Arabella moved smoothly to her feet, drew herself up and burst her own chains like they were paper. She was doing a good job of pretending, I thought, first that she was dead or mortally injured, then that she was unhurt. But Aria's movements betrayed more than she realized. Physically, she had suffered, and it was telling.

"Kill the father, release the daughter to avenge his death. Do you think he really could bind me?"

"Hunt!" I said.

Arabella stepped closer and brought the ruby ring to her cheek. "My mother's. An item of great power, as you already know." She smiled. "Shall it be magic, or more conventional means? How would you rather be dispatched?"

"Neither, thanks," I said, trying to keep Arabella's narrowing eyes fixed on me. "Hunt!"

Hunt slithered to the ground on the rope he had lowered, his movements for once unsure. I remembered a day in gym class where he had beaten the whole of Westbrook's grade eight class in a push-up contest, bragging about his physical condition. He fell the last couple of metres and although he was on his feet again quickly, I could see he was very weak.

But I couldn't afford to find out how he was. My pressing problem was Arabella.

"I am my father's daughter, Maggie." Arabella waved her hand and with a searing burst of red light, part of the balcony was shorn off. The unlucky guards who had been standing there fell with huge shards of masonry to the cavern floor. More than the Burnt Man would be casualties today. Peter, closest of the ritual participants to the fall, shrieked. "Let that be warning enough."

I saw Hunt moving toward Jason, who still had not moved. "Get them out of here!" I yelled to him, as Arabella launched her first attack.