

## Chapter Thirteen



Hunt's summons had contained urgent directions and a warning. Tamblyn, on receiving it, had taken Jan spontaneously into his arms and hugged her. "You see," she said, "you can be a good little antenna too." She hugged him back, glad that something was finally breaking. Tamblyn had been morose before, because no one could pick the lock on the door or figure out how to work the elevator. Hunt could probably have done either in a minute, he had guessed, and the strange call from his brother straight into his mind had proved just that.

"So what now?" said Nick, just a little jealous of the effusive physicality between the other two.

"Now," said Tamblyn, "we see just how dangerous this stairwell is, and then we launch a reconnaissance." He let them and a few officers trail him back to the stairwell. "I know how to jimmy the lock," he said, "but Hunt thinks there might be traps. He apparently had help. I want everyone to stay well back from me while I try this, and only come down when I say the coast is clear."

He reached into a pocket of the ever-present trench coat and pulled out a knob off yellow chalk.

"Steal that from the kids at school?" said someone quietly beside Jan, but if Tamblyn heard he gave no indication. It was nerves, Jan could tell. This was all very odd, very unnerving.

"Well?" said Nick, now at her other elbow.

"There might be traps."

"That's what the chalk's for. Of course. How stupid of me. Chalk. Traps. Gets them every time."

"Ssh," she hissed at him. "It's magic."

He was silent, and they watched. Tamblyn drew his circle and star and lit a match which he placed at the centre. Then he crouched, intoning something in a guttural language while the flame flickered and burnt itself out.

He looked up, and anyone who had been holding breaths released them. "This could be dangerous," he said.

With all the faces spaced around the well watching anxiously, he approached the door. There were a few words Hunt had given him, Char's old back-door passwords offered long ago in return for some favour John knew as much about as he wanted to – very little. Between these and the same good old-fashioned lock-picking techniques they had tried before (spiced up of course with a few arcane gestures) the door came. With it came the explosion.

It was small, enough to knock John off his feet but not much more. The door knocked against the wall and Tamblyn felt pain in his scalp.

"I'm okay," he said, because no one yet had moved. Jan rushed down, pushing her way first, and knelt beside him.

“I supposed you’re not the kind of lady who carries a handkerchief in her purse?” he said. Blood was pouring from his scalp down the side of his face to his neck.

“I’m the kind of lady who left her purse in the car,” she replied, eyebrows knotting in concern.

“Don’t worry too much,” he said, “scalp wounds always bleed a lot. Probably nothing.” He sounded weak, or at least shaken.

“So,” she said. Several officers were circling them cautiously to get a look down the stairwell. “What was that whole little ceremony in aid of if it didn’t stop the bomb going off?”

“Mumbo jumbo,” he whispered to her. “Got to keep up the witch-boy image.

“John,” she said solemnly, and a bit incredulously, “you’re a nut-case.”

There was a whirr behind them. One of the officers, his finger on the elevator call-button, was looking half-way between sheepish and scared. “It just started working,” he said.

From the door came a series of resounding crashes.

“Good thing,” said an officer beside the stairwell door, “because no one’s going down there. Our staircase has just become a very large hole.”

“John,” said Nick, “I think your bleeding head and poor balance just saved your life.”



I ran, the white dress tripping me up.

There was a lot of room to run in Char’s circus, but nowhere to hide. Arabella launched volleys of her red light explosions, and I raised a bubble around me for protection, a shield of the type I’d erected instinctually to protect myself from the gouts of blood during the ceremony.

Fortunately, Aria was wholly focused on me, her singular foe and seemed to be paying no attention to Hunt or the others. Hunt, I could see out of the corner of my eye, was trying to collect the survivors from the ritual and get them started up the rope to the upper level. This cavern was a complex toy whose creator had died leaving no clue to its workings. No doubt, given the leisure, I could sort out the workings of it, but now was not the time.

The tingle I was used to in my hands and feet had multiplied many times. As I ran, the warm sensation massaged my feet and made my steps light and fleet. Everywhere, Aria’s laugh pursued me, and I found my physical endurance flagging. Maggie Stuart was still no runner.

I had to divert Arabella more significantly, and give the others time to escape. Then I could concentrate on winning this fight, because it was a battle to the death and there was no way it would be over until one of us was dead or totally incapacitated.

Hunt watched the battle from the bottom of the rope with trepidation. The unbelievable had happened – Maggie had beaten Char at his own game and destroyed him. He couldn’t expect her to win a second battle so quickly. She was still, after all was said and done, a very young, very inexperienced girl.

A man could regret, Hunt thought, trying to stay calm, being quite so much of a solo act, when he has no one to call on in times like these, except a brother who was likely scores of miles and a lot of bad will away.

Above him, Jason was nearing the top of the rope, where he could help those following him up. It was a dreadful thing for a person to be hanging in the air, totally exposed, above the discharges of energy below. But it was better than taking the chance of still being trapped like butterflies in a bottle when – if – Aria was the victor.

I had reached a wall again – thinking it was at least nice to be in a place where you could never be run into a corner. My only idea right now was to keep Aria as far from Hunt as possible until everyone else was safe. After that – well, that was in the future. When they were gone, I would feel like I could stop and feel around for a way to shape my power into a weapon.

“Afraid of me, little baby?” crooned Aria behind me as ever. “Won’t stand and fight? It doesn’t matter; I’d rather kill you as a hunted beast than as an equal.” Her voice was cutting through the room like Char’s always had, the words reaching me undiminished by distance. The taunts went on. “I think my father’s faith in your abilities was misplaced, girlie. Is there nothing you can do but run?”

I held her tongue, refusing to let Aria draw me into a face-to-face confrontation before my first objective – safety for my friends – was accomplished. Aaron was on the rope now, not looking at me. The guards who had brought them to the centre of the room, including, I supposed, the one who had blackened Jason’s eye, were clustered around the bottom of the rope too, and I understood. Without Char, they too were released. Hunt had a big rescue operation on his hands.

I slipped, foot sliding out from under me on a patch of drying thing-blood and fell heavily to the floor. Throwing an arm out to save me was a bad idea, because I landed on the injured shoulder, feeling the healing gash rip open. The scent of blood was heavy already in the air, and I was amazed she could distinguish the scent of my own among all the other.

Aria was on me in a second, the crimson fire of the ring seething in conflict with the gentle amber of my shield.

“I’d rather,” spat the Dark Man’s daughter, “finish you off with my own hands. But when I get you, and I will, I will scatter the parts of your body from here until the ends of the earth. They’ll never find so much as two fingernails together.” To emphasize, her fingers lengthened until I was nearly mesmerized by the sight of two sets of claws reaching out toward me. The shield around me flickered, but the moment before my enemy was inside, I remembered my desire for self-preservation and pulled myself to my feet, already running.

“Run!” howled Aria, letting me. “Run all you want, little piggy in a poke. You can go as far as you can, and you’ll never be far ahead.”

There was truth in that, I knew, because the farthest I could go was across the room. But – maybe that wasn’t all Aria had meant. I thought back, way back to the beginning of the whole adventure, to the helicopter, to my dreams even – to her own fondest wish before all this had happened – to the dreams of flying.

Gathering a huge glut of power to my torso, around my waist, I pushed. My feet left the ground – and I was airborne. Too much power – too much – I realized right away that flying took more finesse than force and backed off the effort. Like breathing it was, once I knew, once I believed it was really happening. Under me, Aria howled again, wordless, and her body suffused with a brilliant red, like a cloak.

Hunt, below, looked up in astonishment at the sight of Maggie Stuart flying. Whistling a tune that popped into his head at that moment from ‘Dumbo’, he helped another guard up the rope.

No one was less astonished, however, than me. Despite my mortal danger, it felt so right to be in the air. In a way, I’d done it many times before in my dreams, and the actual experience was much like I had thought it would be. How else could I explain the instant understanding of the mechanics of it, how

to hold myself aloft, how to push and where, how to isolate the portion of my power required for the effort from the rest and marshal the rest to my hands in preparation?

Maggie Stuart was ready to turn and fight.

First, however, I wanted to draw Aria as far away from this room as possible to give Hunt and the rest time to get out. I ran down the catalogue of places I'd been in the catacombs, and realized that none was as suitable for a battle as the one we were in – but there were other, smaller spaces that might do.

I rose, faster and faster, out of the well of the room, over the heads of the people watching in confusion and horror from the ledge, and out into the hallway.

The going was no tougher than to walk, and it was far easier to manoeuvre in flight than it would have been, say, on a bicycle. But no cyclist in my experience had ever had to deal with bolts of energy crashing into the nominal shield around her as she pedaled, and I had to concentrate intensely to stop from spinning off into the wall. I could feel the textures of the tunnel in the pit of my stomach and running along the length of my body through the fabric of her shift.

Behind me, following but not gaining, was Arabella, calling my name over and over. “Maggie – Maggie – come back, Maggie. Let’s play, Maggie –”



In the absence of the combatants, it was easier to get everyone moving. Hunt gave orders firmly and loudly, and people obeyed. He estimated there were forty men and women in this room to get to the surface, perhaps twice that again through the rest of the complex. And all were disoriented, having memories of what had been happening and what they had been doing, and there was no more direction from Char to explain what to do now.

Hunt spoke briefly with a man who seemed to have kept his orientation better than most and found out he had been with the Burnt Man’s retinue for years, since he had stumbled onto one of his operations halfway around the world. Since then, he had had no memory of his former life, until the moment Char ceased to exist.

Hunt imagined this was the case for most of the former soldiers, all uprooted from their lives and forced by magic into service. Now that they were all free to go, they needed help to get back into the world above-ground.

Until the fight between Aria and Maggie had come to some kind of conclusion, there was no sense in getting their way. He, last of all, shimmied up the rope, leaving a trail of blood along it with all the blood already there from the clothes of the boys. At the top, he called Jason to him.

“Jason,” he said. “You were never my best or most loyal student. I think we both know that.”

“Mr. Hunt –” began Jason, but Hunt cut him off.

“Mr. Lawson,” he echoed, “I’m trying to cheer you up but you didn’t let me finish. Now I don’t know where I was going with what I started to say, so let me just tell you this instead. You’re going to come with me, and I’m going to show you a way to the surface. You are going to return here after that, and you and your buddies here are going to get all the poor confused people down here – up there. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

Hunt turned to Scott, who had his arms around Peter. “On second thought, Saunders, for you, the first priority is to get this little guy to the surface. After that, stay with him. Scribner here and Lawson can handle the rest.”

“What about you?” said Aaron.

“Don’t be dense, Scribner,” Hunt told him, motioning them to follow. “I’m going after Maggie.”



As I flew, I experimented. I had an idea now, but whether or not it would help me depended on just how versatile this power of mine actually was. I succeeded in turning one hand to smoke and imagined I could do the same to my whole body. I thought Aria hadn’t noticed the attempt. Good, I had another trick up my sleeve.

I chose my battleground by chance, because, although it had been the last place I had been before the ritual, it just hadn’t occurred to me. I had been thinking about big spaces, where a battle royal could take place, but that wasn’t good strategy. I could imagine Hunt lecturing me, even though we had never talked about fighting anything but my own fears and inhibitions, telling me to use my wits and let brawn take care of itself. I couldn’t really count on Aria being too crazy to fight badly, so I must use my only advantage, my sanity, to win.

Then, we were in a corridor which was all too familiar and I knew what I should do. Turning in mid-air, I flew backwards, searching this way for the door I knew was here.

The lock snapped in a whisper of thought, and I was inside before Aria could slow. The other woman careened past the door, dark hair flying and then, with a sound like a cat serenade, she came around the door frame into the room.

A thousand Arabellas regarded a thousand Maggies in front of the round bed. The red ring fell dark and dead, and both of us were suddenly unshielded. It was what I had understood even the first time, when my development was still in its infancy – in this room, you could have your power, but it wouldn’t obey.

“Clever,” hissed Arabella. “Now I’ll leave you here.”

She took a step back, but I was quicker, fleetness born of desperation. I dove between Aria’s legs as the other woman stepped back, one foot in the hallway, one still in the Mirror Room. As soon as my fingers touched the stone of the hall, I felt a surge – the return of my power’s full potential, and I broke down my body into smoke even as Arabella’s fingers grappled for a hold. Aria swung around, trying to see where I had gone.

And as quickly as I had become insubstantial, I solidified, giving Aria a push with far more of my power than was necessary. Aria went flying into the Mirror Room, onto the bed. She righted herself, and came at me and the doorway again, a scream of fury building in her throat.

But I blocked the door with a shield and Arabella crashed against it, ranting. Damon’s face flashed through my head, and especially the look of him in our last meeting, laughing and speaking gently moments before Arabella walked in on us. In time, he might have been a friend, especially if – if –

A blast of energy hit Aria squarely and she fell back, thrown against the bed and then ripped from that to hurl against the far wall. I was screaming, but curiously detached and had to look down at my own hands pouring forth reams of power into the room to believe I was capable of what I was doing. Inside, the mirrors caught and amplified the force of my revenge, and Aria, already unconscious with the first blow, shook and rocked with the battering.

A shaking rattled through me finally, and the power drained out of my fingertips to reposition itself back around my body. My last enemy was dead.

I sank to my knees.

It was no good to be happy, or to say it had to be done. I had still taken a life, and it was hard. I hadn't thought I believed in Old Testament justice, but here was the proof. I lay on my side and breathed hard. It was over.

Hunt joined me moments later, slowing from a run.

He knelt, lifting me up but I pulled away gently. "I'm okay," I said, brushing his hands away. "She didn't touch me."

He nodded, straightened, and went in to the Mirror Room as I got to my feet.



Hunt had run off to look for Maggie without even coming all the way to the elevator. "Down there," he had said, pointing to a long, unlit corridor. "It's not far, and you've got torches." Most of the way from the cavern had been lit, same as always, by the sodium lamps. Not everything changed with the master's death.

"One word of warning," he had called back over his shoulder, "there may be a trap, so get a long way back after you press the button."

Jason had pressed, while the group of them – five of the former guards and the other three from the broken circle - waited at the mouth of the cave. He ran back, but after the whirring of the motors started, he started forwards again, perplexed. "It's going up," he said.



"Get back!" yelled Tamblyn. Officers and the two civilians scrambled for the top of the stairs while the detective braced himself at the bottom. Hunt hadn't warned him about this, but he knew what was coming. It didn't take a real magician to recognize the stink of a foreign being – and he had almost no time to prepare. Trust Char to have left a guardian for his domain in the elevator.

"This thing," he said, bending and pressing the chalk into the floor of the well, "will be attracted to heat, so any of you could be a target. Stay well back, and I'll try to draw it. I should be able to banish it –" and added "I hope," under his breath. The ground here was wet so the chalk made a good impression as he dragged it into a circle and a star, leaving a small section of the arc around the pentagram unfinished. From his head, he got some blood onto his fingers and wiped it into this circle.

"What's he doing now?" whispered Nick.

"Mumbo jumbo," Jan whispered back. "He's trying to keep his witch-boy title."

"God, I hope this works," Tamblyn said to himself, knowing he himself, with his warm bleeding scalp, made a far better piece of bait than the smear he had spared for the pentagram.

The whirring stopped, and the elevator doors slid open.

No one could see what came out – there was nothing to see. But they saw it knock Tamblyn over, and they saw the marks of its claws across his face and chest. The battle lasted a couple of seconds, but in that time Jan had realized her own mortality, and Nick nearly wet his pants. Tamblyn was struggling for something – and she couldn't tell what except that he wasn't having any luck. She made no decision to help, but found herself anyway on the stairs, feet unsteady and eyes swimming. The thing was hot, as well as smelling incredible rancid, and Tamblyn was sweating buckets as the thing attacked again and again. Something small and rectangular flew out of his hands and she grabbed for it – the matchbox.

Not knowing what else to do but remembering what he had done, she lit a match and threw it in

one motion into the pentagram.

It spluttered, then flared up. The detective was released, and dove for the chalk where it lay beside the broken part of the circle. Smoothly, he finished the arc and shouted, "You are dismissed!"

The excess heat in the stairwell vanished, and the match died to a thin stick of charred wood.

Jan sat, her heart racing. Beside her, Tamblyn rolled over, covered now in blood. "Never fails," he said weakly. "This always happens every time I get involved with that man."

"I understand why you—" Jan began, and broke off. Beside them, the elevator doors slid shut and neither of them could move fast enough to stop them.

"Damn," said the detective. He stood shakily and hammered the button, but the elevator was descending.

"All right, people," he said loudly. "Get back and get ready. We've got more visitors on the way."



"Almost done, Mags." Hunt grinned as he left the Mirror Room. Something came flying at me and I caught it by reflex. "It's only right you should have a trophy," he said. I looked down and saw I was holding Arabella's red-stoned ring, the one Aria had said had belonged her mother. The band was a gold-colored metal, but there was something odd about it I couldn't name, beyond the intense crimson of the stone. Aria had used it to amplify her own powers, but it also had properties of its own. If I could get over the strangeness of owning something which had once belonged to my foe, and before that to my intended husband's first wife – I shook my head with the insanity of it all.

Hunt was halfway down the corridor. "Come on, slowpoke," he called. "We have to get out of here, but we've got a job to do first." He set off at a jog and I kept pace, flying a step here and there when I felt tired.

"All those people. . . Mr. Sterling. . ." I remembered.

". . . Are free and on their way to safety," finished Hunt. "The hold Char had over them is gone with him."

They flew around a turn into a dead-end corridor lined with heavy equipment. "Here we are," he said.

I collapsed against a wall, running my hand down the smooth metal as Hunt searched the panels for what he wanted. "I don't get it," I said. "Technology and magic."

"This equipment controls the atmospheric conditions of the complex, not to mention running the pumps and the sewage system," said Hunt without turning. "Char used technology whenever he could to make his work easier. Besides, without a system like this, he could never leave his citadel without condemning it to blackness."

"Oh. That makes sense."

"Maggie." Hunt turned from his consideration of the electronics. "Tell me how you feel."

I sighed. "Okay, I guess. Can I do anything?"

He grinned. "I was hoping you would say that. Here."

He handed me his knife, which was nice for me, a little hint of trust between us.

"You want me to stab you?" I said.

"Not yet. That's probably in the next chapter of our history." I let my eyebrows go up. "No, I need those screws out."

He pointed, and I got to work.

The tingle was there in my fingers, and I laughed. "I'm an idiot," I said, and handed back the knife. With my hands free, I could set a fingertip against each screw, and with a tiny exertion, they came turning out. "Look, ma, no screwdriver," I said.

"I forget," Hunt said, and chuckled. "Do you want me to begin calling you 'your majesty?'"

I stopped, turning to look at him. "Why?"

"That's what I always called Char. He was a king, after all."

"Of what?" I said.

"You saw some of it, Char's kingdom I mean," said Hunt, "and believe me, if you wanted, you could step into his shoes and. . . No, don't let me do this. It's me, not you, always looking for advancement. Char was King, and the King is dead. Long live Jan Stuart's kid from the suburbs."

I laughed and went back to the screws. There was a twinge somewhere deep inside me, a longing. It came on me subtly but was definitely there. "Hunt," I said.

He held up a tiny pair of pliers. "Tools of the trade," he said.

"Hunt," I repeated. "I get the feeling I might want to be a little like Char some day."

He considered me, the little pliers held with a ridiculous delicacy between two of his big fingers. "Do you, now. Where did that thought come from?"

"Somewhere. I don't know. I can't be Maggie Stuart, accountant or word-processor now, can I?"

"Why not?" he said. "There may be lots of word-processors out there with astounding occult powers."

This made me laugh. I took the last screw out of the wall and Hunt lifted the panel away.

"I just wondered how you were feeling, because sometimes after things like what happened, a person can have – some side effects."

I shrugged. "I feel like a new person, my Hunter," I said.

Hunt's eyes widened a little, but he turned his face away. "Maggie, can you sense – what would it be like? - something red, or pink, and pulsing?"

I put my hand out toward the board and let my power roam. "Here," I said after a moment, and tapped a little cover hidden in the wiring. Hunt pried off the cover and revealed a small red light, flashing. Beside it was a switch which he threw and the flashing stopped.

"Thanks."

"Good description," I said. "My faithful Hunter."

"What?"

"Hmm?" I said.

"Nothing," said Hunt, but went back to his fiddling, thoughtful.

"We're almost finished what we came for," he said, a couple of minutes later. He had crossed wires in various places and added a couple of items from his own pocket. "They're right, you know. I can do something decent with pocket lint and pliers. Nice to know you can rely on your own reputation."

"And we're here to do what?" I said.

Hunt turned, the crooked grin back. "This kind of place is full of nasty things we don't want getting out into the world. That's our part. Boom. Blow the whole thing sky-high."



The elevator doors slid open, and this time, a dozen revolvers were trained on the entrance. Tamblyn was still down at the bottom of the well, and Jan was there too, having refused to leave

him in his weakened state. Tamblyn wasn't sure if he could actually handle another confrontation with something that strong so soon again, so he was relieved almost to the point of expressing public emotion when all the elevator contained was a pair of kids. The only thing disturbing about them was that their clothing was splattered with drying blood. None of it, however, appeared to be theirs, which was far more than could be said for Tamblyn himself.

"Put those away," he commanded, and guns were re-holstered. The detective looked closely at the taller of the two, thinking of class photos. "You're Scott Saunders, right? One of the missing kids."

"Yeah," said Scott, staring at the bleeding man.

Under his hand, Peter shifted and stared. What seemed to be taking his attention however wasn't the bloody detective but the patch of sky beyond the grass surrounding the stairwell.

"There's more of us coming," said Scott. Behind him, to attest, the elevator slid shut again and began its descent. "Lots more. They were holding – maybe a hundred people down there."

Anna Gerrin had arrived, but was keeping quiet at the edge of the well. Now she called out, "I'll arrange for some buses," and her face disappeared from sight with an expression that must have been relief that there was something she could do finally. Nick followed her, his arm around Peter's shoulder as he led the two boys up the concrete steps.

"Okay then," said Tamblyn. "Let's be a nice welcoming committee."

"What about Maggie?" said Jan, putting her hand on Scott's shoulder.

He looked her over but couldn't place her. "She should be coming, with Mr. Hunt." No reason to scare her, whoever she was.

"And where is Jason?" Jan asked.

Scott pointed at the elevator shaft, but didn't elaborate. He had no way of knowing the reason for her question.

"Hunt," repeated the detective. "I think I'm going to kill him, very soon." In absence of a Kleenex, he wiped away a stream of blood from his nose with the sleeve of his trench coat.

Jan, listening, couldn't tell if he was joking or not.



Jason and Aaron met us at the back door. The elevator was on its way up with the last group of refugees.

"Scott's at the top getting them out to the road," said Jason.

"Everyone's out?" said Hunt.

"We're the last, unless anyone's been hiding from us." Aaron's face was paler than usual under his fair hair. There was blood again on the corner of his glasses, to add to the blood staining his clothing.

"We can't help them now," said Hunt. "Five minutes."

"Until what?" said Jason. The elevator paused at the top and he pressed the call button.

"Boom," I said.

"The end," said Hunt checking his watch. "Lots of time."

And the elevator sat at the top of its ascent.

"What are they waiting for? Christmas?" said Aaron.

Beside me, I felt Hunt shudder. I looked up at his face but it was inscrutable.

Finally the elevator started down.

"About time," said Jason under his breath.

“Less than five minutes,” said Hunt. “Not much leeway.”

The doors slid open and there was a man standing in the elevator.

I stifled a gasp.

His face was bloodied, a stream still running from his nose. He stood hunched as if in terrible pain. With an exhalation that was almost a growl, he stepped forward awkwardly. His hands, the fingers curled into claws, reached for Hunt.

Hunt was agitated. I had gotten so used to his cool dismissal of all obstacles that I was shaken. And there was also the matter of the upcoming explosion.

“Three and a half minutes,” said Hunt significantly.

Surprisingly, his attacker relented. “Upstairs then,” he said through clenched teeth, the blood bubbling on his lip. The man shuffled backwards into the cab, threatening to fall over.

The others followed Hunt in. He pressed the button to close the doors and sent the elevator on its way. I watched him anxiously.

“We’ll make it,” he said to no one in particular, staring at the ceiling above his head. “The mines should be dead now too, with Char gone.”

I looked down, breathing far too hard, the power rushing into my fingers. It seemed to be an automatic defensiveness. Had my adversary felt the same tingle every time he was confronted with danger? Confronted by me? Had he mastered the control of his power? I thought with a vague regret, that I would never know.

A hand touched my shoulder. “When the doors open,” said Hunt to the group, “run.”

I looked around at my companions, at Jason, at Aaron – finally friends. Tragedies are funny, I thought. Maybe they’re just meant to help people know one another better. A shared experience like theirs: well, the good that had come out of it was meeting Aaron and Jason and Scott, and even Hunt, being forced out of my insides, taken away from my safety where I could sulk and ponder life’s unfairnesses. Even more important than discovering my powers and my “specialness”, better than flying even, I had friends to share myself with.

The hand on my shoulder squeezed. “It’s not over yet,” said Hunt, and I heard something in his tone that made me cold.

The doors slid open on the wet concrete room and the stairs leading up. Sunlight poured richly in sheets, glistening in the puddles that dotted the landing.

“It’s been raining,” I said, amazed. The sun. How long had it been since I’d seen the sun?

Jason and Aaron were already on the stairs. “Maggie,” barked Hunt. He had his arms around the other man, supporting him and helping him out. “The time. . .”

I nodded and raced after the boys. The adventure starts with a rainy day and ends with another, I thought.

Outside, the stairs ended above a concrete well in a grassy field. Behind me, toward the sun, was the edge of the high, jagged cliff above the quarry. In the distance ahead where the storm clouds were still rolling the day into darkness, Jason and Aaron were off and running toward the highway where the group of other escapees had gathered, scattering sticks which had been placed in a weaving pattern across the field. I saw Scott and Peter waving frantically. Someone had put blankets around their shoulders. They looked like the ones which were usually in the truck of my mother’s car.

In touch with everything and everyone around me, I felt growing panic. It rose from my head and my stomach, my whole body seeming to conspire against my sanity. Memories of Char, of Damon, of Aria – I clutched the ring on my finger closer to my chest.

Hunt emerged with the man on his arm and together the three of us ran for the road.

There was a sound like distant thunder and the ground shook beneath us.

“Time!” Hunt shouted again into a rising wind.

I was knocked to the ground as the entire escarpment began to vibrate. Behind us, the well caved in on itself. A series of muffled reports echoed, explosions far beneath us. I shuffled around to look back to the edge of the cliff – just in time to see an enormous fireball rise and fade into the sky. My terror crested, bringing with it what I only vaguely distinguished as a release of energy of my own.

With the explosion past, my panic dissipated. I turned to look for Hunt, and froze in shock.

As aftershocks rocked the bluff, a red light flashed across my leg and a moment later again. I stood shakily and brushed myself off, noticing for the first time the police cars and officers mingled in with the group from the Burnt Man’s citadel. But no one was standing. Every single person on the bluff was flat on the ground, bowled over. And everywhere, in the air itself, was my own signature, an echo of power. I flexed a hand, and fell to my knees on the ground.

It was a long collection of minutes full of grief and remorse before there was movement on the bluff. I was crying, but otherwise still. Over the cliff edge, smoke rose, billows of black and red. The drizzle on my face failed to cool me. Everything was heat and blurs, bodies as colored patches of fuzz. It didn’t matter I could feel heartbeats and breath all around me, no sign I had done any permanent damage.

Hunt, resilient as always, was up nearly first, and put an arm over my shoulder, careful not to touch the clotting blood on the torn shoulder. I shook, crying, and threw my arms around him. He let me sob until the tears had run their course. I looked up at him, eyes red and stained. “Do you see what I did?”

“No harm done,” he said. “No harm done.”

“That’s a crock,” I said, low, my voice cracking. “Me. My fear. I projected it. I could have killed all of them. I’m dangerous.”

Hunt fixed me steadily. “Maggie. It was their fear. You channelled it, that’s all.”

“Does that make it any better?” I wailed. “I’m a monster, Hunt. Look what I can do, without even trying.”

“No.” He held me closer. “Relax. This is an extreme situation. Remember that. Think of what you’ve just been through. Think about it. Now, smile a bit and breathe. We’re out of Char’s grasp. We’re all safe.”

I managed a slow, faint smile. Not even I believed it was real.

“Will you be okay for a bit? I have to see to our friend there.” The man from the elevator was stirring.

I nodded. All over the bluff, people were standing and brushing themselves off. Maybe they would imagine they had been knocked over by the blast, nothing more.

This would be my vow, then. The power would be stored, broken up and sent to all my extremities. I would not touch it. It would be there, the legacy of this time here, but only in another extreme circumstance, as dire as Char’s plans, would I allow it out. Control was the lesson after all.

This decided, I looked around.

The other survivors of the Burnt Man’s final ritual were in a group over on a quiet stretch of grass away from the police cars. Aaron, Jason, standing. Scott sitting on the ground, cradling Peter. And then, closer to the cars, the red and white lights streaking through the familiar dark blond hair – my heart came to an abrupt halt in my chest.

Hunt, nearby, helped the man beside him to his feet.

I turned my back on him and ran toward my mother.

Hunt took the other man's hands and put them on his shoulders. "John," he said, "before you say anything. . ."

"No, Hunt," said Tamblyn. "You've had enough to say. Always you're the one who speaks first and gets the last word. This time, you shut up."

Hunt closed his mouth and felt the other man's weight shift more firmly onto his shoulders.

Tamblyn laughed sourly. "This is always the way it ends up, isn't it? Me torn to pieces and using you as a crutch again. It was almost too much for me, Hunt. Almost. It's time for me to get out of this game. I'm tired. I feel old. You make me feel old."

Tamblyn pushed himself off Hunt. "I came to finish things with you."

"To duke it out?" said Hunt.

"Yeah, I guess that's what I hoped." Tamblyn moved away, looking at the ruined stairwell. "That little girl —"

"I wouldn't have gotten out if not for that little girl." Hunt didn't approach the other man, just watched the lights from the police cars sweep across his brother's back. "None of us would have. Char was berserk."

"No more games?"

"Just a desperate one. He was playing for all or nothing. I guess I thought it was like the old days, just power-jockeying. He would have crushed me."

Tamblyn paused and turned. "And Char?"

Hunt shook his head. "Defeated. Gone. And that little girl has most of what he lost. He was planning a transfer ceremony all along."

Tamblyn's eyes flew wide. "What? Holy mother. . ." Over Hunt's shoulder he could see Maggie running toward Jan Stuart's outstretched arms. "He was going to. . ." but dropped off, staring.

"Marry her," Hunt finished. "In the old occult fashion. A melding of powers and minds. With him she would have had her own powers plus his to draw on —"

"And they both would have lived nearly forever."

"Near enough to make no difference. Neither of us would have been around to see the end of it."

"You explained the stakes to her?"

"No," said Hunt. "It's me, playing my own game. I don't know — I don't know if I did the right thing. What I assumed was if she was ignorant of Char's motives right to the last, she would have more anger to fight with, more passion, more spontaneity. Because he was trying to take those things away from her, scare her into submission. When Char effected the meld, I thought she should have the chance to meet him as an equal, instead of as a frightened little girl. That was the chance I was taking, that she could be strong enough to stay herself and not be swallowed and corrupted by him."

"So what happened after the transfer?" Tamblyn's eyes narrowed with concern. "Will she be all right without him?"

Hunt laughed dryly, and spoke with an amazed tone: "Something I never dreamed of happened."

"Well?" Tamblyn watched Hunt's face; something he had seldom seen his brother betray had appeared there. He was impressed, and making no effort to hide the fact.

"There was no transfer," said Hunt in almost religious awe. "She used the pentagram against him, sucked him dry, and blasted him with his own power when he was helpless."

Tamblyn was speechless. "Holy mother is right," said Hunt.

He turned toward the group of figures at the edge of the highway. "Coming?" he said and held out

his hand.

“Yes,” said Tamblyn, avoiding the hand purposefully. “Don’t, Hunt. You haven’t changed that much.”

Hunt followed him.



“Maggie!” squealed Jan.

I threw my into my mother’s arms. “My god, my god, I was so worried.” Jan Stuart lowered her head into her daughter’s dark hair. “I had these butter tarts in my car – they’ve been. . .” and she laughed and I laughed with her, joyfully. Separately, we each had already decided to never let the other know the depth of our torments over the last days – Jan’s terror locked in the closet in her burning house, my belief that my mother was dead. In a single hug, everything that had been unsure and unsettled was washed away.

Behind Jan, Nick cleared his throat. “Oh –” she said, holding me back at arm’s length. “Maggie, I want you to meet your father, Nikolas Marino.” She looked at Nick a moment, and seemed to forgive all his involvement in the beginning of their ordeal. “He came to help me look for you.”

Shyly, I stepped toward him. I knew him. The dark hair and eyes, the reason for my own slightly Mediterranean looks. The smile, warm and tentative. He held out his arms awkwardly, more apologetic than inviting. “I don’t care if you can’t stay,” I said softly. “I’m just happy you’re here now.”

Nick took me into a bear hug embrace, smiling, his eyes closed. Jan joined them, and for that moment, it felt to me like I was part of a real family for the first time in my life.

I felt a finger touch my shoulder and broke the embrace. “Jason,” I said, noting the concern in his eyes.

I excused myself, kissing Jan on the cheek, and followed him to the small group gathered near the edge of the confusion that had once made up my odd wedding party. Scott was crouched on the ground, Peter hunched in his arms.

“Poor kid’s terrified,” said Aaron. “I don’t think he’s ever been outside before.”

I knelt and reached out. my resolve not to use my power was gone already, perhaps. I had been afraid before for so long to touch someone’s mind; in the catacombs, the Burnt Man had always been waiting for me, trying to turn any form of empathy against me. Here in the open, Char’s influence gone, I could be confident and sure.

*This is me*, I realized. *How can I not use what is so natural to me?* The terror of blasting the people on the bluff unconscious was fading. How could I reject herself, to pretend I was something I wasn’t?

I couldn’t. And I could do good with what I had been given.

The power flowed through me like a warm drink sending tingles through all my nerves. Carefully, I made contact with Peter’s mind and caressed it, moving deeper layer by layer on every pass. Finally I centered on the knots of fear and massaged them like sore muscles until I felt him relax and drop into sleep. Then, as I had tried and failed with Mr. Sterling, I found the root causes of his terror, and soaked them away. *Here, little one*, I told him deep inside, *meet the sky*.

I pulled out and looked around.

“That scares the hell out of me,” said Aaron.

Jason laughed. “Maggie just can’t help it, can you, Mags?” He put his arm around my shoulders

and helped me to my feet. If he wasn't going to be scared of my, there was no reason to be scared of myself.

"Thanks," said Scott, cradling the little boy. "Will he be all right?"

"I don't know," I said, letting Jason's touch support me. "But I'll be there any time any of you need me."

"Me too," said Jason. "I don't have Maggie's – whatever, but if that guy Char was trying to destroy us – well, he showed me something too. I guess I came out of this way ahead on all counts. It's something to be strong; it's another not to be afraid of it." Echoing again my own thoughts.

"I'm here for you guys too," said Aaron. "Ditto what Jay said. That Char guy – well, let's just say he gave me a lot to think about. But anything I can do, anytime, you can count on me." He grimaced, then gave me a quick hug. "Just don't call after ten, okay? My parents will kill me," he added, looking right at me. A fairly mischievous smile flickered over his face and I grinned.

"You've got blood on your glasses," I said solemnly.

"Damn, not again," he said taking on my serious tone. "Can't I go anywhere with you people without getting bloody?" He took them off and scratched the splatter off the corner of the lens. Considering the black blood staining all the boys' clothing, the glasses were pretty irrelevant.

Scott lifted Peter in his arms and stood. "Don't forget me, huh? I don't want these guys making promises without me getting in on it. Any time, all of you. Friends."

"Yeah," said Jason. There was an awkward moment of silence, and then he spoke again. "I guess we should have a club or something," he said. We were all quiet for an instant, before the solemnity was too much and we all started to laugh.

"Uh oh," said Aaron, "Here comes the law."

Three officers were approaching. In the distance, the wail of an ambulance siren rose over the sound of the wind.

"Hold them off, will you," I said. "I've got to talk to Mr. Hunt." I could see him in the thick of the crowd with the other man, scanning the faces and finally locating me. He began walking in my direction.

Jason nodded and the three boys started toward the police while I edged away to get to Hunt.

He met me halfway. Around us, the confusion had hardly abated but the panic had settled at least. "I'd like to introduce you to my brother. John Tamblyn, Maggie Stuart. Maggie, John," he said. "Also a police detective."

"Might come in handy," I said absently. "You all right?" I asked Tamblyn.

"I've been worse," he replied. He was looking at me strangely, and I felt his – his what? I was reluctant to think of it as awe, but that's the only word I could put to the feeling. "It's not nearly as bad as it looks."

"What about you?" I turned to Hunt, and reached out for his calloused palm. The puncture in the centre was deep and black with drying blood. I had a vague memory from sometime during the ritual of Hunt holding aloft something shiny while his hand dripped blood. With concealed surprise, I realized this had been something Char had witnessed, not me at all.

"I needed to call in the cavalry," he said, to explain. "Thanks for coming, bro."

"You're not going to return my ring," Tamblyn spoke softly, resigned. His brother had stolen something else for good.

Hunt ignored the detective. "What's up?" he said to me. "You seem to be trying to avoid saying what's on your mind."

"Away," I said. Indicating Tamblyn, I asked, "he'll let us wander away for a moment?"

Hunt looked at the other man for approval. Tamblyn gave him a tacit nod. “Okay.” Together we walked back toward the edge of the escarpment.

I took a couple of deep breaths and exhaled before speaking. “I don’t know – I don’t feel this is wrapped up. Is he really gone?”

Hunt considered. “I think so, yes.”

“And Arabella, and Damon. The whole family.”

“Yes.”

“And at what a cost,” I said. We came to the edge.

Below, much of the quarry had fallen into the pit in the centre of it. A nearby lake had burst its boundaries and partly disappeared into the ground. Water was slowly seeping to the middle of the park, filling in the hole. The gondola building, Char’s old front door, listed in on itself, its machinery jumbled and smashed, its foundations sagging.

“Some things are better forgotten,” said Hunt quietly.

I turned to him, sensing the challenge in his tone. “I’m getting shrewd,” I said. “What are you thinking?”

“It would probably wipe you out,” he said. “You’d have to live as a normal girl again. It would take every ounce of power you have.”

The pit of my stomach rolled. “To do what?”

His mouth twisted. “To let all of them –” and he indicated the group clustered around the police cars and the arriving ambulances – “go back to their normal lives. No therapy, no bad dreams, no wondering if Char is coming back to get them. No memories of blood and torture, no more of underground corridors and deadly games. There were some five year-olds in the school when you and Jason were taken, you know. They witnessed a –” (a pause for effect; I was beginning to notice the tricks of speech Hunt used) “– blood ritual. Lots of blood.”

I stiffened, waited.

“How much of an altruist are you, Maggie May?”

The question hung between us. I felt my eyes misting. No, I would not cry in front of him. Not after all that had gone before. I could be as strong and as expedient as he was; I’d proved that. How much of an altruist was I? How much would I give to take away Peter’s pain and fear, to make sure Scott would never know he’d been a several times witness to violent death, to take away Jason’s and Aaron’s memories? Too many turnarounds. Too much emotion. Overloading.

“Jason and Scott, and Aaron –”

”Would forget they’d ever had anything to do with you. No memory of what they’d been through with you, or what you’d done for them – promises they’d made. . .” Hunt focused his eyes on me, as if daring me to ask how he’d known about our vows of friendship.

I, weary, couldn’t find any ire to rise to what might or might not be intentional baiting. I considered, running it over in my mind, and was confronted at once by the only answer. If Hunt was offering me a way to make all this to never have happened, I had to take it. My specialness would have to come from something else, not a power beyond my previous belief. I could be a normal girl. I had been before. How hard would it be to go back?

And even as I decided, I knew it would be the hardest thing I’d ever done in her life. Really, on the scale I was talking, it would be the only hard thing I’d ever done.

“I have to,” I said. “I couldn’t live with myself, knowing I could have done something and didn’t.” I lowered my head. “And you?” I said. “What about you? Will you remember?”

“I have a lot of resistance to magic,” he said. “It might take a while, but I’ll remember. You won’t carry your burden alone. Jason, too. We know what kind of potential he has. Something might spark his memory eventually. When he’s grown up enough to handle it.”

“Will I see you again?” I said.

“When you least expect,” he said, almost fondly. “I hate to say it – I hate to say anything that sounds like a thank you – but you’ve done a lot for me, Marguerite Stuart, and I am in your debt.”

I inclined my head, heading off another onset of tears. “Let’s get on with it then.”

“We’ll wait until they go,” said Hunt, indicating the crowd.

“But they’ll come –”

Hunt put his hand gently on my wrist. “First things first, Mags. Remember? Relax.” I took a deep breath, the familiar nickname comforting me, no matter how remotely. “Make them forget we’re here.”

I felt the tingle of power and directed it as he explained, exhaling it like a sigh and watching the force of it settle over the distant people like a blanket of gauze.

A voice reached me faintly, Jason’s: “Look, a rainbow!”

I looked, but to me it seemed to be already dissolving into particles of sunlight.



We sat together on a flat stone at the top of the cliff that had baked dry in the heat of the end of the day. Now, the sun boiled red on the horizon, spreading flat as it sank down. The storm had moved further away and the clouds it had left behind were long and low, full of colour as the sky dimmed.

“What a beautiful sunset,” I said quietly and Hunt nodded.

It had taken more than two hours for everyone to depart. Finally, there was one lone car – Tamblyn’s maroon sedan – and a single figure walking toward us.

When it came closer, Hunt said, “Maggie, you remember my brother John.”

“Honoured,” said Tamblyn. “Our first meeting was a bit truncated.”

I nodded.

“Don’t worry,” said Tamblyn. “I have most of my brother’s good traits and none of his bad.”

“He’s picked up a few of his own though,” said Hunt.

“Granted,” said Tamblyn. The tension I had noted in him before was mostly gone. The brothers must have made some kind of peace.

Hunt pursed his lips. Tamblyn, lowering his head and smiling into my eyes, said, “Let’s get this over with.” He rolled up his left sleeve and I saw the fresh, ragged pentagram carved into his forearm over a huge series of older scars.

“Nothing big is accomplished without blood, Maggie,” Hunt said quietly. “Not for Char, not for us.”

“This time at least, I’m a willing victim,” said Tamblyn and seated himself cross-legged at the centre of the flat stone beside me.

“This place has been used before,” said Hunt, frowning as he dropped to his knees to feel the stone.

“Victim?” I said.

“No blood, no deep magic,” said Hunt. “I taught you that. This is a blood ritual. John has the necessary element we’re missing to make it happen.”

I sighed. It was a low growling sound, and as it escaped my throat, it seemed to me that my heart

was breaking.

“Maggie,” said Hunt quietly. John Tamblyn removed his shirt, his slender chest only lightly brushed with hair between his collar bone and the flat of his stomach. There was blood already, and old bruises and scars.

“I know,” he said. “I have been badly used in the past, mostly by this joker. I never thought I would offer to put myself through this again.”

I reached my hand out, stopping myself before my hand touched his skin. My eyebrows twisted. It was too much. There was a feeling rising in me that I could only call sorrow, but that didn't begin to cover it. What had I entered when Char had snatched me? Something had been taken, or given, and I all unwary had been altered.

Tamblyn took my hand gently with one of his, a white scar crossing it, a flat stroke from a cruel brush. “Maggie, you have to be the one to cut me. Can you do it?”

Hunt's arm slid around my shoulder.

“It's all right, Hunt,” I said, looking at Tamblyn's bare chest, the marks of ritual like tattoos. “I understand what I have to do, and I think I even agree. I'm a willing victim too.”

I took the knife he offered and knelt beside Tamblyn on the rock. Hunt traced a pattern with his finger, and I felt power welling between them. All that was left to do was to watch the line of red grow on Tamblyn's side in the wake of the blade, and to let the blood fall to the stone, caught in the magic forming in my hands. The work came easily to me, and the sorrow and regret was as much a shaper of my will as the power that came readily to my fingers. There was so much to think of, so many loose ends to patch.

I released the magic, hearing Hunt saying, “I can't believe how smooth she is with it,” even though I knew that Tamblyn had already lost consciousness. In its way, what I sent through the darkening sky toward Westbrook was nearly as beautiful as the sunset that had preceded it, but no sunset had ever laid waste to my deepest feelings as this did. I felt the power pour out of me until there was a tug, then a wrenching, and all that I had taken from Char, and all he had stirred from the first moment he tampered with my dreams was gone. My mind closed in on itself, shrinking like a too-tight second skin. I cried out, having forgotten completely life before power. Hunt caught her as me fell and laid me beside his brother.

We stayed most of the night, me conscious but sick to my heart, staring with my old eyes into the darkness. Tamblyn came blearily back to himself, but Hunt told him to sleep.

By the cool, early summer dawn, I was exhausted and tight, curled in on myself. Hunt and Tamblyn carried me to the car and put me in the back seat. Hunt stayed there with me, pillowing my head on his lap. Tamblyn drove into Westbrook, and at last into the subdivision.

“She'll never be able to look at any of this without remembering,” said Tamblyn quietly after they had taken me up the ladder and lain me in my own bed. The house, restored as before the fire, had echoes for both of them, as it would for me. In the bedroom across the hall, Janice slept on undisturbed.

I could barely hear them as they whispered together, thinking I was already asleep.

“Soon,” said Hunt. Slipping over them both was the last resonance of my magic. In a short time, they too would have fallen into its forgetfulness. “That was an incredible thing she did. She alone will have this burden.”

“You will remember?” Tamblyn said. “You told her she wouldn't be alone.”

“It will take a long time. Years maybe. This was power beyond my belief.” He paused. “For a while, John. For a while I can pretend I've been saved. I wish I could tell her how much that means. For a while, I can pretend, even if it's only an illusion.”

“And what about her?”

“I don’t know.” Hunt was silent, then turned back to the door. “But I’ll be back.”