

Chapter Three



I was escorted through the doors into his world after his departure, full of the memories of the flap of his cape and the blackness of his impenetrable eyes. They took me further in, deeper underground. It was a labyrinth, I realized, of rough stone corridors lit by caged sodium lights. It was quickly impossible to get a sense of in what direction the entrance lay, or how much further we had moved underground.

And the feeling lingered in me that I had somehow changed, even more since waking. Reaching out in the way I had to Jason, I could feel the flicker of human lives in other passages, all with those same seething, restrained emotions I had felt in Sterling and the other guards. There was such a difference between them and the first contact I'd had with Jason: he was alive and full of colours and shades; touching them was like waving her hand over a pail of liquid nitrogen. And again, such a difference between them and my second contact with him, when he became a gaping black hole, capable of swallowing me up.

The new dress of white wool whished softly against the floor, the slippers nearly silent. It was a quiet world I had entered, and, into this, the encroachments of information brought by this new sense were like pebbles in a pool. I stretched, and reached further.

Somewhere, far away, I imagined, he was sitting and listening to me as I strained to sense him. He must have these abilities too, or something like them. How else could I explain the voice in my head? Was everyone here able to sense emotion, to project their thoughts? *Or was it just me, and him?*

We arrived at last at a place where a little side tunnel arced out to the right, and then back to the main passage, leaving a little door-less room. This was our destination. The pillar left by the diversion had been carved down into a recessed shelf on the side away from the main tunnel and it was onto this my guards lifted me. There was a depression in the shelf containing a sheet of foam rubber and a pillow. Attached to the wall above these was a fat, iron chain leading from a thick staple pressed into the stone. At each end of the chain were shackles which they locked around my wrists with a key. Three identical alcoves faced me across the narrow passage.

And after they fastened me in and disappeared back into the main tunnel, their footsteps receding until they too were gone, I realized that things had again changed.

The new sense, the way I could reach outside myself and somehow gather to herself the emotions of others, was gone. As if cotton had been shoved into my ears, or gauze placed over my eyes, I could now feel where the new ability resided in my brain, but its powers were dead. Probing, ultimately frustrated, I cursed myself for being so compliant. The shackles had done it, I was certain. Until they were placed around my wrists, I had a weapon, and now I was powerless. Couldn't I have broken away and run, while I still had that extra awareness? Jason had managed to get away. Wouldn't I have had a significant advantage even over him in a bid to escape? With a

little effort, I could have sensed where my pursuers were before I even saw them and avoided them completely.

But then again, there was him. The Burnt Man, the Dark Man. Somewhere he was sitting in wait, maybe even now watching me.

So, preoccupied with thoughts of Jason, and why he had been able to run while I remained passively attending my fate, and of my dark host, I lay down with the shackles heavy on my wrists, and let time go slowly by.



Footsteps. I tensed: people approaching. The tap of heels passed behind me, muffled through the rock, and disappeared into silence further away. I drifted.

It could have been moments, or hours later when I was shaken from drowsiness. A familiar voice, distorted by unfamiliar harshness, was addressing me.

“Wake up, girl,” it was saying.

I opened my eyes. Standing in front of me at the base of my rocky prison was Mr. Sterling, my French teacher, still dressed in that provocative uniform, eyes as blank as a fish’s.

Mr. Sterling’s hand was at my shoulder, prodding. His mouth twisted, giving a tortured look to his normally pleasant round face.

“Yes.. .?” I prompted. That special place in my head throbbed, hungry for sustenance. It was amazing how I missed that feeling, the arrow I had pointed only a couple of times. I remembered the uncomfortable claustrophobia of Mr. Sterling’s head, with something like longing.

“Yes?” I repeated, then quietly as an inspiration overtook me, “It’s okay. I’ll help you if I can. And I will, I will be able to.” I felt giddy; in this alien place, Mr. Sterling’s presence was somehow comforting. Somewhere, somehow, I had to be able to find an ally. Would it be this man?

“You’re taking me to him,” I said. *To him, the Burnt Man.* I searched his face, waiting for a confirmation. If not an ally, then at least some sort of reinforcement, someone else to prove that yes, there was a world I had come from, her own world.

But Mr. Sterling said nothing. The face continued to struggle as if whatever was to be said was both sour and enormous, choking him deep in his throat.

I pursed my lips, my forehead constricting. Should I push him now? Here was an adult, helplessly in thrall, and at the same time with my entire life in his hands. I began to understand the hopelessness of my situation. My only asset had been that way I could suddenly sense people differently, and it was gone. Maybe it would never return.

“Hold out your hands,” said Mr. Sterling. Obediently, I swung my legs over the side of the shelf to bring myself to a sitting position and complied. Mr. Sterling didn’t sound hypnotized. He wasn’t speaking in a monotone, like he’d been programmed. But his eyes were hard and empty, like the hollowness I had sensed inside him before. Something vital was missing.

He lifted the shackles off my wrists and I realized for the first time how heavy the metal cuffs had been, how much they had weighed my hands down. Also, with the release from the chains, some energy kindled in my skull.

It was back. My mind had once more become another organ of sense, capable of reaching out in an almost physical way.

I grazed Mr. Sterling with my thoughts and felt a coldness that repelled me.

I had been right, then. Somehow the shackles themselves could block me from my power. With the shackles on, I was as I had always been before coming here, normal and human – but how

hard it was to return to it! The tingle, the race like a shiver through my veins, now I craved it like nothing I had known in my life. It was a promise of something unnameable, and enormously important.

I set the shackles aside and he gave me his shoulder to help me down from the alcove. As my feet touched the floor, my legs buckled under me. Mr. Sterling caught my arm and put his hand on my waist to steady me.

“Thanks,” I told him. “I was stiffer than I thought.”

He didn’t reply, or give any indication he had heard.

Instead, he pulled a revolver out of his shoulder holster while I grimly admired his one-handed dexterity. He waved the gun, indicating the way they would go, and I walked awkwardly ahead of him on prickling legs.

It was a long way to wherever they were headed, through the twisting corridors, and my pace flagged every so often. My slowness was rewarded with prods from the gun. *I’m too exhausted to understand I’m terrified*, I told herself, stumbling at my teacher’s side. Small mercies. How did he find his way, with no landmarks, just identical stone passageways? I would have had a heck of a time getting back to my alcove if I was abandoned, much less finding the way out. Finally, Mr. Sterling indicated we were turning, at a place where many tunnels converged like a huge underground crossroads, into a dead-end corridor wider than any I had seen that far.

This new passageway was also cut through stone, but was much higher than any we had passed or traveled previously. It was smoother as well, the stone finely polished. The light here was not yellow but clear and white, nearly blue, and I could see no source for it. At the end of the hall, probably still a hundred meters away, were two enormous doors which seemed to be made of bronze.

We traversed the distance slowly. I felt an electricity in the air which had been absent before. Was it my new-found senses tingling, like I was Spiderman receiving a warning of danger? *Why look for complicated reasons?* I asked herself. *You’re about to meet him again.* Of that much, I was dead certain.

Halfway to the doors. Mr. Sterling drew his breath sharply. I turned my head to look at him, but whatever had caused the gasp had gone and his face was impassive. Thirty meters. I stared at the door as I walked, willing myself to see through it for proof he was really waiting beyond.

Ten meters, and Mr. Sterling cried out and sank to his knees. I stopped and reached out to grab his shoulder in dismay. He took his head in his hands and began shaking violently. I exhaled and took a deep breath. In less time than it took to make the conscious decision, I had reached out with my mental touch to comfort him.

Pain flared back at me. It raced, burning, up my invisible tendril-arms into my head. I stumbled to the nearest wall trying to maintain my balance. The hurt swam around my eyes, blackening my vision. Vainly attempting to stop the agony of the assault, I rubbed her knuckles on the wall, hoping that physical pain would distract me from that mental fire.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the pain was gone. Through teary eyes, I saw the great doors were swinging open.

The room beyond, what I could see of it, was huge and deeply circular. It was lit softly and fully, again with no clear source for the illumination. It was at least a hundred meters in diameter and high-ceilinged like a cathedral. That was in fact the first idea that suggested itself to me; that I was looking into some kind of sanctuary, or a medieval throne room or Great Hall perhaps, for at the center of the room was a black stone dais and on that stark platform were four regal, high-backed chairs.

I turned back to Mr. Sterling, now a couple of paces behind me and leaning heavily on one

wall. He was recovering as well and bracing himself to regain his feet. Unfortunately, the first bit of control that had returned to him was whatever had convinced him it was necessary to train a gun on me at all times. His voice shook, but his hand was steady. "Go on," he commanded, indicating the direction with the barrel of the pistol.

"I can't leave you," I blurted, surprising myself with my vehemence. I reached out to him, this time physically, but he took no notice as if again he hadn't heard.

A male voice, pitched deeply but ironically light in tone, rang out. It filled the huge room in front of me like the peel of a golden church bell. "Leave him," it said. "And if you touch his mind again, be prepared to suffer the consequences. He is mine."

I turned my back on Mr. Sterling to look toward the voice. It was *him*.

The Devil had appeared on the dais. It was, indeed, my earlier greeter. He was just as I recalled, meticulously dressed and tall, elegantly but sharply handsome. Before I knew what I was doing, I had crossed half the distance between the double doors and him.

I stopped. Then, reaching out just a little, I could feel the signal he was sending to me, more subtle than I would have noticed without looking for it. Some kind of tacit command, an invisible thread, pulled me toward him. When I was aware, it was easy to resist. I looked up at him and his dark eyes seemed to smile back, pleased. I was still unnerved by what I'd noticed before, what made his eyes seem so strange: that the irises were nearly the same color as the pupils. Still, smiling, he wasn't nearly as frightening.

Good, he said in my mind, just as he had before. Then, aloud, he added, "Thank you for coming to visit me."

"It would have been you or someone else," I said, automatically trying to turn it into a joke to match his own ironic tone. "I needed a holiday from school."

He looked at me strangely. "You do please me very much," he said slowly. Now there was respect, even mild surprise. I seemed to have scored a point, although I had no idea how.

The events of the crazy day, at school, Mr. Hunt, the assembly, blood on her neck – everything whirled in her mind.

I had the feeling we were alone now, the double doors shut firmly behind me. But I could hardly afford to take my eyes off him for a moment to check. There was something big at stake here, I was sure. What it was, though?

"I seem to be in demand," I said, not sure why, thinking perhaps of Mr. Hunt's insistence that he drive me home. The back of my neck itched. Hunt? Was that who he thought I was talking about? I remembered the glass of water, the chalk dust. *Hunt*. It was impossible.

He smiled kindly at me and shook his head. An answer to my unspoken question, or just a bit of amusement at my expense? "Ah, Marguerite. We are two of a kind, aren't we?" He raised his arms from his sides to the horizontal before him and clenched his fists. The long black cape began to billow around him as if it were made of thick cobweb, nothing more substantial. I didn't dare move. What if the fists opened and became an invitation? How would I respond? What was the correct answer?

I had managed to return the opening volley, but mostly because he had misinterpreted my first remark, leading me to my uncomfortable suspicions. But I needed other answers even more. There were so many questions: what happened to Jason, to Mr. Sterling, and most of all, what was happening to me?

Had Jason managed to escape? I hoped so, but in truth, I doubted it. Then a quiet panic struck me, and I pushed the thought of Jason violently out of my mind, feeling suddenly that even thinking about him might endanger him. I pronounced the question as it occurred to me, startling even myself – as Lois Lane said to Superman, "Can you read my mind?"

He looked intently at me, like he'd consumed something sour and was trying to put a good face on it. He considered the question at some length, appearing relaxed, but I felt the weight of the hesitation. The answer was apparent.

I jumped in before he could speak. "You can't," I said, "But you can stop me from helping other people." Stalemate. Perhaps 'helping' was an overstatement. What could I have done for Mr. Sterling? Still, this meant he might know as little about my abilities, whatever they might be, as I did myself. Why now? Why had I suddenly started to be able to do these things? Hunt again? Him, the Burnt Man?

Did it just happen on its own? Could I have been just sitting in class, and suddenly found myself able to sense the feelings of everyone around me? I shivered at the thought of how overwhelmed and frightened I would have been.

Something else clicked, and I thought she understood what had happened in front of the double doors. Mr. Sterling had been attacked to test my response. The only way for him to get a handle on what I was capable of was by observation. I nodded, pleased. This could be a fine piece of information if – if for one thing, it was right, and for another, I had the nerve to use it. Round two to me as well, I thought, and my realization or growing confidence at least must have registered in my eyes.

The Burnt Man smiled with the brittleness of charred paper, but this time there was no pleasure. *Don't Worry*, he said, this time speaking directly into my mind. *I Am Not Finished. By The Time I Am, You Will Wish You Had Never Begun To Play.* "Now, why don't we see what kind of dream you can dream for me, shall we?" he continued aloud. "Too bad you are the sporting type, Marguerite. I would have simply offered you all of this. . ." His hand swept out to include the room and one high black throne. The emptiness around them seemed to shimmer with possibilities.

"Take her," he commanded. I turned to find I had been wrong; the doors had stayed open, and there were Mr. Sterling and an entire corps of guards waiting to take me away. Overcome by fatigue at last, or by some new trick of my adversary, I sank to my knees and stretched out my arms toward my French teacher.



Mr. Sterling carried me in his arms. My head rested against his shoulder, my arms crossed in my lap, long brown hair falling over my forehead. I had given up looking into his face for clues. He stared straight ahead, zombie-like, as did every member of the guard surrounding us.

I supposed my confrontation with the Burnt Man had cost me more than I had guessed. My head ached; even though I still had access to that new buzz of potential in my brain, I was too tired and too wary to try reaching out again. The pain of my foray into Mr. Sterling's mind and the Burnt Man's repulsion was too strongly with me. And all the physical discomfort I had been subjected to since that afternoon when I was snatched from school had translated into aches and pains everywhere in my body. *How long ago had that been?* Time had lost its meaning, in this sunless, clock-less place.

Mentally, my efforts were completely concerned with building a wall around my thoughts. From every direction, I could feel prying fingers, reaching and touching and testing my defenses. It was as if the Burnt Man's taunting had pushed me to yet another level of awareness and only now did I realize I had something to build barricades against. I wondered if there had always been minds exploring mine, before I'd discovered the ability to sense them. In every minute since my first encounter with him, or even before that, how many times had I been scrutinized? He had as much as admitted he couldn't read my actual thoughts now, but what about before, when I was just

plain Maggie Stuart? Were the defenses I was now constructing the first I had ever had against creatures like him – and *were* there more creatures like him? Had someone been lurking, keeping an eye on me, always? I sank further into my own mind, wanting no contact with the world, only to protect myself from these unimaginable threats.

Mr. Sterling stopped. I opened my eyes to find he had halted in front of a plain door made of dull metal. One of the guards had the key. Another held the door to let him carry her inside. He cradled me like a basket of eggs, as if I were something fragile, but with neither the tenderness one would show a child, or the roughness dealt to a prisoner. It made me feel, above all, dehumanized. And it was probably as accurate as any framing of current events. I was the Burnt Man's science project. Something to dissect.

Sterling carried me into the room. Once his first foot passed over the threshold, I again felt the deadness I had experienced with the shackles on. The tingle in my brain was gone, my seething mind was again quiet. This room deadened me. No voices whispered, and no presences pressed themselves against my awakened senses.

The room was about the size of my bedroom at home, windowless and perfectly round. It seemed bigger at first than it actually was, because every inch of every surface, floor, wall, and ceiling, was covered in curving mirrors. At the center of the room, a strange anachronism after my bit of foam in the alcove, was a low couch, round, covered with a smooth flowered comforter, not unlike my own.

A guard turned down the comforter. It looked inviting, especially to a girl who had spent time chained to a rock and crashed out on a pile of fabric. Only the undercurrents of my mind troubled themselves imagining further indignities. Otherwise, with both the prying fingers and my own turbulent mental seethings ceased, my mind was surrounded in a sea of absolute calm. Instead of the panic which the shackles had raised in me, I felt completely at peace. *Lulled into a false sense of security*, I thought.

Still, I felt the absolute need to break the silence holding the people surrounding me. What came out, however, was not what I expected. "Round three," I said, looking to the center of the room, breaking off with a nervous swallow.

Mr. Sterling carried me to the bed and set me down gingerly. He carefully stretched my legs out straight, ignoring my agonized squirm as the left cramped up. He brushed the wool robe smooth. After the involuntary twitch, I was able to lie still, staring up at the reflection of a white-faced dark-haired alien Maggie staring back from the ceiling. Mr. Sterling pulled the comforter over me and stood back. Abruptly, he turned and left the room, the others following. I heard a click, and then a second as the door was closed and locked.

Now there was the true feeling of an empty room. I tentatively reached out with my mind but found that my barricades had disappeared with the intrusions from without. Like before, when the shackles went on, I was blocked completely. But if I had no access to my ability, if this room was a damper, then it stood to reason that no one else was spying on me either. It only made sense. I felt my tense muscles begin to relax.

But when I tried to sit up, I found my body wouldn't cooperate. Then I tried rolling my head to one side, and discovered all desire to move had suddenly left me. I wanted to sleep, and to dream, like he had suggested, and I was darned well going to.

I felt more than heard the small hiss coming from all sides. It was too pleasant a sound to bother with, merely adding to my state of lethargy. Mirror-Maggie looked dreamily down at me, and smiled.

I watched as the reflection above me blurred, and surrendered willingly to sleep. I closed my eyes.



Maggie was running. Then she flew.

All around the world she went. She waved to tropical islanders and to the people on the South Pole expedition as she sped past. She wanted to tell that Antarctic explorer to give in and eat his dogs or he'd die. Her memories of history classes and geography lessons collided and emerged as strange new ideas. Images flooded her. She flew through clouds, paced a flock of Canada geese that had somehow ended up above the Great Rift Valley in Africa. Then she was plummeting down, back to earth. The soggy clouds ripped to droplets as she clutched at them, trying to stay aloft. Still she fell. And suddenly, she hit bottom.

I was in Toronto.

I didn't recognize the intersection, but in the distance, quite clearly, I could see the CN Tower, pointing like a big finger to the sky. Toronto was a foreign city to me, despite its proximity to my native suburb of Westbrook, visited a few dozen times on school trips and with my mother for special outings, but not known. And now I was here, for some new game of the Burnt Man's, with no idea what to do or where to go.

My white robe had been replaced by my more standard jeans and a sweatshirt, and a pair of running shoes. They weren't my clothes, but the kind of clothes I wore. It was almost as if I was wearing an idea of typical clothing more than a specific outfit. But that made sense, if it was a dream.

The only good thing was that the tingle in my mind was back, faint and tender as though it had been used sorely and was only slowly recovering, much, I realized, as I was myself. I was no longer as tired like she had been. Energy was seeping back into my limbs.

"I can do this," I told myself quietly. "Whatever it is, I can do it."

I took a step backwards, and collided with what I assumed was one of the pedestrians hurrying up and down the street or waiting to cross with the lights. They looked just like real people, these dream denizens. And obviously, they had actually weight and mass. "Sorry," I was saying automatically as I turned, when the word got stuck in my throat.

It was him, as in retrospect I knew it must be.

His hand descended on my shoulder, and I tensed too late to run. His fingers were terribly strong and bit into my muscles. "Round three," he said. "Isn't that what you called it?"

I looked up at him, knowing it was a dream, and knowing just the same that he had followed me into it and that it was here that their contest, whatever it meant, would continue. *And just what was the game?* I knew he wanted me to run, that much was clear. He wanted me to, so he could have the fun of capturing me again. It was bound to be a sad disappointment for him, I told myself. *I mean, I thought, whatever previous success I had was accidental, and I'm hardly going to be interesting prey. I'm short-winded, for one thing, and I don't even know the city.*

"You can have two hours before I come after you," he said then, proving me right about at least the one assumption. "Go anywhere, go as far as you like. Then, I will hunt for you. When I find you, I promise you will suffer. I sense a stubbornness of will in you, Marguerite, and I will greatly enjoy breaking you. Please make sure you are worth the time I have invested in you."

I laughed then; I couldn't help it. Shaking my head, I told him, "I guess I'll try." Where did that nerve come from? My heart began to beat faster and my legs felt weak. But it was almost delicious. I was, at least in terms of bravado, standing up to him. It was a new experience for me, and one which I immediately liked.

And, as I felt into my own limbs, I sensed the return of my new powers. If anything, I felt stronger now than I had before. Maybe the confrontation itself was making me stronger. If so, this new game might increase my abilities more. It was intriguing. I tried to shake his hand off my shoulder, and his fingers, after holding a moment longer to show me he could, released me.

I remained frozen only briefly. And then, I ran. Down the unfamiliar street, in this dream version of Toronto, toward the CN Tower, I wove through pedestrians with her jaw set. *I'll give him a fight*, I told myself. *If that's what he wants, that's what he'll get.*

Physically, of course, I was no match for him. His own uncertainty about my abilities might be the only real asset I had. If that was to help me, I would have to make certain I myself knew what I was capable of. *What had I seen him do? He could issue a command to me without my being aware of it; he could open doors with his mind; he could attack someone with probably something like the touch I had used to reach for Jason or Mr. Sterling. What else would be possible?*

If only I could disguise herself, I might have a chance to hide and learn more about what I was could do. There was nothing written in stone about this contest, was there? Nothing that said that I couldn't defend herself when the time came.

I slipped off the main street onto a side road, breathing heavily, and stopped in front of a shop window. *If I was a bit older*, I thought, and felt the tingle of power caressing my face. In a few moments, I found a pretty dark-haired girl in her mid-twenties smiling back at me. I touched my own cheek, not my own now, and grinned. It took a certain amount of effort to maintain the change, but not that much. I found an elastic band in my pocket, wondering if wishing it was there made it appear, and twisted my hair up into a bun. My clothes were as easy to alter – an output of power and I was in a long skirt and sweater. The running shoes I kept.



Here it is, thought Jason, expecting the absolute worst.

But no, it wasn't the end. Guards led him through a new series of corridors. He struggled to keep his feet. The beating had stopped, and they didn't mean to kill him, at least not right now.

A doorway was indicated to him, and he went through to find himself in a small room filled with towels stacked on shelves; the air was warm and humid.

Through an archway, he found a recess like a hot tub carved into the floor, filled with steamy hot water. There was a faint odor of sulphur, but no more unpleasant than the usual tinge of chlorine around a public pool.

Weak, battered, and not in any condition to protest, Jason allowed himself to be stripped. One guard stayed by the doorway, as if they expected him to make a run for it in the buff. As if. Another lowered him into the pool and bathed him.

His bruises were treated gently, the dirt and gravel eased out of his cuts, and his entire body soaped down and sponged clean.

It would have been easier to take if he didn't hate so much feeling like an invalid. Correct that - an invalid and a prisoner. Being bathed by someone else was the subject of embarrassing baby photos, not something suffered lightly by a fourteen year old boy, despite the lack of options.

By the time they lifted him out, Jason was frustrated and angry, snatching at the proffered towel with more violence than gratitude. It was difficult to admit even to himself that it was nice to be clean and to have no more stones plastered into the cuts on his elbows and hands, and just as hard to admit how grateful his muscles were for the exposure to the warm water.

He was allowed to dry himself off and wrap a fresh towel around his waist. After that, they

picked him up gently but (he thought) excessively firmly and laid him out on the floor. Here, two of them were needed to hold him down while a third poured something that burned and fizzed like peroxide, into his cuts.

Bandaged and humiliated, Jason was hardly aware of how much fitter he felt. As well, the attention to him and his own annoyance had temporarily made him forget about what he'd seen in the gym, what made it clear he was in terrible danger every moment he spent in the clutches of whatever had spoken to him out of thin air back in the mine field. Those memories, and others – Maggie, fear, dirt – came back one by one as his body cooled and dried.

They dressed him, back in his own clothing. When he tried to protest, and then to help, his hands were slapped aside. This suggested that the beating needed only encouragement from him to recommence. He wouldn't have been surprised if someone had stepped in to explain that the bath and the first aid were only offered so he could be beaten up more later. No, he would have been surprised. Since his invisible tormentor, he had heard not a single word of English, or any other language. Mute prison guards. And the sound, again and again, of the explosion ringing in his ears.

They took him out of the bath room and back into the twisted, labyrinthine corridors. Instead of the high, rough passages he had been in before, the new ones were lower but wider, and the walls were smoother and brightly lit. He was certain, although he didn't have anything concrete to back the idea up, that he was heading further in. Always further in.



Aaron Scribner had not been treated roughly. He had also not experienced any distinct form of welcome.

Maggie would have recognized his prison instantly. His bed was a ledge of stone lined with a thin mat. There was a blanket, which he'd folded under his head as an addition to the thin pillow. From a bracket in the wall stretched a pair of chains of a little more than three meters, attached at the free ends to a pair of shackles around his wrists. Aaron had measured the chain with a ruler he'd made himself with a strip of foam torn from the edge of his mat. He had estimated thirty centimeters, which seemed a reasonable length to guess at accurately - how many people aren't familiar with the old school ruler? The chain was long enough to let him get off the shelf and move a few paces in any direction. Not long enough for him to feel happy about his situation, of course.

A guard with his face hidden under a ridiculous helmet brought him a meal. The food was reasonably good, although quite bland. *I have nothing to complain about*, Aaron told himself, bitterly. *I'm well-fed, rested, have all necessary amenities – oh, yes – and a little boredom never hurt anyone, did it?*

It had been a long car ride, and the first part had been spend bent over his own knees under Damon's elbow. That was until they were right out into the country and there was no way to tell what direction they were going in, although north would be a fair guess. He guessed he had been carried here unconscious, but he didn't actually remember how or when he'd been put under. He'd woken in the stone corridor just as they were attaching the shackles to his wrists. This had caused the guards holding on to him absolutely no consternation. He'd struggled, but they were much stronger. And here he'd been, for however long had passed.

A white semi-opaque curtain hung from the roof of the cell to give him the feeling of privacy when he used the toilet. That was probably his favorite thing about the prison. Here was a working toilet, the plumbing dug right into the solid rock of the shelf, and they couldn't manage more than a piece of upholstery foam for a bed. He could feel the shape of the stone beneath him pressing into his back when he lay down.

Still, he couldn't complain. And boredom – or 'leisure time' might be phrasing it more kindly – often led to creative thinking, his dad always said. *So*, thought Aaron with a yawn, *I'm going to get creative, and I'm going to get out of here. The question is – how?*

Suddenly, sounds in the hallway drew his attention. Aaron sat up. This wasn't just the usual low conversation of the guards passing back and forth. He recognized this voice.

"Jason, what a guy. There's trouble, and Jay Lawson's in on it," whispered Aaron to himself. His throat was dry.

A guard entered the tunnel and trained a gun on Aaron. "S'okay, buddy," said Aaron, holding out his shackled wrists. "I'm not going anywhere without bolt cutters."

The next guard hauled Jason in by his handcuffed wrists. He was badly bruised and having trouble standing.

"Lawson," called Aaron, and stopped short. The next man to enter the room was dressed in a slightly more elaborate uniform than the plain green-black worn by the other guards. Aaron moistened his lips. It was his French teacher.

"Hey, Scribner," said Jason weakly. "Welcome to the promised land. How are they treating you?"

"Can't complain," said Aaron. Jason groaned as two of the regular guards lifted him roughly to the stone ledge next to Aaron's.

Mr. Sterling cleared his throat, and said slowly, "Talking – is permitted but be aware: you are – being monitored. You will be sent for as required."

The guards finished fastening Jason into his shackles and followed Mr. Sterling out.

"Lawson," said Aaron. "What's going on here?"

Jason laughed feebly. "You have just learned more in a minute than they've told me the whole time I've been down here."

"What's going on?"

Jason snorted. "I don't know, but I wouldn't be too worried. It's not us they want. It's Maggie Stuart." He put his hands to his face with a clank of chain. Aaron could see scrapes and bruises down his forearms. "After what happened at school, I wouldn't want to be her."

"At school?" Aaron was confused now. "Hold on: Mr Sterling is mixed up in this somehow, right? He brought you and Maggie Stuart..."

"You were in the assembly, right?" Jason's voice was strained. "They wanted Maggie. They used all of us. They did – what they did to us at school. The – blood and everything. And Mr. Hunt is in on it too. I don't know how, but he is."

"Have you seen this guy Damon? He's the one that got me." Aaron tensed, remembering. "He killed my dog, I think."

"He what?"

Aaron closed his eyes. "My dog. I owe him for that. I could kill him for that."

Jason leaned back. The chains attaching his shackles to the wall rattled. "Well, we're not going anywhere for now, or doing anything." He closed his eyes now. "Get some sleep, Scribner. I promise I'll still be here when you wake up. You really don't know what happened at school?"

"No. I'm trying to think, but I can't remember anything about this afternoon at all."

Jason opened his eyes to fix Aaron: "Just be glad."



Detective John Tamblyn had weighed all the considerations very carefully before approaching Lieutenant Morritz. It had been a frustrating night. He'd been in his office with the

door closed and locked, listening to Carla Szaba pace back and forth with coffee and reports between the interview rooms and Morritz's office. She had paused several times in front of his door but he hadn't given her any excuse to disturb him.

Now, fingers steepled on the desk on his well-worn blotter, a cold cup of coffee with stains around the rim at his elbow, he realized he'd made his decision. He pushed aside the diagrams and maps and closed the book he'd been studying most of the night. Before he left the office, he locked everything in one of his file cabinets – except the book. It was his most important possession, and Morritz didn't know about it. No one did, but it was the only reason he was able to do the job he'd been contracted for.

Its cover was thin leather, worn through in places to the cardboard below. There was no title on the spine; inside, half the pages were handwritten and the rest were printed on a small press. There were additions made in a dozen hands, some in his own. Because of what it was, and how immensely valuable and irreplaceable it was, he put it first into a lead-lined box, locked it, and then locked the box securely into its recessed compartment in the hidden safe in his office. That was a secret Morritz did know, something that Tamblyn had insisted on as a condition of his employment, a formidable hiding place for something his superior was to remain unaware of. As far as Morritz knew, the safe was for dangerous substances, or top secret documents. The book would have surprised him. It looked, at a glance, to be an illustrated volume of poetry.

It did not look like something that Tamblyn was in possession of only through a long series of horrible events. Its cover might as well be stained with blood. Its secrets, people who knew of it would agree, would be well worth killing for. And some had.

The book safely concealed, Tamblyn double-locked his office and followed Carla, again on a delivery run, this time with a pizza, around the corner toward Morritz's door.

Morritz, his paunch tucked under his wide desk, was in conference with Anna Gerrin, a senior homicide detective and a tough old veteran of the worst the city had to offer. Her grey hair was short and messy, framing her wide face and thick jowls. She was getting to look more like Morritz every year, Tamblyn realized.

Carla set the pizza down and brushed past Tamblyn, offering him a single quick scowl.

"Well, well, well," Gerrin greeted him, not smiling. "Our friendly neighborhood Witch Boy. Back from the burnings?"

Tamblyn didn't grace her with a reply. He was well used to the kind of reception he typically received from the more conservative officers. Instead, he addressed Morritz who looked distinctly uncomfortable with his presence, and guessed he was sitting on some unpleasant news. "What's up, Bill?"

Morritz sat back and sighed. "You're off, John. I've got it from higher up. They don't want to you or anyone to touch this. We look for the kids; we go on the idea that the girl's absentee father has taken off with her and the others were some kind of mistake, or insurance policy. Nothing gets said about the other stuff. We can't afford the publicity."

"You don't want to talk about mass hypnosis, or gallons of strange blood, or cults in the suburbs to the press, do you, John? It would be your head, your mouth out there talking crazy – if that's the kind of publicity you want." Gerrin spoke in a measured, reasonable tone, but Tamblyn knew how much dislike that covered.

"You know I can't do my job in front of cameras," Tamblyn said, trying to affect at least as reasonable a sound. "Why do we have to let it go dead? Assign the usual press camouflage team and let me get on with my work."

Morritz shook his head. "Someone broke the story. They don't have much, just the kids going missing. Probably a parent talked. We don't know. Fortunately, none of the parents know the

rest. And the scene has been totally cleaned up – school went back today. They burned the curtains, that’s the only thing we couldn’t control, but at least that much of the evidence is just gone. You know we’re dealing with a situation that could get so fast out of hand. . . No. We’re not going anywhere with it.”

Tamblyn shook his head slowly, unbelieving. He played the only card he had, in the best way he knew how. “There is something else, but I doubt it makes any difference now.” Deliberately, he turned and headed toward the door.

“Hang on, John.” Tamblyn paused, and Morritz flipped through a stack of papers on his desk, finally handing one over. “You can do one thing to tie up a loose end. I’ve got the mother of the missing girl at the Chelsea. She’s being very uncooperative. You heard about the fire?”

Tamblyn had. A broken door, a fire started with kerosene and dishtowels, ropes and a chair in a closet. The mother and some boyfriend, and neither of them willing to admit anything unusual had been happening at the house when the fire began. “What does that have to do with me?”

“Yeah,” Gerrin agreed with him, atypically, then qualified. “You want someone good with people to talk to her, don’t you?”

Morritz shushed her with a thick hand. “Anna. John, I just want you to have a talk with her. She’s been with the psychiatrist most of the night, and she still insists she doesn’t remember a thing. And she won’t tell us anything else either. Maybe you can throw her off balance. We also need to think seriously about this ex-husband of hers. Just in case it is just some kind of bizarre custody battle. So far, she won’t give us his name, and the birth certificate is somewhere in Greece.”

Tamblyn rolled his eyes. “I’m not good with people.” On that count, at least, he and Gerrin were in perfect agreement.

“Maybe that’s exactly what’ll work.”

Gerrin smirked.

“So, before you go,” said Morritz, “what’s this information you think I can’t use anymore?”

Back to that, Tamblyn thought. “It doesn’t matter now. Just a little matter of something that happened a while ago in Vancouver, and someone you might remember who called himself the Hunter.”

Now he had their attentions. He waited for effect, because he didn’t very often get a chance to milk a revelation.

“Vancouver. I don’t have to explain, do I, Anna?” He smiled coldly. “It would be so nice to believe he was dead.”

Morritz was on his feet. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Check out the staff photos at Westbrook Elementary. He’s had a bit of work done, but it’s him all right. Funny how things turn out, isn’t it? He’s been in your backyard all this time, well, in 2 District – at least seven years, from the dates on the pictures. That could be nasty if it got out – and, if you’re smart, it’ll make you reconsider dropping the ball.”

Morritz had gone pale. Gerrin wouldn’t look at him. “So,” Tamblyn continued, “this doesn’t have to go further than this office – but I do. I do need to stay on this case. You can’t afford not to have me around. Just think of the opportunities for damage control. What exciting times we live in!”

“Surely there are other explanations,” Morritz began, disorganized fully. “I mean, we can’t assume – Even if he didn’t die, what possible reason. . .? And I mean, a teacher for God’s sake. . . How certain are you?”

Tamblyn left that hanging. He’d made his statement; he didn’t mean to qualify it.

Gerrin had a look on her face that would have made a Madame Tussaud mannequin seem

animated by comparison. “I remember all that stuff, in Vancouver. Weren’t you out there?”

He didn’t think it needed to be said, but then again, Anna was, like him, a transferee from another city, he from the West Coast in the wake of that very scandal, she from the East with a promotion.

Morritz answered for him. “John helped bring him in. He was out on the Vancouver force then, when they. . .” He trailed off.

Tamblyn acknowledged the credit by rolling his eyes. “If this is one of his games, then what happened at Westbrook might just be a beginning.”

There was silence for a moment, then Anna Gerrin, calm and professional again, said sweetly, “So. . . did you ever consider that he might have followed you out here?”



It was a room deep below the earth, a room cut out of solid rock, furnished in a fury of pillows and hangings. The floor was tiered, graded in gentle steps from the natural pool at the lowest level, which bubbled and filled constantly from a warm spring, up to the huge heavily barred door at its highest.

The air in the cavern was delightful, clean and perfumed like the sweetest spring afternoon. A warm breeze circulated near the roof, moderating the temperature and batting the wall hangings in tiny waves, as if by the passing of a fitful resident ghost.

Perhaps the room itself looked like a hybrid of a haunted bedroom in a Gothic manor and a prince’s apartments in an ancient Persian fable, but it was neither. It was merely the home of a lonely boy.

In that moment, he was singing quietly to himself while bathing in the pool. His fair head bobbed underwater and rose slowly, sending droplets down his thin shoulders. He dipped his head again, and again, blowing streams of bubbles into the water, then rising to let the water run down his cheeks in streams.

It took a roomful of minutes before he became tired of this game. Humming a sad melody, he pushed himself off the side of the pool and swam with broad strokes across it. He pulled himself back and forth with a sort of side-armed version of the crawl, gracefully, but with no economy of movement. He had made up the stroke himself, as he’d had to with no one ever to teach him, as well as many others. Since his only exposure to swimming had been here, in his own pool, completely by himself, he had no idea swimming could ever be used for competition. His strokes reflected this. Like all his movements, they were slow, complex, languid, and designed to fill time rather than to conserve it. In the room, thoughts and actions that might have occupied a few seconds in another world stretched to hours.

His world was divided into sleeping and being awake, or perhaps, more fairly, into sleeping, being awake, and having a visitor. Having a visitor wasn’t a common enough occurrence to make much of an impression on him. Memories of the visits didn’t stay with him too long. The only thing that really sparked a remembrance of visits was another visit.

The barred door creaked, accompanied by the sound of clicking, scraping metal. The little boy continued swimming. The door’s heavy hinges groaned, and finally a crack appeared along the wall.

The boy swam to the side of the pool and pulled himself out of the water with thin, pale arms. He stood on the edge of the water, naked and white, like something that had crawled out of the earth after years hidden from the sun. As a quick impression, this wasn’t far from accurate.

The door was opened by the burly woman. Behind him, holding the end of the rope tied

around the blindfolded Scott's neck, was Arabella, her black hair now loosened and streaming over her shoulders like a paralyzed cataract of black water. The bigger woman stepped back to let her and the captive through.

The moment the inhabitant of the room caught sight of the girl, he burst forth with a stream of notes, flowing like her hair, sounded on meaningless syllables.

"That's right, Petey," said Arabella, stepping into the room and handing Scott's lead to her companion. "It's Aria. Very good. It's Aria." She ran lightly down the steps, over pillows of varied sizes, to the final level which contained the pool. She bent and picked up the boy's clothing and a towel lying discarded in a pile of bedding.

"You've got a visitor, Petey," crooned Arabella, "so get dressed in your pretty clothes. He's going to stay with you for a while and you'll have to take care of him. Will you do that for me?" She carefully dried the boy and dressed him. He stood perfectly still, staring ahead. Arabella finished and sighed. She turned to the other woman. "All right, toss him down."

That was all the warning Scott received before she gave him a shove, letting go of the rope around his neck. He fell forward, and tripped awkwardly but unhurt two tiers down into a pile of soft pillows.

Arabella kissed the boy on the top of his fair head and retraced her steps up to the top of the room. She reached down as she passed Scott and ran her hand along the back of his thighs. His guilty thrill brought heat to his face. Then, continuing, she left the room without a word or backward glance.

Scott heard the door shut, and the metal tumble of its lock engaging. Still, he lay motionless, face down. His knees and hip bones were a bit sore, but besides that, it was just the bruises to his dignity and the lump of fear in his throat that were hurting him. He raised his head slowly, his covered eyes straining into their private darkness.

"Who's there?" he said, his voice a bit hoarse. There was no answer.

He reached his hands to his head, waiting for Arabella's ominous laughter to break the slightly less ominous silence, and for the press of steel again on his bare neck. There was no sound.

He tried to untie the knots in the blindfold but they were tight and tangled in the knots of the rope around his neck. He pulled on the cloth, trying to get it up and away from his eyes. It was brutally tight. Suddenly it gave way and he jerked it off to find not only was he half blind in the new light, but that Arabella had tied the blindfold securely into the curls of his hair. He winced.

Scott squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again. They adjusted quite quickly and he drank in the sights, thinking he'd never known before how important it was to be able to see. He untangled the knots of the blindfold from his hair. The little boy was still standing by the pool, frozen. He looked at Scott as if trying to memorize him, intently, taking in every tiny detail, in no rush to finish.

"Hi," said Scott, sitting up and facing the boy. He couldn't imagine the pale little creature as any kind of threat. "What's your name?"

The boy stared at him, just as clinically.

Scott stood, resting for a moment in a crouch before coming up to his full height. He estimated the boy's age at six or seven. He could be older. It was hard to tell, he was so fragile looking, so pale. His hair had the color and appearance of sea-foam, almost white. His skin was unhealthily bland as if he'd never been in the sun. The boy's eyes were pink.

Scott realized he was staring. He looked back at the boy's eyes. He took a couple of careful steps forward, expecting the boy to run away and break the bond between them. The eyes themselves weren't actually pink, more colorless than anything, but the irises glowed like dilute blood. The boy didn't move. Scott saw the color of the eyes contributed strongly to the boy's look

of distance, but it was more than that. It was as if he didn't quite understand that Scott existed the same way, in the same place, as he did.

"You're albino," said Scott. Did the boy nod? "What's your name?" Although the boy still hadn't moved and showed no signs of fear, Scott continued: "I'm not going to hurt you. My name's Scott. What's yours? Was that you singing before?" The boy said nothing. "Singing? Aria," he tried. "Aria. Remember Aria?"

The boy threw back his head and the notes poured out of his white throat, the sound seeming to involve his whole body in the production of it. It poured over Scott in cascades, breathtakingly beautiful. Scott sank to his knees, remembering – what did he remember? Not so harmless after all, this little boy. There was no particular memory attached to his utter certainty, but he had no doubt he'd somewhere encountered the child before. The boy sang on, then stopped suddenly. As if released from a spell, Scott jerked upwards and ran, only half on his feet, up to the door and pounded on it with his fist.

"Arabella! Arabella! Where's my friend Jason? What did you do to him?" He beat harder, then listened to the absolute silence around and beyond the door. He slid down the wood, large square nails grabbing at his hands, and started to cry in rage and frustration.

"Peter," came the thin clear voice from before. It was nothing like the glorious soprano singing. It wasn't the voice of a little boy either; it was warm and old, but somehow empty as well.

Scott looked back down. The boy stood, still in the same place, but now a look like concern was on the white features. "Peter," he repeated. "That's your name? Peter."

"Peter," said the boy, trying it out as if it was a new word, or if it had suddenly taken on a new meaning by its sounding by Scott.

Scott stood and walked slowly back down the tiers. "My name is Scott. Can you say that? Scott. Scott."

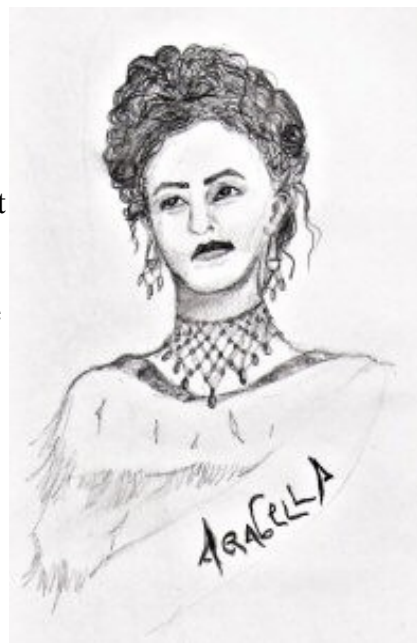
"I can say that. Scott. Scott." The boy's eyes opened wider, seeming emptier somehow, with the white rims around the pink. "Scott," he said again, then he fell silent. Scott waited. Suddenly the boy's head fell back and he sang, a souring, proud melody. It was only a small series of notes, but when he stopped again, Scott was heartbroken and uplifted, all at once. If Arabella said his name like a death rattle, Peter confirmed his life. He wished the song could have continued forever.

Little pale Peter's eyes fell back to the other, older boy. "Scott," he said.



I ran again until I couldn't think of anything but the pounding, the rhythm of my feet transferred through my spine. Finally, out of breath and out of energy, I stopped to take in my surroundings. I had never been to this part of town, had never in fact been into the city at all on my own. Kensington Market was a name to me and nothing more. It didn't really look like what I'd expected a market to, all quirky little shops in old houses sprinkled with restaurants fronted by busy patios.

I went into the first second-hand clothing shop I came to, looking for inspirations to



complete a disguise, and picked up the first item that caught her my. It was a tidy leather briefcase, stacked with the shoes and handbags.

Someone said from behind me, "You can't buy it if you don't have any money."

I reached into her pockets and found them empty. "Okay," I said, despite knowing that I probably could have made the items, or money, appear at will, and returned to the busy street. It was like being in a dream; some things I felt justified in changing, but others, I was discovering, I felt the need to do in as realistic way as possible, as if the world I was in was bending me to adherence with its laws.

So. What could I do for money? There was going to be more to this game than hiding, obviously. Just then, an old woman passed me. She stirred something in me like a memory of a favorite, long-absent friend, but I couldn't place her. She was nothing like my own grandma, dead now the last two years, although about that age. This woman was wiry and thin, but everything from her brillo-pad grey mane to her deeply lined skin just shouted strength and experience. I felt confused, and intrigued looking at her. *The wise old guide from fairy tales*, I thought. *My Merlin*.

She didn't say anything, just smiled and handed me a large sketchbook and a handful of charcoal. I smiled, remembering the set of paints that my father had sent me that one birthday, which I had opened a few times but with so little knowledge of what to do with them that despite my attraction to the idea, I'd never done much more than get the paints wet and blot them around a couple of pages.

Then she whispered, "A great talent you have there," and disappeared into the press of people. *What talent?* I thought, but then it struck me that now there was a way to make some money. The idea jumped out at me fully formed, as if handed to me from someone else's mind. And maybe it was. I didn't care. Committing myself, I waved my arms to attract attention.

"Portraits!" I called. "Portraits while you wait!" I thought a minute; what should I charge? "Only ten dollars. Come on, portraits by an experienced artist while you wait!"

With another inspiration hitting me, I felt my back broaden, my face fill. I re-imagined myself as a solid and late middle-aged Maggie, hair greying, someone impressive looking.

A woman in a business suit stopped and sat down by a bench on the curb. "Can I pay only if I'm satisfied?"

"Of course," I said, imperious, and sat down to start to draw. The picture flew off my fingers and in a few minutes, it was finished.

"Beautiful," said the woman, and handed me a ten dollar bill. Even I had to admit it was pretty good, especially considering it was about the first thing I'd really ever drawn in her life. I returned to my loud solicitation. This dream stuff was actually kind of fun.

I drew four more portraits, which finished off the sketchbook, so I pocketed the charcoal and my fifty dollars, and went back into the second-hand shop.

I bought the briefcase and a ladies' tailored suit, thinking about my first customer, and handful of nondescript rags. It cost me a total of seven dollars. I figured the sneakers would go with either the suit for a corporate healthy look or be well hidden under the rags. The sales woman put my purchases into a brown paper shopping bag, and I went out into the late afternoon to look for a place to hide.

When dusk came, I ate a supper of cheese and crackers from a little plastic container while sitting on a bench looking up at new City Hall, feeling safely inconspicuous in the busy square. In the plaza, a bunch of Morris dancers were performing by a striped refreshment tent. Finished, I got up and started walking toward the Eaton's Centre, at the very least an excellent landmark. A clock told me it was seven thirty and eighteen degrees. And all's well. Although I kept myself aware of my surroundings and the people who passed, I saw no one who resembled even slightly my

pursuer. Either I had done a good job, or he was not looking very hard for me – yet. And me, I was enjoying myself.

I walked by a bunch of women on a corner of Yonge Street who struck me as probably prostitutes. They smiled and called out to me as I passed. Suddenly inspired, I yelled back over my shoulder, asking if they knew about any job openings.

One woman laughed and shouted, “Try Mick’s. They’re always firing girls. Down from the Elgin.” There was some discussion that I was too far away to hear clearly, which seemed to be either specific directions or tips for me, but it soon faded into the traffic and other street noise. I continued on, scanning the store fronts for the Elgin and Mick’s. It was only after I was a block away that I realized the cause of their obvious amusement, and what a spectacle I must have presented, a elderly, grey-haired woman pacing the streets at night looking for a job. Now I wondered just what Mick’s was, and what I’d put myself in for.

It was easier to find Mick’s in the end than the Elgin Theater; there was a sandwich board in the street advertising it which she nearly tripped over. From the advertising, it seemed to be a bar and tame strip club, and yes, there was a notice for employment posted by the door. A flight of steps led down into the bowels of the building from the street; Mick’s was a sub-basement place. I glanced at my face in the mirrored walls on the way down. Instead of checking makeup, I had to check era. A few alterations, with a minimum of effort, and I was about twenty-five again, dark hair cut blunt and curling under my ears. *I was pretty*, I thought, and sighed. Too bad this wasn’t real.

There was a burly bouncer at the bottom of the steps. I asked him where I would go to apply for a job. He pointed to a door near the back of the bar.

The room was dark and noisy, but only marginally busy and, at the very least, clean. I was glad to see that all the waitresses were fully clothed. I threaded her way carefully through the tables and around the small stage where some less than exotic dancing was in progress – they seemed to be keeping their clothes on as well, as if the fact I was really only thirteen had made even my dreams appropriately PG – and knocked at the door.

“Come in,” said a voice, with heavy emphasis on the ‘in’. I opened the door and entered the office.

“I’m Mick, I’m the manager; what can I do you for?” said the middle-aged woman in the room. She continued what she had been doing when Maggie came in, namely taking a bunch of darts out of a large stuffed animal on a table near the wall, which obviously served her for a dartboard.

I felt a bit put off – she was quite intimidating. “I was told by some friends you might be looking for girls to hire.” I surveyed the room, finally managing to pull my eyes away from the stuffed animal. The walls were papered with cocktail napkins and ads for other bars all around the world.

“Stripping or serving?” Mick finished with the darts and retreated to the other end of the room behind a desk piled high with receipts and other paper. I, only being practical, moved closer to the wall and further from her darts target.

“Serving,” I said with all the finality I could muster. PG the dream might be, but I wasn’t putting myself in *any* potentially compromising situations. I’d only been wearing a bra since Christmas, and I wasn’t one of those girls who thought it was cool to wear midriff-exposing shirts to school and dance around like some oversexed pop star.

“Good, that’s what I need. Ever mixed drinks before?”

I thought, and a flood of names and proportions came into my mind. What a bunch of useful talents I was developing! I was about to reel off a string of drink mixtures, then thought

better of it. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Mick,” said the other woman firmly. “You’re hired, until further notice. I can use you tonight. Talk to Emma at the bar. You’ll be serving. Just as long as you can tell a Bloody Mary from a gin and tonic.”

The evening passed quickly, as it had when I was drawing. Time scales were variable here, but time did pass. It was even kind of fun, and it kept me too busy to be too worried about what the future held. Only when I was sitting at the bar on my break, sipping a diet cola, did I remember with a chill that somewhere out there, the Burnt Man was still on his way for me. Somehow even being in a twenty-five year old body hidden in a seedy bar didn’t seem like any protection. He hadn’t caught up yet, and that was all. I tried to be optimistic, but the more I thought, the more preoccupied I became with thoughts of impending capture. When I went back to work, I couldn’t get him out of my mind.

This must have shown, because the other servers got snippy with me quite quickly, and even Emma, that night’s bartender, who had been friendly at first, soon cooled.

Finally, it was over, and I counted her tip money. Another fifty dollars, and another couple of day’s grace, I hoped.

Emma was the last out of the bar, and I was still standing on the street by the door considering what my next move should be.

“Got a home to go to?” said Emma.

“Yes,” I said.

In the bus station washroom, I changed into my old rags and shuffled out into the streets with my paper bag of possessions clutched to my chest. I looked seventy, and my hair was knotted and white. I filled the top of my sneakers with bits of plastic bags and paper towel to keep out the cold and slowly moved onto Yonge Street. In a side street north of Dundas I found a large packing crate still full of foam chips and curled up in it to sleep. Half a block away, a digital neon clock said it was three thirty-seven and eleven degrees.

At least, I told myself, lips moving with my thoughts like a senile old street woman talking to herself, *he won’t find me here*. And I succumbed to my own fatigue, and fell asleep fitfully. And although I tried to push the Burnt Man out of my mind, I drifted off thinking of nothing but *him*.



His dark eyes opened slowly.

Somewhere, down the halls of his underground palace, Maggie stirred in her sleep but did not wake.

Maggie’s Burnt Man sat in his darkened throne room on the dais, on the tallest of the four black thrones. The only light came from a single glowing globe floating at the apex of the domed ceiling. The feeble light gave a hint of brightness to the broad floor, but did not touch the muted blackness of the creature on the throne, wrapped in his dark cloak like a Gothic nightmare.

He stood, restless. Somewhere down the corridors, yes, Maggie slept, but in the Dreamworld, she was lost.

Unconsciously exerting enough power to move almost instantly, he placed himself on the opposite side of the room from the great bronzed entrance. The smaller door here was much more elaborate, although less awesome, than the other. Around its arch were intricately carved stone faces and tiny people. Some were old, some young. There were handsome, regal faces, and withered, fresh babies with round cheeks and happy, fat women with tiny noses. When his children were little, they had come together to the archway and run their hands over the little bodies frozen

in stone, made up stories about them. That was in the heyday of his power, when this was the least of his palaces and his commerce with the outside world never involved something as paltry as chasing a little girl through a dream.

He halted before the arch, looking up, and tried to recapture the wonderful feelings, the lucidity and rapture of those days long ago. The tiny visages stared down in all their stony glory and he smiled. It was a beautiful piece of work.

“Father?”

The Burnt Man’s eyes slid slowly down the little faces, down the arch, to find Damon’s face.

“Father,” said Damon again.

The Man smiled at the young man with clenched teeth. Damon looked down at first, then summoned the courage to stare back into his father’s eyes. The other man nodded absently as if somehow caught off guard by his son’s show of strength.

“You have done everything?”

“Just as you ordered,” said Damon.

“Good.” The Burnt Man turned away from his son thoughtfully. “Mr. Lawson?”

“It’s been taken care of,” said Damon. “I don’t think you’ll have any further trouble.”

“Good,” the Burnt Man repeated. He raised his fingers, weaving the threads of his plans in the air in front of him. Then, without another word, he turned and strode back to the dais. Damon followed, slower, without his father’s ability, and arrived to find his father already seated, the black cape arranged around him like a thick shadow over the arms of his throne. Damon knelt and touched his forehead on the ground before his father’s feet.

I Am Tired, said the Burnt Man, directly into Damon’s mind. *Enter The Dream. Take My Place In The Dreamworld, And Find Her.*

He vanished.

Damon ascended the dais and took his place on his father’s throne. He lay back in it, sighing. This was a good thing, wasn’t it, a sign that his father’s trust was less and less in Aria all the time? He was older, but she was far more cunning and ruthless. Probably a good deal stronger, as well. But, and of this he was sure, all it would take to deal permanently with Arabella was to expose the depths of her betrayal of the family. His father would never trust her again if he knew about all her covert activities. He reached out with an enormous effort to find his sister. He was met with a cold abyss.

Damon leapt to his feet, fury burning in his dark eyes. “Arabella,” he cried out. “Where are you?”

A moment passed before his sister’s voice came into his head. Both children had extended their telepathic abilities far beyond what their father knew they were capable of. “Hi, Dame,” said Aria’s whisper. “That’s a trick you don’t know, isn’t it?”

Damon controlled his anger. “Tell me about the boy. The one for Father?”

“None of your business. If I want something, I take it, and I wanted him. I’ve been kept in the dark and I want to know what’s going on. And don’t tell me Father’s confided any more in you than in me, because I know that’s a lie. And don’t get angry, because you know and I know you don’t have either the guts or the power to stop me doing exactly what I want.” Through the link, she laughed. “Oh, Dame, you’re so gullible. He’s with Peter in the low room.”

“And everything else?”

She laughed again. “I got the boy, no fuss, and the mother burned. I took care of her long-lost papa too.”

Burned. “That’s the quick, sure death Father wanted, Aria? Did you make sure? Do you

know they're dead?"

Aria broke the contact with a wrench.

Damon sat and breathed deeply for a few minutes before he felt composed again. So, Aria was more interested in terror than efficiency, and might have botched her job. He sent a concise telepathic message to a chamber deep in the earth, then settled back to muster the power to take him into the Dreamworld. It was nice to be doing this for once with his father's knowledge and instruction. And while looking for Maggie, he would also be able to relax for the first time in weeks.



In his stone apartments, which had no doors or entrances of any sort, the Burnt Man nodded in acknowledgment of his son's increased telepathic abilities. He was progressing again, after such a long period of stagnation. Sometimes, the Burnt Man thought Damon had forgotten who and what he was. Troubled, he submerged himself in the sea of his plans and his past, but not before reaching out to his daughter and finding her mind closed to him.