

Chapter Four



I woke, suddenly. I pulled the rags closer around my face. I knew I had slept for a long, long time, and I felt restored. It was day, perhaps even approaching evening. It would be time for work soon.

Something had changed, something which had woken me. The ever-present fear of the day before was there, but its flavor was different. “He still must be out there,” I told myself in my cracked, old woman voice, and stood, shedding the disguise as I did.

I was happy to note that I’d managed to maintain my disguise while I’d slept, with almost no discernable effort. At least, I assumed I had. At the very least, no one had bothered me, no rough hand shaking me out of sleep and dragging me off to a new, troubling situation.

I felt it this time, the age slipping out of my body, bones straightening, hair becoming less coarse and filling with color, until I knew that my reflection would once more show me yesterday’s twenty-five year old.

I smiled, and threw the rags away into a pile of junk. *Let him track that*, I thought.

Yonge was busy, but I was in no hurry, feeling relaxed enough to let everyone on the street walk faster than me. Mick was on the floor when I arrived for my shift early enough for a drink and a snack and greeted me coolly. I wondered if I would be around long enough to feel I should make the effort to win her over.

The first hour passed easily enough, and the after-six rush began with a change in pace but no panic. I balanced my tray, taking cues from the other waitresses. Wherever my flashes of knowledge came from, they were far more reliable than my memory, and I found myself a couple of times without a clue what I was supposed to be ordering from the bartender, or who to give it to.

“Ask me if you have problems,” said another girl, Jane, some exasperation in her voice, while I drained a glass of juice and wiped my brow by the wait station. “But please try to get used to it.”

“Thanks,” I said, and picked up the tray again. Without warning, a wave of nausea and terror swept over me, and my legs buckled. The other waitress grabbed for the tray and managed to stop anything from breaking. Everything, however, did spill.

Jane raced to us. She said, “Maggie, what happened? Oh, damn it,” as one overbalanced glass shattered on the floor by her foot.

My heart was racing. Was he closing in? I had hoped so much I’d be safe here. I’d thought I’d done such a good job of hiding so far. But, hearing Jane say my real name, I realized with horror that I hadn’t given a false one. I was so new to this kind of subterfuge! Disgusted with myself, I let Jane help me up and dust my clothes.

“Sorry,” I said, “I’ll get the mop.”

“Leave it,” said Mick, moving Jane out of the way. “There are customers waiting for drinks. One of the runners can get it.”

I nodded, hearing the ice in her tone, and re-ordered the drinks. Another wave of panic hit me, and I collapsed into a chair.

Mick was beside me instantly. “What’s wrong?” There was no humor in her tone.

“I’m sorry,” I said, an edge of desperation entering my voice.

“If you have medical problems, you should have told me. This is no way to begin a worker-employer relationship.” The older woman fixed me with unsympathetic eyes. “I can’t let you go. There are hardly enough girls on as it is. Survive the shift and we’ll talk tomorrow.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said. Mick left and disappeared into her office.

“Wow,” said Jane, “Mick doesn’t usually come down that hard on anyone.”

“I seem to bring out the best in people,” I said, thinking of Jason.

Jane gave me a funny look, almost distasteful, and walked away. Whatever chance I had had of being friends with the other woman, the fainting spell seemed to have wrecked.

So I loaded my tray and went back on the floor.

I served the drinks, distantly polite, and circulated among my other tables, clearing empty glasses and taking new orders. There was a new guy in my section, at a table by himself near the door. He was dark-haired, handsome, somewhere around my own apparent age, and looked familiar. His table needed to be cleaned and there wasn’t a runner in sight, so I got a cloth from the bar and went to do it myself.

“I hope you haven’t been waiting long,” I said, wiping the wet circles away, eyes on the table.

“No, don’t worry. Just got here,” he said, and my throat clenched. He was familiar, of course he was familiar. It was written in his sly grin, in the way he looked so real and vital compared to everyone else in the bar. I knew he had to be connected with the Burnt Man somehow. He had found me –

I took a chance then, and looked up at him from wiping the table. I knew. Then I knew. It was him, the one from the car, the one who’d called my father’s name after me, attached to an implied threat. The one I’d seen later at the school.

If he was here already, sitting a foot away, there was nothing to lose. Maggie forced a smile onto her face, waiting for him to laugh, mocking her like the Burnt Man. “What can I get you?” I said, as I had said a dozen times in the last hour.

“What do you have on tap?” he asked, and smiled back.

Oh, God, I thought. He doesn’t recognize me. The game has to go on.

I listed beer names, my memory playing fair with me for once, and took his order back to the bartender, feeling with every step like the blood was draining out of my head into my feet.

Jane was pouring herself a coke at the wait station. “Ho-ly. You look white,” she said, and took my hand in her own. “Clammy,” she pronounced. She touched my forehead. “You’re not hot, but you look terrible. Wouldn’t Mick let you go home?”

“No,” I said. “Really, I’m okay.”

“Well. That’s perfect,” Jane said, and it seemed to me that Jane would be happy if I was sent home, hoping to get rid of me. Jane moved away, appraising me coolly. The hostility took me by surprise, but then, it was probably some normal kind of reaction I just had so far avoided in my life by spending more time reading than interacting. “The only way to get out of a shift at Mick’s is to die or screw up enough to get fired.”

“I’m halfway there,” I said to Jane’s back, pretending I hadn’t noticed her tone. I carried the beer back to the dark-haired man, trying to relax my face as I went. Every step toward him was like walking into deep water, harder the closer I got.

He reached out and took my arm after I set his glass down. I flinched. “You look sick,” he

said, “Won’t they let you go home?”

For some reason, an honest answer came to my lips instead of some clever, offhand lie. “Home,” I said bitterly. “No, they won’t, and I wouldn’t have anywhere to go if I left anyway.”

“New to town?” The young man smiled again. I winced. The one person in the world who didn’t find me distasteful was the one person besides the Burnt Man that I couldn’t afford to be near. I could end the game right here, right now.

I nodded, in reply to his question, inventing frantically. I had to do better than I just had. “I just got in a week ago. They don’t let you stay long at the hostel without doing chores, and at my age, I just can’t hack it. I want – so much more.” There had been a pause, meaningfully placed. *Right out of The O.C.*, I thought, *am I – what am I doing?*

“You!” Mick’s shout carried across the room. Thankfully, no one seemed to care, and Mick’s next words, delivered in transit between her office door and the table, were ignored by everyone except me and the young man.

“I want you out of here. There are customers waiting. What do you think you’re doing? Never have I seen such irresponsibility. Usually, people wait a few weeks to slack off. Get your tips from the bartender. No pay.”

“Suits me fine,” I retorted, my voice as loud as Mick’s. Why was no one listening? It felt staged. “Take your stupid little job. Maybe if you treated your girls with a little more respect, you’d find some that stayed more than a few weeks.”

The young man’s arm slipped around my shoulders. Mick stalked away and slammed the office door, but the arm stayed. “Ssh,” he whispered, bending down so his lips were level with my ear. “It’s not worth fighting about. Everything will be fine.”

“Excuse me,” I said, coldly. I disengaged myself from his touch. The danger represented by the young man was offset by the need to get the heck out of there, as fast as I could. I didn’t think I could handle Mick returning.

I went to the bar to get my brown bag. The bartender, Emma, handed me a thick envelope. “I saw what happened,” she said. “She won’t be nice, so here’s something to tide you over until you find something else. We’ll call it your two weeks’ severance. I’ll explain. She can’t fire me.”

I rubbed my eyes, wondering if I could stop myself from crying. With the initial adrenaline of the argument fading, I was starting to feel weak. I looked at Emma in amazement. Someone was taking a chance for me. “Why?” I said.

“I’m her kid,” said the bartender, laughing. She pressed the envelope into my hands. “Take care, Maggie.”

I turned to go, then looked back. “Why do people not like me?” I said to the bartender.

“But we’re all so willing to do things for you.” She frowned. “Look at Jane. She’s ignoring this whole thing. What did you do to her? Anything?”

She didn’t wait for a reply. “People like her, you know, they like to be in control. You don’t let them. And you don’t boss them around either, so there’s no pecking order. Throws their whole system of behavior out of whack. Mick felt it. Jane was threatened, Mick too.” She shrugged, and turned to take an order.

I stuffed the envelope into a pocket, trying to digest what Emma had said. I shrugged into my sweater and collected the briefcase and brown paper bag from beside the wait station. It didn’t seem worth saying goodbye to Jane now. It was like a condemnation of my own personality, something mostly beyond my control anyway. But it seemed like Emma had given me information that was destined to be important to me, if I only knew how to use it. People wanted to do thing for me, but didn’t feel comfortable with me because they couldn’t control me. It didn’t seem like me at all.

The heck with it, I told myself. *It's a dream. These aren't real people.*

I turned to the door, and the young man was still there. *Except him*, I told myself. *Don't forget that he's real. Lose him.*

"So," he said, "Do you have a place to stay tonight?"

"I'll manage, thanks," I said and passed him.

His hand replaced itself on my shoulder. I walked faster, pushing away the hand, but he was behind me all the way up the stairs, out of the bar and onto Yonge Street. Beside a vacant store, I stopped and confronted him, feeling vaguely like a liberated Cinderella.

"What do you want?" I said. "Stop following me. It's bad enough losing my job. I don't need some guy hanging around trying to . . ."

He took my hands; I tried to pull away, then let him hold them. I was breathing hard, and felt again like I was about to cry. It was all more than anyone should have to stand. How long had it been since I had passed out into Mr. Hunt's arms, how long since I'd had any control in my life, since I had any real idea of what was going on?

"My name," he said, "is Damon. I'm not from here either. But I have an apartment just around the corner, and I would like to offer you a place to stay tonight."

"Out of the question," I said, and tried to pull away again. His grip tightened, not enough to hurt me, but firm.

"Stop," he said. "Breathe." He waited, holding my hands, until the rhythm of my heart returned to normal and the choked feeling passed. "Better?" he asked.

I nodded. How long before he recognized me? Or had he already, and he was just pretending? The game had changed. It wasn't hide and seek so much any more as – well, as cops and robbers. Everything depended on him not seeing through my disguise, if he hadn't yet. And what if the disguise lapsed after all when I slept? What if it only lasted a certain amount of time? How much control did I have, and how could I find out?

My panic hadn't completely subsided, but another feeling was mingled in it now. His grip on my wrists loosened, and my right hand broke free from his grasp, and moved up to touch his face. He was very handsome, if I was any judge of that kind of thing. He closed his eyes, then opened them to meet mine. Despite the ridiculousness of the feeling, not to mention the huge difference in our real if not apparent ages, I was attracted to him. "I just want to help you. This is not a come-on."

He seemed sincere. *What the heck?* I thought. Better the enemy you know, and who doesn't know you. Keep your enemies close and all that.

His "apartment" was the better part of a building, still downtown and quite close to Mick's. We walked quickly to it, and he was strangely wary all the way, turning his head often as if he thought we were being followed, or was sniffing out something like a bloodhound. *Of course*, I realized as we paused in front of his door for him to take out his keys, *he's looking for me.*

Inside, he seemed to relax a bit. He showed me a couch to curl up on, and brought us both hot chocolate. I was glad he didn't offer alcohol, as I had no taste at all for the stuff.

"So," I said at last, trying to relax, and aware all the time of the conflicting thoughts in my mind. This was the enemy – or was it? Wasn't the Burnt Man the one I should worry about? This might be just a flunky – or he might not have any connection with my enemy at all. At the very least, I might be wrong, and he was in this dream-place on some other errand entirely than searching for me. But, if he was connected to her kidnaping, what kind of danger might he be to me, without even knowing who I was? I longed to ask, but it would be the end of the game, one way or another. And besides, all that – homes, mothers, school – that was another life now. I sank into the sofa and smiled. Stay in the here and now, wasn't that one of my new rules of survival?

“What do you do?”

“Oh, this and that,” said Damon. “I do some business in town, so it’s nice to have a place of my own to stay.”

“I can’t imagine being able to afford a place like this,” I said. A faint concern nagged at the back of my mind. There was something I was missing, some conclusion. What was it? The Burnt Man, this young man – this Damon. I looked around the room, maybe hoping to find answers in the white walls, or the tall windows shuttered by thin white drapes. “You like white.”

“Makes a nice change,” he said, and laughed. “I do okay.” He took a wallet out of his pocket, and showed off a thick sheaf of bills.

“Wow,” I said, not particularly impressed, but thinking. He sat down, beside me on the couch. I flashed back to the hookers on Yonge Street. “That’s a lot of money. I hope you don’t think –”

He laughed. “You never told me your name.”

I could hit him over the head with something, I thought, a bit less comfortable all of a sudden, *but how do I make sure I knock him out? There must be some reason I thought I should come here. It was stupid to be here, stupid to have trusted him for a minute.* “Darlene,” I replied to him, then wanted to hit myself. Of all the things to pop into my head. Darlene.

“That doesn’t seem right for you,” he said. “Know what I’d call you? Marguerite.”

I almost dropped my cup. *He knew!* But he kept on, no change in his manner.

“That’s a pretty name. It would suit you.” He laughed apologetically, noting my discomfort. “I’ve got Marguerites on the brain.”

The Burnt Man. If he had the ability, like me, to change his age, this Damon was just what the Burnt Man would look like at twenty-five.

That was it, the possibility my subconscious had tried to call to my attention. He was the man from the car, the one who had yelled my father’s name after me as I fled. Were he and the Burnt Man one and the same? Or did I have two deadly enemies?

Damon reached out, and stroked my face, taking my fingers softly in his other hand and drifting, his own eyes distant. Despite my suspicions, I liked his touch. It had been a long time, with the exception of the desperate hug from Jan when I thought she’d been kidnaped, that I’d had any tender human contact. “You’re lovely. Darlene. Marguerite. Dirty old man.” But still, no move to take me, to laugh and say, the game’s up. My adversary wouldn’t wait this long if he was sure. He would gloat. He wouldn’t let himself look foolish, soft, definitely not sentimental. Not if he knew.

So I knew then that, no, I hadn’t been found out. And this way Damon was treating me, as if I necessarily should go along with what he said – so romantic and almost unreal – like her name didn’t matter. . .

He thought I wasn’t real. He thought I was as just like the old woman in the market, like Mick herself. A creature of the Dreamworld. A bit of comfort, without any need for explanation.

But even if it was the Devil you knew – to have him looking at me with his warm, dark eyes was too much. A game, and I didn’t know how deadly it would be to make a mistake. This, this felt like a mistake. Was, undeniably, a mistake.

I pulled away, on my guard, all hope of keeping my composure gone for the moment.

“G-go-“ I choked.

Damon released my hand, and stood, abrupt and embarrassed. “I’m sorry. Some knight in shining armor I am.” He turned to the windows and clasped his hands behind his back. “I just don’t know what to do.” He lowered his head. “You don’t want, of course, to hear about my problems.”

I was quickly losing track of what to think. “Maybe it would help me forget mine,” I tried.

If I kept him talking, I would be safer. Encouragingly, I whispered, “Please. I really do appreciate the place to stay. It’s just –”

”I scare you. Typical stupid guy.” He sighed. “I have no excuse for my behavior. Just the same things as everyone else. Family problems, you know. Actually, mostly it’s my father.”

“Your father?” I said, and a new thought entered my head. *Could the Burnt Man have a son?*

“Yes,” said Damon, his face still turned away from me.

There was a long silence. *Unbelievable*, I thought. *I came to be the fox to the hound, and here I am about to play momma dearest to a depressed pup. If it’s him, there’s something unfathomable going on. And if it’s not – could he really have a son?*

I sighed. “Come here, Damon,” I said, and he turned and sat beside me again, not touching, not looking at me. He seemed embarrassed that he’d crossed the line with me. This time, I reached out to him, and wrapped his head in my arms. Encouraged by me, he lay down, his head on my lap. “You’re lucky to have a father,” I said, and meant it sincerely.

After a while, he sat up, gave me a brief and awkward hug, and swept me into his arms, much as Sterling had before. He carried me up the stairs to the white loft, loosened my clothes only enough to make me comfortable, took off my sneakers and socks, and tucked me in. He kissed me quickly on the cheek and went back down the stairs. Still reeling, I watched as the lights went off, and, in the dark, could just make out his form as he undressed and lay down on the sofa.

My heart was still beating too fast, but I was more at ease than I had been in days. I lay awake in the dark for a long time, trying to sort out what had happened. *The Burnt Man’s son*. Why was Damon now in the Dreamworld too, or was the Burnt Man gone and Damon my only pursuer – or maybe he was here to help? *Hardly that*, I thought. But then – what happened during this evening? I thought of his face, in all the places I had seen him: in this apartment, framed by the white curtains; in the bar; on the street holding my hands and telling me to breathe; shouting my father’s name after me as I raced away. He was evil, somehow intrinsically evil. Believing anything else was too dangerous. But so charming, so disarming, so vulnerable – so appealing.

Maybe the explanation was simpler. Maybe. . . And dangerously, I began to believe I had found a kindred spirit in the middle of all this confusion. Maybe he had come to this place for escape, a more concrete version of my own forays into books. Dangerous indeed.

I hugged myself as the fear wrenched me once again. I had to remember the confusion and horror of the last day. If he was a part of the Burnt Man’s plans, I couldn’t trust him at all. That was what I had to remember, above everything else. This decided, I let herself fall asleep, believing myself safe at least until morning.



The sun peeked in the windows of the loft early, a bit before five a.m. by the clock by the bed. I rose quietly, slipped down the stairs to where Damon lay sleeping. I took the wad of bills from the wallet in his pants pocket and added it to what Emma had given me the night before, picked up the briefcase, and let myself out. I was tempted to give his cheek a quick kiss, the way he’d kissed me the previous night, or at least to leave him a note, but willed myself out of being so foolish. I couldn’t chance waking him in any case.

I ate a slow breakfast in a greasy spoon over the morning newspaper. Coffee, something I’d only drunk in moderation from Jan’s morning dregs, tasted vile after the first few sips, but I drank two cups anyway, for the sake of the illusion. I had changed in a public washroom into my business suit, and, hair in a bun at the back of my head and age adjusted to about thirty-five, I was

quite respectable.

After breakfast, I headed into the banking district, and made a phone call to a classy hotel I had passed the day before, reserving a room for myself for that night, under the first name I saw when I opened the telephone book. So far, my randomness, following my whims, had kept me out of the Burnt Man's clutches. If Damon had been on my trail, it had taken them more than a day to track me down at Mick's. Now, it was a game to see whose luck ran out first, his or mine.



Damon came out of the Dreamworld with a jolt. The first thing he saw through his lowered eyes was his father's hand wrapped around his wrist.

The older man was amused. "Did you at least get a good night's sleep?"

Damon felt color rising to his face. "No luck," he replied. He had been foolish to imagine that his father was unaware of his forays into the Dreamworld. "I sensed her, but she was well hidden."

"She's learning," said the Burnt Man. "She grows." He turned his back on his son, and moved slowly to the chair next in line on the dais. "No, don't rise. I can use hers as easily as mine." He sat, lowering himself into the second highest of the thrones. His long hands closed around the arms of the chair with a languid tenderness. "Shall we return together?"

"Father –" Damon sat forward. "About my sister. . ."

The Burnt Man silenced him with a wave. "The girl first. Arabella can wait. There's nothing she can do to change or unseat my plans."

He said nothing more, and Damon felt a twinge of frustration. There was nothing that either he or Aria could ever do to influence their mighty father, was there? Why had he had children at all, if he only meant to deny them any power or foreknowledge of events to come? But an iron-handed fairness had reigned in their household far more than generosity. Even after all the years spent with him, Damon knew far more about his father's sense of justice than about the man himself.

Drawing a deep breath, he gathered his resources to follow where his father had already gone, far more swiftly than Damon could hope to accomplish.



I felt comfortable and happy the moment I set foot in the hotel lobby.

The hotel represented by far the greatest luxury of my life, and everyone was polite and discrete. Still, there was a buzz going around the lobby when I arrived, reporters and milling people. I almost panicked, then relaxed and asked the concierge what was going on.

"The price of fame," said the woman. "The price of fame, rock star style. He's coming in tonight, this singer. They've got the penthouse suite all done up with a piano for him, and his entourage has the floor below." She rolled her eyes.

I asked who the rock singer was, wondering if it would be someone who existed in my world as well. Were the characters in this Toronto shadows of people in the real world, or had they all been brought here like me, in their dreams? The third option of course was that everyone she had been in contact with was an entirely fictional creation, but that was almost impossible to conceive.

"No one you'd know," said the woman with a wink. "Not our generation. To tell you the truth, I keep forgetting his name."

I laughed. My generation.

In the room, I stripped off the jacket and skirt and pulled on the flowered dress I'd bought that afternoon to be comfortable and different tonight. I turned on the television, curious, and here was another anachronism. The screen, every channel, was full of snow. *Maybe the cable's out*, I thought, *or maybe expecting functional TV is a bit much for this place*. It had occurred to me that afternoon to hide out for a few hours watching a movie. If the television was any way to judge, it was probably a good thing I hadn't wasted my time.

Instead, I sat cross-legged on the bed and played.

Closing my eyes was a good way to begin, because there I could see her growing power like light behind my eyelids and gauge how much more there was of it every time I checked. I was beginning to see a shape to it – an exciting, twining mass of potential. Playing with it was like being Alice slowly opening the door to the Queen of Heart's garden. I could bring my hands up to my face like a ballerina and manipulate it. This was what I had done instinctively when I learned to change my appearance. It was like paint; it was liquid, and I could force its ebb and flow.

Liking the image of it as liquid and tidal, I made an experiment. What if I could use my magic to make a container for itself?

Grimacing to concentrate, shutting my eyes tight, I tried. I pictured a cylinder the size and shape of a plain drinking glass. It formed in my hands, gleaming like mother of pearl. Then I poured into it just enough energy to lap the rim. I opened her eyes, and I could feel it there although I couldn't see it. Another idea occurred to me.

Groping around in my mind, I found what felt like a light switch and fiddled with it – and the object in my hand burst into flame.

Yes, a cylinder, like I'd planned, and all the colors of fire. It was not warm, but it tingled with what I understood was the presence of her power. To see what would happen, I dimmed the glow considerably and hurled it at the wall. The liquid splattered and spread, the container disappearing into the body of the mass, and I realized I was directing it by my own expectations. For a moment I was afraid, and then I decided to remind the power instead who was the boss. I drew wide shimmering arcs on the wallpaper until the room glowed like magic. With magic.

Laughing with joy, I threw out my arms and collected the magic back to me, loving the gentle tingle of its presence.

It was now I also began to see the full destructive power I possessed. It called to me to use it, to send it out, to destroy something or change something. It bucked like a wild pony and called to me, even the little bit I had sent against the wall, begging to dissolve, eat away the paper and plaster. Swept up in the heady feeling of omnipotence, I flung another part of my magic at the wall.

And saw, horrifically, the wall dissolve in an instant, like touchpaper becoming ash. The wallpaper shimmered and was gone; plaster popped, and severed electrical cables threw cascades of sparks. The next room was empty, but I collapsed with fright anyhow at what I'd done, and what I could have done to a person standing on the other side of that wall.

Very much chastened and afraid now more of myself than even of the Burnt Man, I directed the wall to repair itself. Fixing it took a lot more effort than destroying it had, and I was exhausted when the job was completed. I had relied on my memory of what had been there before, and I wasn't certain I'd got it all right. What if there had been someone there? And what if it had been in my world, not this dream-one? What then? Can you put a person back together, like you can fix drywall?

A short time later, when I was ordering food from room service, I felt panic flooding back, adding itself to the dark despair that hadn't abated since my earlier experiments. There was a nearly palpable sense of urgency, to stay – to move – I couldn't determine the nature of the urge. I

forced myself to stay calm and keep my emotions and voice level. I could not afford to panic. Tomorrow, I would be gone from here.

But the pressure remained, a tick in my forehead, and grew, fast. I wondered if there was any sense in taking aspirin for what was now an actual pain. I put my hands around my forehead when I hung up the receiver and vowed to cope.

It was nearly nine when I got off the phone and decided to go for ice. If not drugs, then a cold towel. I could allow myself that. I was on my way back with the cool bucket under my arm when I froze. In the middle of the hall, effectively between me and my room, stood my own private demon, the Burnt Man.

Some trick of his no doubt made it possible even at this distance to clearly see his mouth quirk in the half smile I had already come to loathe. Stupid games. I had been a free agent for several days now. I had no desire to be a captive again, chained to anyone's rock in the discomfort and boredom of the underground tunnel. Come to think of it, I was enjoying all the aspects of my freedom - the ability to work, to wander, to see sights, to make discoveries. Dangerously, I realized I didn't in that moment care if I ever went back to the 'real world' I had left behind. Here, I wasn't impotent, awkward, isolated Maggie. If I was alone, it was because I was enjoying my own company. What I did was by my own choice. Even my age was within my control. I could be an adult, a child, a teenager. I would not easily go back to a routine and to school after this. Or, especially, to being a prisoner.

All this went through my head in the instant of the sighting and his smile. Then, I was aware of a clatter as the ice bucket banged against my leg on the way to the ground, and I was off.

Once, on an overnight class trip, I had joined in a game of tag in the hotel. It had almost ended in the entire class being sent home. For once, I was as culpable as the rest. The fun of it had faded into the past, but the theory remained sound. *Keep moving, keep weaving, and go on instinct.* I dashed to the end of the hallway, away from the towering man in black, and into the stairwell. There were two staircases, one at either end of the long hall, and four banks of elevators. Provided I kept moving, and kept choosing randomly, I should be able to stay ahead of him until I could double back to my room, or simply out to the exit. What would be better, the lobby? the back door? the parking garage? Without my briefcase, I'd have to find money all over again, or figure out how to make it appear. *Don't even think about it now. Let what happens happen.*

Would he run? I wondered, trying to picture him racing after me, black cape flapping, and cursed myself. There was no time to think, only to stay ahead.

What could have tipped him off? But I thought I knew, even as I wondered. I should have put my finger on it earlier. The reservation I'd made at the hotel. Somehow that had been enough. He must have more resources at his disposal than I had guessed.

I raced down one flight, then out again. The elevator doors were sliding shut but the people on board held it for her. If anyone thought it was odd to see a grown woman running like a teenager playing tag, no one remarked on it. I pressed a number at random. When the doors opened, I was off again, down another corridor, and up the stairs this time.

There must be a way to use my power to hide me, to do something. What was the use of all of it if I couldn't help myself? But nothing, no idea of how to proceed, came to me, and I just kept running.

Somewhere in the middle of my thinking, the rhythm of my feet unpleasantly echoed in my head, I realized something else that might have led him to me.

And I dropped the disguise. I had to be right. The magic, that's what he was tracking. That's what Damon had sensed while he was with me. It must have maddened him, to be so close to his quarry and not to see that I was closer than he imagined. *The magic.* Maybe this last time I

had played with her new power, I had led him straight to her. Maybe the headache was my awareness of him. The amount of power I used to keep up my disguise was minimal, I knew that, and so probably was a faint signal to follow. But taking down an entire wall. . . and then repairing it. . .

I didn't know how I ended up on the penthouse floor, only that suddenly I found I had reached a dead end.

"Well, well. The first fan. Congrats."

He was enormous, not just tall but solid like a wall. There was a band tour shirt stretched across his big chest but I found myself unable to read it through eyes that were full of pained tears. The headache was almost unbearable. His hand came down on my back, pushing me into the foyer of the penthouse suite.

"I'm going to have quite a talk with the folks in the lobby," he said. "You should never have been able to get on the elevator, much less all the way up here. But now you are, I've got specific orders about you."

I shivered, said nothing, panicking. He grinned, friendlier than I had thought him at first. "Don't be scared, kid. It's just he has this quirk, right? First crazy fan who finds his way to the door gets to say hi. Been doing it since he got famous. Doesn't advertise, that would be insane. But he does it. Most people like him wouldn't bother. I think it's kind of sweet."

The big security guard put an ink stamp on the back of my hand and led me to the door at the end of the hall. I felt like I was being processed, for someone's dinner maybe. "I think you know how lucky you are," he said.

I, who was thinking nothing of the sort, breathed deeply, wondering how much a haven this would prove to be, and for how long. It was totally surreal. I was numb. Was this an escape? How long could I hide out here?

The doors swung open. I stepped off the plush carpet onto a plusher carpet, stunningly white, into a room that seemed suffused with sunlight, although if time was holding out in this reality, it would be night outside. It was a room glittering with gold and glass, opulent, opalescent, a fairy tale.

The guard motioned me forward toward the next room, beyond cut glass doors, from which came the silver tinkle of a piano. I took a couple of steps, and he retreated into the hall silently, closing the doors behind him as he went.

I wonder what singing for supper entails around here, I thought. I felt myself shiver. Maybe this was a mistake after all.

I trailed my hand along the wall, brushed the glass door as I passed, feet silent in the deep carpet. The next room was as the first, except for the swarthy blush of the black grand piano that dominated the side closest to the big French doors leading to the balcony.

I could see through the glass to the dark sky outside, speckled with the diamond flecks of the city's lights beyond the pianist's head, a view that had to be worth whatever they charged for this suite. If money could really buy beauty, here was proof. And maybe that after all was where I fit into this part of the fantasy. It was all about where money could take you. I thought of Damon. His money had bought me into the exquisite world of this hotel. He had, in essence, paid me for companionship, no matter how innocent that companionship had been – and I had turned on him and turned around to pay for the comfort of this hotel. Now, I would need a new sort of currency, perhaps, to buy some more time.

I continued my approach to the piano, wondering if I should make some sound to let the unknown rock star know he was no longer alone. Maybe I should just seat myself on one of the couches and wait, listening. Would it be in my favor to demonstrate an appreciation of the music

somehow? In indecision, I stopped and stood examining him.

From what I could tell, the musician was a man in his twenties. The build and musculature of a fit young man were easy to discern under his soft white shirt. His hair was blond and long, caught in a low ponytail below the nape of his slender neck. His hands were hardly moving, the right clearly visible on the upper range of the keyboard, his left dancing to meet it then disappearing again behind his body.

I put my hand to my head and felt for the pins I had put there to hold everything in place. My hair was fine. *Stupidity*. This musician didn't even exist in my world, or not at least so he would remember me from this dream. What would it matter what impression I made on him? He was a haven from the dangers of this place, not a real man at all. No reason to be star-struck.

Besides, I would more likely look ridiculous than attractive, a little girl with her hair all done up in a bun like the mockery of a grown woman or some hopeful ballet student.

Suddenly, the pianist's hands came crashing down on the keyboard. I jumped, then relaxed. He was temperamental after all. This must mean that I had been noticed.

It seemed so; his right hand came down, long fingers resting on the bench, and he began to turn, his left hand going to his head in the same motion mine had the moment before. I started to smile, then felt my throat constrict as the hand completed its motion through the blond hair. It tumbled into his hand – and he finished turning, dark eyes meeting mine, dark hair matted from the wig.

“Hi, Maggie,” said Damon, winking. He hefted the blond wig in one hand, running the other through his own hair.

A claw came down on my shoulder, huge, strong fingers digging into the muscle. I turned my head slowly and painfully, headache re-awakened, realizing too late my mistake. It had been a trap after all.

I had been counting so much on providence, on the workings of fate that I could neither control or, it was clear now, rely on, that I had allowed my very faith in blind luck to betray me. By letting the situations run me, instead of taking the initiative, I had used up one lucky chance too many. Fortune had worked against me because I trusted it to work in my favor. I had spent far too little time trying to understand my situation. Of course his magic should be able to track down mine. Of course I should have tried harder. I probably could have tracked him as easily, if only I'd taken the time to understand.

He was smiling, as I knew he would be, the Burnt Man, holding my shoulder so tightly it was already going numb. “You lose,” he said.

Damon laughed, and I was suddenly angry, at the way he had betrayed me, even though I understood he was being true to both his nature and heritage, as well as acting in his own best interests.

“Congratulations,” I said, not trying to keep the bitterness I felt out of her voice. “Are you back in your father's affection? Has he forgiven you?”

His eyes narrowed in confusion, not understanding. I had a spilt instant to wonder – *doesn't he know he already found me once?*

The Burnt Man lifted me right off the ground, my shoulder in the vice of his fingers. I felt the bones shift and cried out in the suddenness of the pain. Around us, the Dreamworld was melting away, and in the brightness of my agony, I slipped into unconsciousness. The last thing I was aware of was the starscape, glittering through the window.



Aaron was awake before Jason, but that didn't surprise him. Jason was obviously in bad shape. Whatever Aaron had suffered in boredom was nothing compared to the other boy's treatment. *There were worse things after all that having time on your hands*, Aaron told himself.

By the time Jason rolled over, opening his eyes, Aaron had done a lot of thinking.

"Morning," he said. "How's the black and blues?"

"Blot too blice," said Jason thickly. His lip was swollen and purple, but he was exaggerating how much.

Aaron scratched his cheek. "Blat blo?"

"Bles." Jason sat and shook his head, laughing. "Blenough blees."

"How are you doing?" Aaron pulled himself onto his knees. It looked like Jason's chains wouldn't give him as much range of movement as he had himself. "Looks like they're trying to keep you pretty uncomfortable."

"That seems to be the intention," said Jason. He grimaced as he shifted again, trying to find a good way to sit. "Although yesterday they decided to give me a bath."

"A what?" Aaron laughed, disbelieving. "What do you mean, like a big tub and bubbles?"

"Pretty much. I figure they're just getting me in shape for the next time they want to kick the crap out of me."

Aaron was silent for a moment. "What do you think is going on here?"

Jason shook his head. "I already told you just about everything I know. What about you? Did they get you that day when everyone was sitting around like zombies?"

"When we were what?" said Aaron, and Jason explained.

"I don't remember any of that," Aaron said. "It must have been hypnosis or something like that. Gas in the ventilation system."

"Then why do I remember most of it?"

"Okay, go back. We'll figure it out. I remember up until we went to assembly."

"Maggie wasn't there," said Jason, concentrating hard. "She couldn't have been. She was in the hallway when I ran out."

"How's this?" Aaron pushed his glasses up. "What if they were doing something to us, and it didn't completely work on you? That's why you remember more. I don't remember anything that happened in assembly. That didn't bother me until I started thinking about it. I've had quite a bit of time to think."

Jason had to be impressed. "Yeah, that's possible. Actually, that makes a lot of sense. Do you remember the singing?"

"What singing?"

"Like – I don't know – a choirboy. A kind of – I don't know. Just a boy singing all by himself, and whenever I can remember hearing it, it was like I lost some time. I couldn't have been totally unaffected."

Aaron nodded. "That's what it was like for me, when I tried to remember, like I'd lost the time. But I didn't hear any singing. Holy, was that just yesterday?"

Jason thought, although he wasn't sure anymore. "Two or three days ago now, it must be. At least. But you didn't come here then?"

"You mean was that when I got kidnaped, shanghaied, keelhauled, whatever. No. I went home from school like nothing happened. I was going to call Scott later in the afternoon, but I kind of got myself involved with – well, involved." It wasn't necessary to explain he'd been completely wrapped up in economics anecdotes from the turn of the previous century. Telling his father was one thing: letting a peer find out was probably not a good idea. He stretched an arm back over his shoulder. "I am so stiff." He frowned. "What's wrong?"

Jason shifted uncomfortably. “I was just thinking that I’m probably the only one who was there that remembers anything.”

Aaron felt suddenly cold. “Maybe,” he said slowly, “you’d better tell me.”

Aaron looked seriously at Jason, who shivered. “Go slow if it’s hard. I mean, there’s obviously no rush.” He broke eye contact and indicated the single set of shackles in the depression opposite them. “Who do you think we’re waiting for?”

“I don’t know. Maybe Maggie.”

Aaron closed his eyes. “Lawson, I am not happy to be here. I’ve never even talked to Maggie Stuart. I barely know you, except from hanging around with Scott. So please. Just tell me a bit about what you know.”

Jason didn’t answer. A long period of time passed between them where neither could bring himself to break the silence. Finally, Aaron said, “How does Mr. Sterling fit in to all this?”

“I think we get him as a maid,” Jason proposed. Aaron snorted. Jason shrugged. “I don’t know – why don’t we work on him a bit when he comes back? See if we can get him out of the trance. You know anything about hypnotism?”

Aaron coughed. “Jay – what if it’s something else?”

Jason sucked in his lips, and blew them out again in a raspberry. “Listen, I have to tell you something else, and you have to believe me. Then I’ll make a stab at the assembly. Okay?”

Aaron nodded.

“Okay. The day before all this happened, I saw Mr. Hunt doing something really weird with the blood samples he collected from our class. I don’t know what, like waving a knife around, and candles and stuff. And then he asked Maggie to stay after class. So neither of them was in the auditorium.”

Aaron nodded. “You think he knew something about what was happening?”

“Yeah, and had different plans for Maggie. What I don’t get is how we fit in.”

“Back-up?” suggested Aaron. “In case they screw up with Maggie?”

“Ugh. Don’t even make jokes about that.”

“And the assembly?” Aaron prodded, a little less patiently.

Jason drew a deep breath. “It was bad. I mean, real bad. It was kind of like a ritual. Like what I saw Mr. Hunt doing, but more even. Candles again, all these black ones, out in patterns. And then the man –”

”Yeah?” said Aaron.

He was intense now as Jason had seen him when they’d had classes together in previous years. Aaron was a pretty serious guy most of the time, he had always thought. Jason didn’t know him at all well enough to know if he was the type to laugh at this sort of stuff. He continued with some trepidation. “He was beside this circle, all dressed in black, like some bad Dracula movie. And there were other people with – I don’t know, little pots they were carrying around. They were burning something – and the more smoke I inhaled the weirder I felt. But everyone else was just staring, like they weren’t there at all.”

“Big five-pointed star?” said Aaron.

“Don’t make fun of it!”

“I’m not,” said Aaron. “They use five-pointed stars in circles for magic – they’re called pentacles. Pentagrams.”

Jason looked more closely at the other boy. “You believe in all this stuff?”

Aaron laughed harshly. “Look where we are, Lawson. I’m not inclined at the moment to believe I’m much of an authority on anything.”

Jason nodded. “Right.”

“Okay,” said the other boy. “The man. And the singing.”

“And then the singing,” Jason agreed. “Sometimes I thought I could see the boy who was doing it, just kind of this white little thing inside the man’s cape. Anytime I looked right at him, he was gone, and then I’d catch him out of the corner of my eye.”

“Sounds pretty spooky.”

Jason was suddenly vehement. “That was nothing. There was a lot more. God, I don’t even know how to describe it. God! It was the worst thing ever.”

Aaron waited, trying not to let any of his growing excitement show.

“Blood, Aaron.” Jason shook his head, eyes wide and staring. “Everywhere. Not at first. First there were shapes, like shadows. I thought it was just because of the candles. I really couldn’t look too hard, because everyone else was so still and I didn’t want to let them know I wasn’t. . . . But I wasn’t. And then there were these. . . things in the air, and they got bigger like I was seeing, I don’t know, a tick feeding. And they swelled up, and then –”

He stopped for a moment, wiping his brow. “It rained off us. I thought we’d be covered. That’s why I bolted, the moment I saw it all coming down. Red rain. Blood or. . . . God! I don’t know how, but none of it got on me. That’s what freaked me so much. It just – slid off. But I could feel it sliding over me.” He shut his eyes. “I can’t talk about it any more.”

Aaron kept silent. There was absolutely nothing he could think of to say. It didn’t seem right to make a joke, or to offer some kind of sympathy. The horror for him was that he had been there, and, unlike Jason, couldn’t remember a thing. The blood must have fallen over him as well, slipped off him like water off the proverbial duck. . . . They sat quietly for a long time, until Aaron couldn’t stand it any longer. In as cheerful a tone as he could manage, he said, “Still doesn’t do anything about our current problem.” He shook his wrists and the chains clanked. “This really ticks me off.”

“Right. And I’m hungry.” Jason laughed. “I can’t believe I’m thinking about food. I guess we’re lucky this isn’t a forced labor camp.”

He started whistling the theme from *The Bridge Over The River Kwai*, and in a moment, Aaron joined in as well. It felt pretty good to Jason to do something a little rebellious, even if it was minor, all things (like shackles and being some unidentifiable place underground) taken into consideration.



Damon came out of the Dreamworld drawn and exhausted.

He had been sitting comfortably on his father’s throne when he’d entered; now one leg was over the arm of the chair and the other was hooked under him. The foot was nearly asleep. He was braced upright with an arm over his head, and that piece of anatomy had lolled right over his shoulder to rest on his chest.

The waking was sudden, as it often was. He was not used to going into the Dreamworld from the throne room. Usually, he made his forays from the privacy and familiarity of his own room. It was no surprise, with how little he was accustomed to using the throne room as an exit point, that he was a bit disoriented at first.

The Dreamworld was exited by an effort of will and an expense of power, the same way it was entered. Soporifics, like the ones which had been used for Maggie, were not necessary unless there was resistance – effective resistance, in any case. No mere human could keep out of the Dreamworld if his father wanted them there.

Maggie. The little girl, thirteen, wasn’t she? And all the efforts, the plans packed like

Russian dolls, all had paid off in the end. She was here, and here she would stay. Nothing was as neat as Damon would have liked, however. Aria was playing her own games, while Damon tried to do just as he was told and felt himself coming up short, as always.

Damon's eyes adjusted slowly to the dim light, taking in the forms of the other thrones and his own legs, curled through the shadows. His irises glinted red for a moment.

"Father," he said, as the Burnt Man rose out of the blackness with no warning.

That Was Well Done, My Son, said the other man, letting the words echo only in his son's head.

Damon figured this was probably the only time discussion would be allowed about the point to the exercise, but had no energy to respond in kind. "Thank you, Father."

"Arabella—" the other said, and Damon was conscious that the warmth of the room he had felt a moment before had drained away. "You know she is plotting. You know, as well, that she interprets rather than follows instructions. What do you know of your sister's plans?"

"Arabella," said Damon, "is always plotting. Her reach tends to exceed her grasp."

The Burnt Man nodded, his eyes coal-red for the moment and fixed on Damon. Then, his demeanor shifted, altered, leaving Damon facing a reasonably ordinary middle-aged man, handsome and slightly sinister undoubtedly, but without his usual menace.

Damon said nothing, let no surprise show in his eyes. Impulsively, he reached out and his fingers brushed the stiffness of the Burnt Man's cloak. His father's long fingers raked up and grasped his wrist, with a pressure on the verge of painfulness.

"Stand with me," said the Burnt Man, and Damon, watching the aura of power return, nodded dumbly. How could Aria think to deceive him? But there was little his sister wouldn't dare, and she usually won whatever battles she chose, regardless of the adversary. More than once, her father had congratulated her when Damon had expected fury.

Stand With Me, the Burnt Man said again, and this time Damon drew himself up.

I Will, he responded.



I woke suddenly, gasping for air, and was surprised to find myself alone in the round room with the mirrors – alone except for the multitude of Maggies that surrounded me and sat up with me in concert, the same expression of fear on each of their tired faces.

But where was he? I had expected him to be there, hovering over me, gloating. I had half thought I would never wake up at all, and he would be there for eternity in my head, tormenting me.

I lay back down, trying to catch my breath. What part of the game was this? Had I failed, and now he would just let me go? No. No, unlikely.

I sneezed then, and felt the room refuse to respond, dead echo.

From the walls, Maggie upon Maggie looked back in surprise. As I had in the Dreamworld, I closed my eyes and tried to pull my power into a solid form. There was no response. No tinkle of energy surging in my fingers and toes. I tried reached out, and discovered a coldness about me unlike what I'd felt in the catacombs, and very unlike the rush I'd experienced in other Toronto. My power must still there, but it felt completely dead. This room had some kind of effect on me, not the dampening of the shackles, but something more profound. Surprised, I discovered that my eyes had filled with tears. It couldn't all be gone! Was that the price of my failure in the Burnt Man's test?

The door of the room opened with a click, a good indication that I couldn't let myself be helpless without the power to call on, that I still had my normal abilities. I should have been

listening, alert.

Mr. Sterling entered, flanked by two other guards with expressionless, empty faces. He himself looked the same as before, the foreign hatred spread shallowly beneath his features. He moved toward me, stretching out his arms to lift me.

“I can walk, thanks,” I said, and shifted my weight off the bed and onto my feet. At the first movement, jarring pain shot through me, *just pins and needles*, I told herself. *Don’t be a baby. You’re not an invalid.* I shuffled onto legs that seemed made of thin paper and took a few awkward steps before allowing him to put his arm under my shoulders to help me. My stomach growled. Phantom hotel meals might be okay for the mind, but they wouldn’t do much for the body. Or was the dream-place more real than I imagined? And how much time had passed while I’d been asleep anyway? This place held far more questions than answers.

They moved into the hall, and immediately I felt a shift in that special part of my mind.

Suddenly, I was like a fire, bursting into brightness. The two uniformed officers stationed themselves on either side of the door. She and Mr. Sterling continued alone down the rocky corridor.

The Burnt Man had proved something to me. Maybe in the end he had caught up to me, but inside me the power was burning. Whatever power I had been aware of before had multiplied tenfold. Whatever he had begun by bringing me here, and then by putting me into his Dreamworld, I was boiling over now. Why didn’t I try now to run away, back to the surface?

The answer was in what I’d begun to feel in the Dreamworld hotel room. Since then, my power had grown again, and what I could now sense inside myself seemed far too big to control anymore. My fear of *myself* held me now from trying to escape. Funny, that I should be restricted not by what he could do to me but my fear of what I might do to him. Could I bring down the catacombs if I unleashed my full force? I thought she might.

He’s created a monster, I thought. I flexed my hand, and with it came a rush of heady power that coursed through that arm, and up into my chest. *Wish I’d been sitting down*, I told myself. *I’d better watch myself carefully before I try that again.* The power was in me, riddling its way through me. It felt like all I could do to contain it.

Relax, Mags, I said to myself, and closed my eyes once more, letting the power surge through me again, this time trying to direct it herself, finding after a few false starts (in which I was sure I would lose control completely and spew raw energy out of every pore) that I could store the tingling feeling in my fingertips, in my toes, in my joints even as I walked. *Separated, broken down, it would be manageable* – I hoped.

Very soon, I began to recognize where we were. *Funny*, I told herself, *even featureless stone corridors can take on a look of home if they’re all you can find to hold on to.* And it was obvious from where we were that soon we would be back at my home away from home, that beautiful bare rock shelf – with manacles, of course, for that extra comfort you’ve been looking for in a prison. *Flippant, Mags*, I thought. *Can’t be as bad off as you think if you’re still willing to joke about it.* To have the shackles back on, with their dampening effect, might be a blessing now. Then I could relax from the effort of controlling myself.

But there was one thing I still had to try. I’d promised, even if he was unaware that I had. It was now or never to make another attempt to get into Mr. Sterling’s head. I reached out a tentative thread of power, and felt nothing, no Burnt Man, none of his presence, no vibrations of any kind. Even more cautiously, remembering Mr. Sterling’s anguished contortions the last time I tried this, I reached out to the man beside me.

His mind was like a rough-skinned fruit, tough for the first little bit, then soft and regular like an orange, in segments. I found I could trace the shape of his thoughts, find layers, other skins,

none as tough as the outer layer but skins regardlessly. But something – unnatural – The feeling was somehow not what I expected a mind to feel like – *oops*.

I extended a hand, just before stepping into a wall. I would have to split my attention between my powers and the normal function of avoiding obstacles if I was to continue walking and searching his mind all at once.

Leaving a portion of my consciousness to keep an eye on the outside world, I moved back into Mr. Sterling's mind. Yes, something felt wrong here – the Burnt Man's influence, no doubt. But what was the nature of his control, that was the real question. What did an *untampered-with* mind feel like? Surely not as soft and – what? juicy? – as this one.

I dug deeper, and began to find chips, hard little pockets that resisted easy examination. Like pits in an orange, I thought, how nice to be able to continue the analogy. They must be the key. I surrounded one of them with a glowing exertion of my will – and immediately cringed. *Why not put up flares for him, I Am Here – Surrender, Maggie?* I dimmed the glow with an effort, and dug in.

It was harder than I expected and the attempt at first forced me back out of his mind, to see that I was maybe a hundred feet down the corridor from the branch that led to my little cell. I dove back in, slightly recklessly for prior experience, and this time grasped a thread of that pulpy stuff in his brain to brace myself for the plunge.

Once past the shell of the hard fleck, it was easy, and I saw immediately, now inside, that I would have no further trouble with this kind of block. What was inside surprised me, however. Mr. Sterling, I had known, was half English, half German. What I hadn't known was that his maternal grandfather had been imprisoned for war crimes, specifically for enthusiastic participation in the Nazi party. The stories passed through the family had had an effect on the young Mr. Sterling, and seemed to have terrorized him in the form of nightmares as a boy.

I passed through a bizarre landscape in this tiny kernel full of a child's crazy imaginings about war and torture and death – and at the center of it was a robustly healthy Mr. Sterling, in his SS uniform, efficiently ordering thousands of people to their deaths. With his own worst nightmares, however irrational, used to warp his perceptions, he had lost the ability to distinguish between dream and reality.

And this, then, would be my clue. The Burnt Man was able to use people's own fears against them, making them succumb to what they hated. What would that be for me? This was the question I would need to sort out before I faced him. *What would he use to get to me?* Had he already done just that, in the dream Toronto? Forced me to lose? Using my belief in blind fate? There was so much –

I pulled myself out of his mind, gathering my resources for another attack, this one to remove the seeds planted by the Burnt Man. *He must pay for this*, I told myself, and found myself smiling, bitterly. *And what makes me think that I have any claim to understanding reality after this time? I don't even know how long I've been down here, or where here is. Maybe this will all turn out to be a dream - or just a dream within the Dream, and in another moment I will wake in the white room by the piano with the Burnt Man gloating over me after all –*

Self-defeating. Go on the assumption that this is reality, and whatever you see is reality, or be lost always. I whittled a spear of power, a surgical needle, and pierced Mr Sterling's orange-skull.

He screamed, dropped to his knees, but with the presence of mind to grab me on the way down. I twisted and fell, more intent on the mental than the physical, intent on the operation. His hand came up, full of my hair, and I suddenly knew the truth. The Burnt Man had injected his poison too deeply. This procedure would succeed only at the expense of the patient's life.

No wonder the Burnt Man had left me alone. I could reach Mr. Sterling's mind only to a point – any further tampering with the blocks would kill him. I knew the disease, but not the cure. We lay in the corridor, both incapacitated and panting, for several minutes. He recovered first, and I felt the pressure of the Burnt Man's will on me, holding me down until he could stand. He was observing me, of course, always spying to evaluate me. Another game, and this round was to him.

Mr. Sterling pulled me roughly to my feet, no gentleness this time, finally seeming to have developed a personal grudge against me. With my arm twisted behind me hard enough to pinch the nerves in my shoulder, the one that still ached from the Burnt Man's grasp, he pushed me before him into the tunnel, pushed me up onto the shelf with a hand under my arm and the other on my calf.

I sobbed in frustration and allowed him to shackle my arms again. *I would, I thought, sleep like a baby, for as long as they would let me.* Maybe some idea would come to me before I woke – if I was only able to get some real rest. Too exhausted. I curled up on the thin foam mat and slept as easily as if I had been in my own bed, which is to say deep and restless, and like a bad night back in my old life, my cheeks were soon wet with the tracks of slow tears escaping from clenched eyes.

I was only half-aware of Jason and Aaron, and they talked on in whispers while I drifted into sleep.