

## Chapter Six



She came to the throne room to say a thousand things she was still not sure of, and found her brother pacing there, arms folded across his chest.

Damon watched Arabella all down the long approach, recognizing immediately her agitation. *I'm a lot more perceptive than she gives me credit for*, he thought wryly, *at least where my own safety is concerned.*

However, since there was nowhere to run without passing her, and in effect admitting he was afraid of her, he stood his ground and looked down on her disapprovingly, always the smaller but deadlier of the two. She kept her distance warily, and he felt a slight and grim satisfaction. Arabella understood very well the danger in forcing a normally timid foe into a corner.

"I've got to see him," she said, and Damon realized she looked nearly disheveled. Curls of her piled hair snaked over her ears and around the point of her chin. She was troubled. If he had the heart to drive home his current advantages, he might be able at last to finish their long battle. If he had the heart. Somehow, he doubted he did. Winning meant no more frivolity, no more leisure, no more friends, no more Dreamworld. What of those would he give up for a lonely empire and a father who hardly ever talked to his son except to give him orders?

To win, over Aria. There probably would be some pleasure in that, but he much preferred their current deadlock. Still, he couldn't help but answering coldly in the manner most likely to infuriate her, "Father is busy and cannot be disturbed."

"Look, you tiresome worm, I have to talk to him. I have to talk to him now."

Damon stood his ground. She had made no attempt to push him aside and force her entry. Maybe she thought she was in more disgrace than she was. Char had said nothing, except on that exit from the Dreamworld, while Damon was still swimming in memories of Maggie's face, the straight dark hair coming loose as his father lifted her up, the look on her face as she fainted away, and the smile on Char's. Maybe it hadn't been a smile exactly, but he was pleased. What ever the test had been, Maggie had passed with flying colors.

"You can't," said Damon to his sister. "He's busy."

"I don't expect loyalty from you, Damon. We're rivals, and yes, I can say that without any thought you'll say otherwise. But we have a common purpose, at the heart of it. We are both Father's children."

"What?" said Damon. "Are you declaring a truce?"

She was fast as always, and before he knew what she was planning, she had pinned him against the wall, her knife to his throat. "Don't think I haven't figured it out," she hissed. "I know who exposed me. The boy is mine. Char doesn't need him. Any of them would have done, he said. This one is mine. I'll find him another one if he wanted one. So, we have to be uncomfortable, instead of all neat and happy like it would have been if you weren't trying to turn Father against

me all the time. I am again in your debt. Don't worry – this time I will find a way to pay you back.”

She stepped back, the knife leaving his throat last. He reached out and had her wrist in an instant, but she merely dropped the knife, caught it with her other hand and brought it up against his stomach. “Let's call it a truce for now,” she said. “I have to admit, Dame, you're not as much of a coward as you used to be.”

She moved off, blind hate in her eyes, and walked confidently backward to the end of the hall, never taking her eyes off her brother.

Damon had been holding his hands at his side with a certain amount of effort until she had disappear from sight. The moment the flurry of skirts had vanished around the corner, he touched his neck, and the fingers came away with a sheen of dark blood. Aria would turn him as murderous as she was herself if she kept up. Never in history had their dislike and rivalry been more open, and never had the stakes seemed so high. He was unsure of what was changing here in Char's underground empire, but there was something very rotten going on.

As a precaution, he began to call out to his father, then thought better of it. If Aria had the boy tucked away somewhere, there was only one place she could have put him where she'd have considered him safe. It was an easy conclusion to come to: exactly where she'd said, with Char's little albino acolyte in the low room, deep below even the catacombs.

Maybe he would take matters into his own hands. If Aria didn't return within the hour, he would send someone after her. Let his father see how his son was taking responsibility at last.



Arabella wouldn't have liked the conclusions an outsider might have drawn about her last few hours, which had begun with a frantic flight to the subterranean landing and continued with near-catatonia slumped against Peter's door. To an outsider, it may very well have looked like she was frightened, or running to escape, or at the end of her ability to scheme. There may have been parallels to note between her flight here and Damon's to Maggie, but the similarities ended on the surface, or so she convinced herself. She was no weakling like her brother, no sentimental baby rushing off to confront his demons. She was making plans, and just needed a bit of time alone to do so.

And so she believed.

It didn't matter if she was sitting still and staring, unable to think of anything at all, knowing she was sinking into a haze of black anger and depression. When she could, she had called Peter to her, soft pulses of power through the doorway going where her hands couldn't. He came, toddling up the stairs like a much younger boy, and crouched as she did, fingers spread against the wood matching hers on the other side.

“Peter,” she whispered. And then, more softly, “Mama.”

Waiting had done the trick. The new idea sprang into her head so fully formed she wondered if she had thought of it before, and just shelved it until this moment now. There was Fate obviously working in her favor, because without her intervention earlier, she wouldn't know what she did now. That Scott Saunders was strong, eager to please, and loved Peter. To threaten Peter was to have Scott perfectly in hand. And with a good strong back for protection and her father's prized Peter for guidance, she had all the help she would need to win her an empire. Now, to let her brother play his hand. She crouched, feeling Peter's presence through the door, patient finally.



He'd been driving all night, in a rarely ebullient good mood. Not that it wasn't always fun to get the better of his poor little brother John, especially after having to wait so many years since the last time.

Tamblyn hadn't been quite as surprised to see him as Hunt had thought he would be. Of course, he'd had time since initially seeing the "Mr. Hunt" picture in the hall at Westbrook Elementary, but he would have enjoyed a gasp or a jump, even a look of fear or a bit of anger. Maybe the years had changed Tamblyn in ways they hadn't changed him.

That was the crux of the matter: the inexorable passage of time. It was never possible to escape from the flow of one year into the next. And if Hunt had changed less than most, well, that was a situation that returned to haunt him in his dreams. He wondered sometime just how much Tamblyn really knew about what Hunt had done in Vancouver, the events which had brought him to wider notoriety. He thought it was very little, but John had surprised him in the past. Not that he'd ever let on.

He pressed a thumb into the carved sigil lying on the passenger seat next to him, a crude wooden thing painted black so you couldn't even tell it was also soaked in his brother's blood. Immediately, he felt oriented, a strong compulsion sweeping through his bones, pulling him toward Maggie Stuart, and toward Char.



Aria tensed, hearing at last what she'd been waiting for.

Marching feet. And again no attempt at quiet. Someone was far too cocky for his own good, or really still hadn't yet assessed the explosive potential of sibling rivalry.

She drew back into the shadows, having decided to let them go ahead with the procedure of opening the door before she interrupted. The locks fell at last to the stony ground, and Arabella stepped into the light.

"Halt," she said.

The three guards sent by her brother did as they were told. Poor Damon. The intricacies of their relationship was beyond even those directly involved. It was blatantly unfair to put these automatons in the middle of it and ask them to understand where their loyalties were supposed to lie.

On the other side of the door, Scott crouched, listening. Peter, unconcerned, had gone swimming. The sound of the lock being released had drawn Scott up the stairs again, but Aria's voice had frozen him. If he had dared to move, he would have run to hide, futile though that was.

"Do you think I should knock you all unconscious?" said Aria. "Or would it be more sporting just to kill you outright? I can't decide."

She didn't have anything near as much trouble as she pretended. Through the door, Scott felt a tingle around him and the world took on a slightly yellow glow. He was buffeted to his knees by Aria's pulse of power. The three men outside the door went limp, one with a trickle of blood coming from the corner of his mouth. Arabella, stepping over the prone forms, threw open the door to Peter's chamber.

Scott went slack-jawed, staring at her. Too quick, everything had turned around again. Out of the frying pan.

She smiled at him and he returned the grin sickly. From around her waist, she drew a length of rope and came toward him, same cat-grin on her face.

"Good Scott," she said, looping it around his neck and tying it. "I've missed you terribly.

I'm sure you don't believe me, but it's true. I need your strength to hold me up, dear, dear Scott. How would you like to do a little favor for your Aria?"

Stoically, he said nothing. Complying, he guessed, there was a chance Peter would be safe. Disobedience could be costly. *Fear the one you're with*, he thought, trying to bolster his courage with an attempt at lightness.

"Nothing." She studied his face; he was half a head taller than she was, but instead of this giving him any advantage, he felt like a tree with rotted roots looking down on the guy with the axe. "Do you want me to make promises I don't intend to keep? All right, it's only fair you should get something you want when I get what I want. When I'm Queen you know, I'll have no use at all for you and your little friends. There will be, to use a cliché, lots of bigger fish to fry. I'm willing to let you leave, unharmed."

Scott said, quiet and strangled, "Peter."

"Oh!" Arabella's eyes widened. "Of course, and Peter too. Goodness, you look pale."

Her apparent goodwill had no impact on Scott; at this moment, he had very little ability to grasp hope when it was offered. He did however fixate on Peter's name, and managed a nod.

She tilted her head, trying to decide what the nod had been in answer to, then blinked. "All right then. I need your little boyfriend too, but this won't be a social call. Keep your hands off him, and remember we're keeping this brief."

She tugged the rope. Scott glance out into the corridor, and wished he hadn't. Blood was welling onto the ground around the bodies of the three men lying on the ground. They were all dressed in some kind of uniform. Dead, he thought. Aria tugged absently and he turned. "Well? Peter?"

There was a trill of music and a small white naked body came hurtling up the stairs. "Scott, Scott!"

Arabella put out her hand and stopped Peter, fingers grasping the thin shoulder. "Petey, we're here on business. This will have to wait for later, do you understand?"

"Later. I understand." He nodded, but looked at Scott for him to read the disappointment there. Scott smiled encouragingly.

"Don't worry, bud," he said. "Lots of time later."

"Petey," said Aria gravely, crouching down on the nearest pile of pillows, one hand on the boy's shoulder and the other on Scott's lead. "This is very serious, but it's also going to be fun. We're going to play hide and seek. I know Father's played with you, but now I want you to play with me."

Peter nodded, still looking at Scott for approval.

"Look at me!" Arabella snapped, but the sweetness returned almost instantly. "Now look, Petey, do you see my ring?"

She lifted the hand off his shoulder and extended it toward him. On the third finger, a slender band of gold glinted, the blue stone in its setting catching the light on its facets.

Peter nodded.

"There's another ring just like it, only red, and I want you to find it. The band is the same, but the stone is very different. Do you remember how to sing objects?"

"I remember," said Peter and reached for her hand. His white fingers closed around her darker skin, and his eyes squeezed up in concentration. Then, he opened his mouth and Scott began to smile. The ring, with the first notes of Peter's song, started to glow. The band became bright and molten, but the stone remained dark, touched only by the light in the room. Scott was aware then of a ringing in his eardrums and tried at first to get rid of it, wiggling a finger in one ear. But the sound got louder, and Scott understood; the ring was responding to Peter's song.

Louder and louder it became until the whole room was echoing with the fullness of it. When Peter at last stopped singing, the ring kept on, the song falling off in ripples until it too had faded away.

“It’s down low,” said Peter. “Under us and over there.” He pointed to a wall.

“Tell me in your head,” said Aria. “That way I can see it like you did.”

They both fell silent for a few minutes, while Scott strained but could pick up nothing of what passed between them. Whatever this ability was, he didn’t possess it.

“Good,” said Aria at last. “And Scotty will be necessary, it seems, as I thought. Come on, dear worm,” she said to the older boy, standing and giving Peter an absent pat, “we’re going grave-robbing.

“But first, you have a bit of a clean-up to do out in the hallway.”



Aria and Scott left the lower catacombs and walked a path she seemed to be only vaguely familiar with. The tunnels here were narrower and soon became so low that Scott was forced to stoop. This appeared to make Aria slightly gleeful, in Scott’s mind at least, and did nothing but add to his foul humor. If he had felt like analyzing his feelings, he probably would have come to the conclusion that, no matter how much he resented being locked up before, having something happen had not improved his lot. If there was any hope for him to escape, it would have to be when Arabella was through with him. She was far too formidable a jailor.

Also, he hated the idea she could leave him locked up, like something in a tool shed at the bottom of the garden, for the moment when he was finally useful. A big, strong guy like Scott hated very little more than the feeling he was valued only for his size and strength.

“Down to the Sunless Sea,” she told him cheerfully when his pace slowed, giving him a jerk on the rope to advise him to keep up. To his look of utter confusion, she snorted, “Don’t they give you any education at all? Oh, well, I can’t be bothered to explain. It was a nice image, and you’ve ruined it for me. Next time I say something rhetorical or dramatic, humor me and just look awed.”

After a time, they came to a chamber with several options for proceeding, and Aria told him he could sit for a few minutes while she decided their route. She gave him some bread and a jar of what turned out to be runny strawberry jam to keep him occupied. Scott thanked her, grudgingly.

“Maybe I’ll keep the water for myself, if you’re going to be like that,” she told him, but handed over a leather bottle anyway. It was amazing what she had in her knapsack, and he told her so.

“My life on my back,” she said, distracted. “Just in case I have to run away. Could happen anytime.”

He nodded. Something struck him. “We are going back, aren’t we?”

She laughed. “Oh, poor little Scott. No, I don’t think we’ve left the thrills of the catacombs permanently behind us yet.” And more soberly, “Well – we’ll go back if we succeed. More I can’t promise.”

Aria took the bread from him and tore herself a piece, ignoring the jam. “Scott Saunders, what do you think of that girl?”

“What girl?” he said, surprised at the turn.

“Her name’s Marguerite Stuart. Maggie.” She looked at him slant-wise, and Scott felt chilled. First he’d had the strange feeling that Jason was somehow in trouble too; now here was a mention of Maggie Stuart.

“Maggie?” he said, carefully. “She’s all right. I don’t know her; I mean, she’s not a friend of mine or anything. I don’t know who her friends are, if she has any. She’s a bit weird, quiet, you know.”

Aria bit her lip, smiling. “You’re very illuminating. No, not very. In fact, not. But it’s not your fault. If you don’t know her, you don’t know her. Nothing to be done. Personally, I don’t have much of an opinion of her. If I did, I might find it more difficult to do what I have to now. Sometimes it’s nice to be a bit in the dark about all the facts, hm? Makes it easier to be expedient.

“Come on.”

She jerked the rope, a bit unnecessarily, thought Scott, and he put the lid back on the mason jar. Dinner disappeared back into the knapsack, and Aria prodded him towards one of the tunnels to continue.

They now passed beyond where electric lights existed to show them the way, but Arabella extended her free hand and it glowed bright like a torch.

“How –?” began Scott, then the more natural aspect of his admiration took over his wonder. “That’s really cool.”

“Thanks,” she said, accepting it as her due. They walked in silence, and Scott’s eyes were drawn always back to her hand.

Finally he said, “It’s like Peter. Kind of magic.”

“How observant,” she said, moving ahead of him to make another choice of tunnel. “And how open-minded.”

“Yeah, well.” Scott used the brief stop to chase an itch down his calf. “It’s weird. I always thought things like that would exist somewhere, because they’re always showing up in books and movies. But no one every really talks about them.”

“This way,” Arabella said, giving him a tug. “No. It’s a good thing too, because part of our power in the world you live in is just that.”

“I think I see what you mean.”

“Figure that out,” she said, “and, my little Scott, you will be the most powerful man you know.” She turned back and winked. “And stay on my good side.”

*Yes ma’am* seemed the most appropriate reply, but Scott’s mouth had gone dry, and he just nodded instead. If he ever got out of this, that would be something to bear a bit of thought.

When his energy started to flag, Aria called a halt and let him doze. Far too soon, she was kicking him in the side and ordering him to continue. It hadn’t been much of a sleep, but between it and some more bread, he was awake enough to go on.

“Don’t worry, baby worm,” Aria told him as they set out, “it’s not far now.”

She seemed preoccupied again, a more or less natural state, Scott was beginning to understand. This was a little different from usual, though, not as much of the schemer about her and more of reflection. He trailed after her, tired and shuffling his feet.

Quietly, with something in her voice he’d never heard before, she began to speak.

“I’m going to tell you a story. It is a story of long ago when the world was bright and younger than it is now, and the great clockworks of time sprang from minute to minute, second to second, with no indication that they would ever wind down.

“In those days, there was a great King and a divine Queen, she who had first told him what his destiny was, to follow her through the ages as consort and companion. She had found him in one of the little places in the world, a young man with no knowledge of his own power, and she took him deep into the bowels of the earth where they were joined by ancient rituals. Together, for time immemorial, they shared the throne of their kingdom, and together they planned for their future with shining eyes and glory.

“They were collectors and scholars, and they covered the earth with their influence. Bishops and potentates, knights and great lords all came under their tutelage or into their service. When they were crossed, they were quick to anger. When they were well served, they were as quick to reward, and lavishly. Those who pleased them gained power on earth without peer. And so it continued.

“It hardly made sense to plan for endings when so many things were just beginning.

“She, however, saw further than her husband the King, or perhaps she allowed herself to see the dark truths of the future as well as the triumphs ahead. And so she prepared a place where she would go, when the time of endings came, when her time was ended.”

Scott had fallen into the rhythm of her words and trailed behind her. Whether it was his imagination or some extension of her own power, the tunnel around them had taken on a new lustre, like they were walking through veins of precious metals speckled with clusters of gemstones. The walls as they walked looked slick and wet around them, running quicksilver ingrained in the stone. He was smiling, hardly watching where he was going and following instead the will-o-the-wisp flickers of light around him.

Aria kept speaking, and her pace quickened. She had a buoyant energy in her steps now, more even than before. “And the Queen put a legacy of herself deep below the earth, giving it the special property, the unique ability, that it would follow her husband to whatever part of the world he might be living in, so that always she would be near to him, although unseen.

“And this was her last great magic, her last great work. Because, although he didn’t know it, she was sick and dying and this was the last of her resources, a gift of love and remembrance. With the completion of this final work, she died.”

She stopped and Scott was bumped out of the near reverie he had fallen into. They stood now before a door, small by the standard he was used to down here, only about ten feet high. It was made of wood, and studded like the door to Peter’s cavern. The difference here was that while Peter’s door was irregular and covered in squat iron nails, this one was beautifully patterned with the studs, and they seemed to be made of gold. And in front of this, blocking the edge of the door, was a big rock, the size of a beach ball, which was pale yellow, and seemed to be a huge lump of gold ore.

“That Queen was my mother,” said Aria, “and I loved her completely to distraction. Maybe if I hadn’t, I would have figured out a long time ago where she put some very special items. They should have come to me anyhow. I don’t know why they didn’t.”

She circled Scott, who was standing mesmerized by the dance of gold against the walls and door, and gave him a push. The rope jerked his neck as he fell, hard against the boulder.

“Now,” said Aria, “why don’t you prove my faith in you is justified, and I may just consider taking you back out with me when I go? Come on, Scotty, surely you’re at least familiar with Lazarus? In the tomb with the rock in front? Make like a good little bulldozer and open me that door.”

He stared at her. This was what he had been brought all this way for? To be her beast of brute strength.

“Is that gold?” he asked dumbly.

She nodded, and said shortly, “If it was plaster, I would have moved it myself. It makes a good door-stop – it stops the door good.” She giggled, and followed the giggle with a kick in his direction.

Scott flinched away from her foot. “I remember,” he said quietly, “we visited the mint once in Ottawa, and they had this gold brick, and it was pretty small but they said even when they offered it to anyone who could pick it up, no one had even budged it.”

Her lips narrowed, patience again wearing thin. “So they do teach you something. Look, worm, I’m not asking. Anyway, what could be easier? You’ve only got to move it a few inches, and there’s the wall to brace yourself against.” When he still didn’t move, she reached for her bag. “Don’t make me get nasty.”

That was enough to remind him of the stiletto, and he braced himself, feet against the wall, to push.

It was minutes before he, straining, veins swelling in his head, managed it, and by the end, his muscles were jelly. The stone seemed to gain a momentum of its own the last inch, and the door flew open, bashing into him. The lump of ore crashed against the opposite wall, suddenly weightless, and Scott, losing what was supporting him, fell flat to the floor.

By his head, he felt a quick, violent disturbance, a rush of air. He lay still.

Aria’s voice, quiet and satisfied: “Very well done, my little worm. Very dexterous.”

From the ground, Scott breathed hard as he answered. “No skill, just strength.”

“No,” she said, “in avoiding the darts.”

She indicated the wall behind her, where a rain of tiny black arrows, each a few centimeters long, was embedded in the rock. Around each point was a bit of wetness which appeared to have dissolved or melted the stone to allow the dart to penetrate. Scott moved away from the door and crawled closer to investigate.

“Don’t touch,” said Aria. “If they can do that to stone, imagine what they’d do to you. And they might not be totally spent yet.”

Scott grabbed his fingers back and knelt, looking at her. “You almost let me get killed,” he said, a slight questioning tone.

She smiled sweetly, then added venom to the expression to keep him afraid of her.

“Nothing personal, sweetie,” she said. A firm jerk on the rope and Scott came to his feet again. “Now, let’s see what other little surprises Mother has in store for us.”



There is nothing worse, thought John Tamblyn, than being humiliated on top of being taken advantage of.

The key, wrapped in cello-tape to muffle it against the jug, was in his free hand. He couldn’t, even in the midst of his anger and unshaven misery, help but to appreciate Hunt’s joke at his expense. He had been sitting probably five minutes like this, the key in his palm, the glass of water which had revealed it soaking into the carpet at his feet.

Hunt had taken the precaution of dismantling the phone, another delay for Tamblyn. He was in no condition to immediately walk out onto the street jauntily, pick up the phone in the nearest public booth, and call headquarters with a cheery, “I say, Q, got anything special for me? There’s a maniac on the loose who threatens the safety of the free world.”

The image of himself as James Bond almost did him in, as a pre-emptive burst of bitter laughter cramped him up on the bed. “Only hurts *more* when I laugh,” he told the empty glass by his feet. “Christ. I’ll kill him.”

He washed at the sink and dressed slowly, and very painfully. His buttocks were especially sore, and his back was a mass of confused muscle, while his head was groggy and slow with the drugs. He was glad Hunt wasn’t quite up to form and had left him his clothing. There was a flash in his imagination of himself, wrapped in the scrawny, ragged towel hanging over the radiator in the bathroom, dragged into his own police station for public indecency. “I was just trying to use the phone. . .” and his reputation would never be quite the same again.

There was more than even the usual silence and distance around him when he stalked in the door of police headquarters this time. A bank clock had told him two days had passed, but surely that wasn't enough time to give him up for dead? He growled at a small woman with a refreshment tray and she cringed. That bit of frustration-release, he thought, didn't necessarily help enliven his appearance, as he could tell by the reaction his entrance caused – everyone was looking at him like he was a ghost.

Carla wasn't at her desk, and the strange man looked up blankly.

“Morritz –” Tamblyn was bellowing even before he could see the name on the door.

“Morritz!”

He burst in on his superior in the middle of a meeting with a group of other senior officers. For once, the detective wasn't sure what to say first. In the end, a split second before the shouting began, he decided to go with, “What the hell is going on here? And where's Szaba?”

Then everyone was yelling at once, and the detective found himself staggering to a chair aided by one of his superiors. His energy was all used up. A cup of coffee was pressing into his hands and he drank slowly, balancing the mug between both palms and feeling how little strength there was in the fingers.

Morritz cleared the room except for Tamblyn and began the explanation. “Carla Szaba is on disciplinary leave. I told her that anyone would have behaved similarly in a comparable situation, but she did let him in, and she felt so bad we thought it was a good idea to let her take a couple of days off. I'll try to make sure it doesn't end up on her permanent record.”

Weakly, the detective shook his head. “What am I missing here?”

“The Hunter. He came here, trashed your office. We don't know what he got because we don't know what you had in there. And with you disappearing at the same time, we've had people out combing the ditches.”

“There aren't any ditches in downtown Toronto.” The detective smirked, every line on his face exhausted. Hunt had his book. That was a certainty. The bastard, the insufferable bastard. But he betrayed nothing of his inner turmoil to Morritz. “Alleys, did you check alleys?”

“Buddy, we dragged the river.” Morritz had come around his desk, and put his hand on John's shoulder. “We did everything but write the obit for the morning paper.”

“I wish I'd stayed lost,” Tamblyn said. “I'd like to know what you'd have said.”

“It was your Mr. Hunt all right,” said Morritz. “Carla identified him from his Westbrook staff photo. He was posing as your brother, can you believe it?”

Tamblyn looked down and shook his head. Imagine that.

“Well, that's what he said all right. You look awful, John.”

Reluctantly, Tamblyn said, “He had me. It was the Hunter, just like I told you. And now, he's off with probably everything I would have needed to get to the bottom of this little problem of yours. It's just as well you're calling it quits.” He brushed one leg of his pants, stiff with dried blood. No wonder his reception at the station had been less than warm.

Morritz sighed. “Actually, John, this whole thing with the Hunter has made the bosses reconsider.”

“You're keeping it open?”

“We're keeping it open.”

Tamblyn was relieved. “Finally something you can't just sweep under the carpet and ignore. Am I back on?”

Slowly, Morritz nodded. “I need you back down at the hotel with that mother and her boyfriend.”

Tamblyn stood shakily. It was infuriating not being able to conceal his weakness. “What

about Hunt?"

"Now, even if we can't get him for Westbrook, if we catch him we can put him away for kidnapping as well as what he did here." Morritz rubbed his hands together. "Why don't you file your vacation report with the guy at Carla's desk - John, like you, last name Agram. Then get checked up with the doctor and get some rest. Ms. -" (he flipped open a file and scanned it) "- Stuart isn't going anywhere, and neither is this investigation. But it's pretty clear she and the boyfriend have been lying to us from the start. Guess what we found when we looked up the kid's birth certificate? Her 'friend' Nicholas Marino, listed as her father."

"I mean," said Tambllyn slowly. His old impatience was being to assert itself. He really couldn't care less about the paternity of the kidnapped girl. "Who goes after Hunt?"

Morritz sighed, then closed the file and replaced on his desk. "Get some sleep, John. And tomorrow, you can see the folks down at the hotel again. Find out what they know. They're protecting someone. That much is clear. Then we'll start in on Hunt."

Tambllyn fixed his superior disapprovingly, then turned and left the office, hefting the mug as he went. Morritz braced for an explosion, but the detective was for the moment the eye of the storm and all was quiet. *Too quiet*, thought Morritz. *Something big's coming, and I don't think I'm going to like it.*



Inside, the air was still and heavy. Scott tried not to breathe. 'Grave robbing' Aria had called it, and that's what it felt like. He was entering, he realized, a room which had not been open for years. Maybe centuries. Who knew with these people?

Arabella was behind him, which gave him no comfort. For one thing, he didn't care for having Arabella in a position to stab him in the back. For another, it meant he was going first into her mother's crypt, which she had said might be booby-trapped.

There was light in the chamber, low and golden. His eyes adjusted quickly because they had already become used to very little illumination. Aria had let her own light fade out, and her seeming caution was another thing to frighten him. If even she was nervous about intruding, using her magic here, setting foot inside, how was a poor mortal boy supposed to feel?

Although the chamber was large, the walls were so irregular that he could see very little of its treasures.

Because that was what this was. A tomb, yes, but a treasure chamber as well. In the recesses in the walls, between columns of rough stone, there were cascades of fabric, statues, paintings, and everywhere the glint of gold.

"Father and Mother were collectors," she had said, voice low, at the door, "but most of their prizes brought back too many painful memories for him afterwards to enjoy them. He locked them away in her mausoleum. I don't know why I never thought there would be other things there as well."

"And you've never been down here?" he asked, whispering.

"No," she whispered back. "Forward."

And he went.

The floor of the chamber was deep in piles of goods: carpets, rolled with their fringes hanging out; chess sets; strange low couches shaped like animals, enormous vases of white porcelain covered with delicate blue designs. Scott had never seen anything close. Museums were so sparse and arid in comparison. It was like a junk shop, antique store, everything precious and steeped in history. He didn't dare make a sound.

The light seemed to come from all around them, but when he looked closer, forgetting for the moment he could even now be in mortal danger, he saw instead it was certain objects which provided the glow.

But yes, it was a tomb as well. Everything about it had the feel of a monument – the stillness, the stone. There were carvings, barely visible amongst all the other business, which reminded him of gravestone carvings. Some, it looked like, were illustrations in stone, others in a script that didn't look like English.

"I have it," said Arabella quietly behind him.

He turned his head.

Aria's eyes were enormous and bright. She held her hands together at chest level, and between them, there was a tiny red star, a flash of crimson fire. There was a matching red glint in the wetness of her eyes. She looked demonic.

Scott was speechless, not daring to move or say anything. She was almost as still; only her eyes were alive, shifting and darting over what she had cupped in her hands.

"My legacy," she said, and there was a peculiar harshness in her voice, a throatiness. "Move slow," she said, "and follow me."

Scott's muscles were tense every step of the way, retracing their route back to the door. Aria moved ahead of him haltingly, in a daze which seemed to approach religious ecstasy. She was taking as much care as he was, but was also twice as preoccupied as usual. He didn't know what was worse, Aria's strange delirium, or the terror this room produced in him.

Before they reached the door, Scott had the feeling something was in the room with them. He paused, turning his head slowly. Aria kept on going. The room was the same as before, an overview impossible because of the crenellations of the wall. So he looked up.

The ceiling was irregular as well, until he followed the line of it to the far end. There, the roughness ceased and instead he saw a flatness begin. He thought this change of texture represented a round area like a rose window. In color too it resembled stained glass. From it came a gentle, multi-colored glow. There was a pattern – and Scott felt himself drawn to see what it was. Before he could think, he had turned and gone back into the room, stepping carefully as before.

The heaps of treasures didn't catch his eye anymore. Only the window – or whatever it was – A moment later he was running for the door, heedless of the danger. He missed Aria, who sidestepped him, and crashed into the wall beside the darts.

"There's a face," he blurted.

She replied coldly, "What did you expect? I told you it was a crypt. You can have exactly two minutes to collect yourself, and then it's time for me to go, with or without you." Changing tone, she said lightly, "Nice there was only the one trap, huh? Now, take a little wee breather, and we'll start back. There's someone I'm just dying to see."

Scott, shaking and pale, hunched over into the wall.



Scott was exhausted, dirty, and above all angry at the way he had been used, but Aria was in heaven, and none of Scott's misery could penetrate her mood.

"Don't be so glum, wormy," she said, giving his neck-rope a playful tug. "We've won, and I think I've decided I'm not going to kill you after all." She danced ahead, forcing him to jog to keep up. "Isn't that good news?"

"Doesn't anything get to you?" Scott spat, to frustrated for caution. He stopped dead, nearly jerking the rope out of her hands.

Arabella turned, murderous look now in her eyes. A flare of power sent Scott to the ground. “Remember who you’re talking to, worm,” she said. “And remember what you’ve done.”

He looked back, uncomprehending. “There’s a threat coming,” he said.

“Of course,” she replied, “though why I need to spell it out is beyond me. You’ve aided and abetted, Scott Saunders. You hardly resisted at all. And in the new order, I’d say that puts you in a fairly good position. In the old order, you’ll roast like toast. When I win, and my kingdom comes, you will be rewarded. In the meantime, you need me to protect you against the wrath of various other parties I could name who will be less thrilled you went along with me so compliantly. Do I need to be more explicit?”

He thought of Peter. “No,” said Scott.

“Good,” she said. “You’re quite reasonable for a boy.”

She tugged the rope and he fell to his knees. “Have a nap, boyo,” she said, smiling. “We may have a bit of a wait.”

Gratefully, Scott curled over and closed his eyes.



Hunt found the back door without problem, glad that Char was operating true to form. The front, of course, had been too obvious to enter by, too well guarded, and too ostentatious as well. Staff entrance and deliveries to the rear. Only invited guests entered the other way.

He had hidden his car on the bluff, covering it with branches until it was invisible. Tamblyn’s ancient Ford was back in Toronto, parked on the driveway of Hunt’s condominium after he used it to pick up his own vehicle. That wouldn’t take much to figure out, but it had saved him time not to have to ditch it somewhere. Wherever he was going, returning to his bungalow would not be possible.

He had never been to this place, this particular one of Char’s palaces. It had all the feel of being a recently built thing, none of the usual history. Char, fortunately, was a bit stuck in a pattern as far as his structures were concerned. With all the ease of casing it out, Hunt could have been here before. The old man didn’t change much, even if epochs rolled by and the world didn’t wait. Char was like a classic suit, never really out of fashion. In his own class. Hunt grimaced.

Hunt reached the back door without incident. It was classic Char, right down to the minefield. He performed a simple ritual and divined the clearest path to the well, subtly enough that Char’s retainers would hopefully not notice. He doubted they used this entrance much anyhow; it was far more like Char to favor the ostentatious and forbidding entrance in the quarry proper. He laid small rocks out to mark the way; another insurance policy. A man alone in his tenuous position could never be too careful. Just to make sure, and to announce in a small way his arrival, he hefted a good-sized rock and exploded a mine.

The back door took advantage of modern conveniences, even if the style was all Char. On the top of the bluff overlooking the quarry, Hunt found a concrete well with steps leading down to a partially enclosed elevator shaft. There was an alternate staircase - in case of fire, Hunt thought, realizing he was dangerously happy about this whole endeavor. A certain thrill, in entering the fray again, perhaps.

The door to the staircase was locked, but that was of course no problem, and done quietly. The elevator was out of the question, naturally.

Hunt counted as he moved down the stairs. Every twenty steps, there was a pale orange lamp in a wire mesh cage to illuminate the next stage. The stairs ran irregularly, not twisting around the elevator shaft, as he imagined they might, or folding neatly back on themselves in a

column. Instead, they ran straight down at an angle, then cut back at varied intervals. There was no pattern he could discern.

Near the bottom, he took stock – say, taking the angle of the steps into account, each twenty steps took him three meters deeper – maybe closer to four – even a conservative estimate would put him sixty or seventy meters down, well below the quarry floor, in any case.

He could hear nothing through the thick steel door at the bottom, which was hardly surprising. There was no lock, but as for what was on the other side, there was nothing to do but take a chance. Hunt put no faith in luck.

No one. There was a small chamber, lit by a single dim sodium lamp. Beside him was the bottom of the elevator shaft, accordion doors shut and a red light glowing above. In front, and stretching away into impenetrable dark, a ramp, still descending. This wasn't over yet. Char's realm was deeper still.

The walls were rough, as if this in fact was a cave hollowed by time and not by will. There was enough light in the cavern to see the face of his watch and not much else. Further on, there would be less.

He closed his eyes as he moved forward, placing his hands on one wall to guide him. If he was to take full advantage of the low light down the passage, he would have to close out the brighter light and move by feel at present.

His ears worked overtime, pricked for any change in the ambient sound. Eyes were a near waste of time in the dark anyway, especially dealing with Char. If he was being watched, there was nothing he could do about it, and no way – yet – he could know. Meanwhile, he had to use all his resources.

Then, as he had half expected it would, a soft voice came out of the darkness he'd shut himself in. "Hello, dear old friend. And I do mean old. You're getting positively ragged. Well? Aren't you going to thank me for clearing the way?"

He opened his eyes. There, surrounded by her own faint glow, Arabella. Well, well, well. "Hello, Hunter," she said, smiling.

Hunt smirked, crooked grin matching hers. "I don't want to appear too glad to see you," he said.

"That makes me sad. I'm almost reluctant to tell you what a delicious thrill it was to see you hanging on the wall of that little school outside the office. There he was, in black and white, Mr. Hunt, looking a little – well, shall we say enhanced? How did you fool them all, dearest?"

"I could never fool you, could I?" he replied, smiling comfortably. "My only course ever with you is to ply you with outrageous flattery."

"Shame," she said, and danced back down the tunnel, leading him. Dutifully, he followed. "Come on, the Hunter descends. We'll be glad of the diversion. I will, at least."



Scott would never have expected the voice which woke him.

"Saunders," it said, addressing him in a familiar, crisp manner.

"Mr. Hunt?" said Scott almost inaudibly, sitting up.

But Hunt paid him no further attention. He slid to the wall and balanced himself on an outcropping of stone. "You'll have to correct my impression, Arabella - but I don't really remember being all that chummy with you in years gone by. Was I wrong, my love? Were we, but for my own blindness, destined for each other? I swoon to think I could have resisted you simply out of ignorance."

Aria smiled. "I am provoking, aren't I? Hang on." She grasped the rope around Scott's neck and dragged Scott toward an iron ring set in the wall. Nimbly, she threaded his rope through the metal staple. She tied a quick knot and tapped it with a finger so it glowed. "Be good," she told him, and patted him on the head.

"Now," she said, returning to Hunt. "Tell me, old soon-to-be-rewarded-beyond-his-wildest-dreams friend, what brings you here?"

Scott reached out to the knot, impotently furious to be abandoned here tied like a dog. The glow scorched his fingers and he stuck them in his mouth to cool the sting.

"I've come about a girl," said Hunt. "One of my students to be precise. Maggie Stuart." *Maggie?* Scott thought.

"Maggie Stuart." Arabella mulled the name over, as if it was completely unfamiliar.

Hunt wasn't in the mood for games. "Enough," he said. "How's that brother of yours?"

"He's a fool," Arabella spat, with something more than contempt. "This. . . girl of yours. Why do you think she's here?"

"You know that better than me." Hunt reached out for her hand. "That's a pretty, sweetheart. I don't remember seeing you with it before."

Without letting him get a closer look at the ring with the red stone, Aria swept her hands out to grab Hunt's. "Dance with me, old friend, for the sake of our history. I need something to brighten my spirits. Dance my cares away. We'll talk business later. I am glad to see you, really."

Hunt put an arm around her waist and they waltzed, laughing and whispering together. Mr. Hunt, thought Scott. Mr. Hunt, here, and with her. Mr. Hunt.