

## Chapter Seven



Nick Marino waited for Harrison Edwards's arrival with slightly less eagerness than he would have looked forward to a firing squad.

He had finished a late breakfast, flipped channels on the television finding nothing to distract him, and finally came to the conclusion the world was conspiring against him. There seemed to be nothing to do but wait and listen to Jan singing in the shower as she got ready for her lunch date.

The detective they'd talked to the first day at the house was no longer available, he had been told on the telephone. The concierge had put him in touch with the new guy heading the investigation, but not before expressing some mild exasperation at the way the hotel had been taken over by the police for an indefinite period of time. Not the least part of this resentment seemed directly at Nick. This was less than tactful, he had thought.

And the new detective, a weedy, less than inspiring individual ironically called 'Bull', thought it was a good idea for Jan to do something to relax herself, and recommended the hotel restaurant for her rendezvous. Other than that, he had no problem with the idea, especially when Jan, irate and overreacting as usual, had come out of the bathroom to steal the receiver and explain that the man in question was her lawyer. Much as he had disliked that first detective, the brooding one, Nick was wishing he'd come back. He'd have had more sense.

And now the time had nearly arrived, and Nick was only just restraining himself from pacing the floor.

It was worse than having a teenage daughter (well, he imagined it was) – your ex-wife dating under your nose. Not that there was anything but animosity between them now. Not that Maggie wasn't about the only thing they had in common, and she was unfortunately missing from the little family grouping. Not that Maggie could possibly make everything else all right.

Some rich lawyer. When the knock came at the door, Jan was still in the bathroom, and Nick went to answer it in the mood for a fight.

He opened the door, not to Jan's date, but a young woman in the hotel's livery.

"Yes?" he said, switching gears as fast as he could so he could be civil.

She bobbed her head politely before speaking. "Yes, sir. Mr. Edwards is in the restaurant now, waiting for Ms. Stuart. Is she here?"

"I'll pass the message along," said Nick, and slammed the door, fuming now, pretense of good humor gone. What a guy, to send a messenger. He supposed Edwards would also have hired a page. Jan would enter the restaurant, be stopped at the door. "Name?" the page would say. "Jan," she'd reply, looking beyond him and batting her eyes at her boyfriend, who'd of course be otherwise engaged with the business section or something. "I'm expected." "Ms. Janice Stuart," the page would announce. . .

“Who was that?”

Jan stuck her head out of the bathroom. There was a pin in the hand resting on her hair, poised for addition to the coif. Nick couldn't help thinking it was a bit much for a lunch date – an upswept thing with ringlets and enough hairspray to make it all into concrete. Not at all touchable.

“I don't think one more is going to make any difference,” he said. If he wanted, he could make a nice big problem for her. Don't pass on the message. Let lover-boy think he's getting stood up.

“Who was it?” Instead of going sharp, her voice had taken on a softness. “Was it Harry?”

“His Hermes,” said Nick. “He sent a girl up from the desk to tell you he's in the restaurant.”

She laughed. His mouth turned up a bit in spite of himself. He felt sad suddenly instead of vindictive. “That's Harry for you,” she said.

He followed her out of the room.

“Nick,” she began, pausing.

“I'm just going down for a pop or something. I'm not getting lunch out like you.”

“Nick.” She stopped again at the doors of the elevator, finger poised on the button. She seemed about to say something, and changed her mind. “Harry and I always split the bill. I don't want anyone to pay my way. I can take care of myself.”

He nodded, because it wasn't a good idea to tell her she wasn't making sense, and not looking at her. “I'm just going for a pop.”

They managed the elevator ride in total silence, aided by the presence of other people, real ones, ones not involved with disappearances and disturbing young women who weren't what they seemed. Jan patted her hair, but how, thought Nick, could anything be out of place? There hadn't been a hurricane in sight since they left the room.

She turned to him just as the doors opened on the lobby and whispered under her breath, “Be good.”

“Yeah, whatever.” English colloquialisms had always been easy for him. There had been opportunities in abundance over the past fifteen years to speak English – stints at tourist hotels in Italy, a summer in Portugal. Didn't matter if he knew the local language. English got him jobs. But so much of his English was unquestionably Jan's, twenty-something Jan's. When they had met, his English was okay but stilted. He owed his accent to her. He owed most of his slang to her as well. It bothered him he could hear her whenever he spoke this language, and that this would never change. You only have one chance to learn English for the first time.

She flew ahead of him through the lobby to the restaurant, getting away from him. No page, he noted. She went through the doors and disappeared from sight.

Disgruntled, he went to the shop in the lobby and leafed listlessly through a couple of magazines. He didn't know what he was doing here, in this store, in this hotel, in this stupid country. It wouldn't be too long before someone realized none of the beds in Jan's house had been slept in the night of the fire. They must already know about the ropes and the forced door of the closet. Right? And when the police decided to focus on the two of them again, he'd be in the middle of another huge mess. He had been out of trouble for so many years. Harrison Edwards, if anyone asked him, could make a pretty quick farce out of the story he and Jan had told the detective. Jan didn't know any Nicks, except that jerk of an ex-husband of hers, and she certainly wouldn't have accommodatingly invited him to stay the night. Nothing they had said would hold water, and what they hadn't said could probably be called withholding evidence.

*Bothered.* That's what he was. *Worried.* That was a good one too. It wouldn't be too long before someone checked up on his passport, and asked him about his business in Canada. Given his previous record, the police would soon be leaping to conclusions which were as bad for him as

they were nearly true. He still couldn't bring himself to admit there was more to his complicity in Maggie's disappearance than an extended drunk which had made him highly suggestible.

Without buying anything, he left the store when the clerk drew his attention for the third time to the sign above the magazine rack discouraging reading. It was more than he could do to stop his feet from leading him inexorably toward the restaurant.

It was pretty easy to justify, although also easy to know the justification was ludicrous. *If Jan can get a nice meal out of the room, the excuse went, so should I.*

In retrospect, of course, what he should have said to himself was something more like, 'There's going to be a scene.'

He held up one finger to the hostess, and she, a quick girl and obviously a bit of a nut after his own heart, put a phantom cigarette to her lips. *Smoking?* He shook his head and she led him in.

*What am I doing?* he asked himself, averting his eyes with ridiculous care from Jan's table. Still, he got a look at the god Harry, and figured he'd already sized him up pretty well. One of those handsome guys with a personal trainer and physiotherapist, most likely. Wonder if the dietician is lurking to help with the menu.

One thing he didn't tell himself was that Jan could do better for herself. She could do a good deal better than Nikolas Marino, and that was the truth. Compared with a bum who'd been unable to take either his marriage or his child seriously, Harry Edwards must look wonderful.

Now he was falling headlong into a pit. Jan hadn't noticed him, but he found himself leaving his table as the hostess laid out a menu for him and detouring suddenly with an "Excuse me a moment; I think I see someone I know."

"Hello, stranger," he said.

Jan's eyes came away from the menu, like someone had poured ice cubes down her dress and she was out to murder the culprit. Her face was all outrage and total disbelief.

"Jan, aren't you going to introduce us?" And while she went into her wind-up, he pushed on, sticking out his hand. "Nick Marino. Jan and I met in Europe."

"Harrison Edwards," he said, accepting the handshake with firmness but also offering Nick possibly the coolest palm he'd ever felt in his life. It wasn't so much a physical coldness, but the man was so obviously an emotional retard. How could Jan even sit with him, much less date him?

"Ooo, guy," said Nick. "That's a good, firm grip you got there. Nice for inspiring the people you do business with, I'll bet."

"Nick," said Jan. "I'm not going to cause a scene. I want you to turn around right now and leave this restaurant."

"Janice," said Harry, pretending not to be out of his depth. Smug bastard, thought Nick.

"I just came in for lunch and thought I'd say hi. No problem. I'll go." He waited.

"Just – go." She closed the menu. Freeing her hands, he thought.

"Hey, don't get mad. If my ex-wife doesn't want me to say hello, that's fine. I don't want to cause any trouble."

"Janice?" said Harrison.

"Nick," she said, rising now. Her voice was still level, but that wouldn't last long. He didn't know where the words leaving his mouth were coming from. What a cheap shot that had been. Mentioning his name in the first place had been bad enough; forcing the issue when Edwards didn't seem to catch on was incendiary. Had Jan never talked about him at all?

"Okay, okay." Nick moved away from the table. Jan started to sit again, looking murderous, but more words came to him and were out of his mouth before he could think of stopping them. "I'll see you upstairs, then."

Harrison was on his feet. "What is going on here? Janice, what the hell is going on here?"

Now they were attracting the notice of the wait staff as well as the other patrons. It was only going to be a matter of time before something exploded, or they were asked to leave the restaurant. Then the explosion, an inevitable thing now, could happen out in the lobby.

“Harrison, Harry, I’ll explain, but first he has to go.” Jan grabbed her purse. “Oh, to heck with the police. Let’s get out of here and eat somewhere quiet where this madman won’t bother us.”

Harry, in that instant seeming to have decided Nick was no more than someone crazy with delusions about his date, called out to one of the servers. “Can we have the manager over here, please?” A waitress, happy for this errand, rushed out the door.

“I am her ex-husband. That’s no lie, although I’m getting less and less proud of it.”

“Get me out of here!” cried Jan, and started out herself, Nick and Harrison both trailing her.

The police met them in the hall, and they found themselves sandwiched between plainclothes officers irately flashing badges on one side and the incensed management on the other.

“I thought we asked the two of you to keep a low profile,” said the policeman who was their current jailor – Officer Bull.

The waitress was whispering frantically in the ear of a frosty blond with an expensive coif, apparently filling her in on the situation. “Mrs. Marino –” began the blond, whose name tag indicated she was the hotel manager.

This was the last straw for Jan. “Don’t call me Mrs. Marino. I am not now and have never been Mrs. Marino. My last name is Stuart.”

Bull fixed Jan with an icy, accusing stare. *Ex-husband?*

Harrison, turning to Nick, said, “Is this true?”

“Yeah, sure,” he said. “She kept her maiden name.”

“Nick!”

The hotel manager was icy. “Detective, we like to be accommodating, but I must insist you take this ruckus elsewhere. You have the conference room on the second floor. We would appreciate if you kept disruptions of this sort confined there.”

The detective barked back at her, all tempers apparently now lost. “Look, I have nothing to do with this. Ms. Stuart –” he spat the name, “– has obviously taken matters into her own hands.”

“Don’t lay this on me,” said Jan. “This man is odious and rude. It wasn’t me who started this.”

The manager sneered at the detective. “And you wanted these two in the same room? I don’t care if they’re married or not, but there is a small matter of noise levels and –”

”That’s it!” said Harrison, mostly to the other end of the lobby. “You’re sharing a room with him!”

“Harrison, please wait,” said Jan, helplessly. Her voice came down to a conversational level. “I didn’t get a chance to tell you anything yesterday on the phone. Things are very complicated.”

“Obviously,” he said. His briefcase was in his hand and he started for the front doors. Jan moved after him but found a hand on her arm.

Officer Bull was shaking his head. “Ms. Stuart, I think we need to have a little talk.”

“Look,” Nick was saying to the manager, “There’s no problem. I just got a little worked up. This is between her and me.”

“No, this is not.” Jan wrenched her arm away from Bull’s grasp. “This is spite. This is childishness and spite. You get away from me. And don’t you ever grab me like that again.”

She turned. “Get me a room by myself.”

The detective looked at her for a moment appraisingly before answering. The volume in the lobby had crested and dropped to a normal level. “No,” he said.

“No what?” said Jan. “Look, I’m no longer asking. I’m telling. You will not lock me up with this lunatic for another minute.”

“No,” he said again. “Ms. Stuart, you have lied to us, concealed your relationship with this man. Is he Maggie’s father?” She didn’t answer, but the way she dropped her eyes to her feet seemed to tell him everything he had to know. “This is a very serious time. You have to put aside your differences, and cooperate.” His voice dropped conspiratorially. “For your daughter’s sake.”

“That is low,” she spat at him, just as quietly. Then, because everything seemed to be waiting on her, she took a moment to study all the faces around her in turn, purposely avoiding Nick’s. “Fine,” she said at last. “I’ll have a sit down with you, and tell you everything you could possibly want to know, and a whole lot more. But I’m not going to be done out of a meal. I’m going back into the restaurant, and I’m going to have a nice, long lunch – and you’re going to take Mr. Marino back upstairs and show him to the phone. He’s very fond of room service. And if I see him, or any of you, before I’m good and ready to go back to the room, I will leave your ‘protection’ and take my chances.” Her voice fell another notch and she snarled, “How you people plan on finding *anything* is beyond me. You don’t inspire my confidence.”

The detective took her elbow, but Jan was over the worst of her rage and didn’t shake him off. After a moment, he released her and turned away without another word.

Nick tried, as she passed him, to patch things up, but nothing even partially appropriate came out.

“Jan, you can’t possibly be mad about losing a stuffed shirt like that. The guy’s as warm-blooded as a fish.”

She looked at him murderously, and went for lunch.

His last glimpse of her, before the elevator doors closed, showed her picking up her napkin and then the menu. *You’re lower than a worm*, he told himself.

“Women, huh?” said the young sergeant who was escorting him back to the room.

“Shut up,” Nick murmured.



When Aria had deposited Scott back in the Low Chamber with Peter, she returned to where she had left Hunt. Unsurprisingly, he was nowhere to be seen.

“My lady,” came the Hunter’s voice, and a dark shape dropped down to land beside her.

“Hello, Hunter,” said Aria gaily.

“Business now?” he asked. “Now that you’ve given your protege time off for good behavior.”

“Yes, oh, yes,” cooed Arabella, seating herself on an outcropping of rock and motioning for Hunt to join her. “You wanted to know my father’s plans, assuming, I suppose, that he confides all in me.”

Hunt feigned shock. “And he doesn’t?”

Aria declined to answer. “She had something he wants.”

Hunt nodded. “She’s a little powerhouse. I only found out a few days ago myself. The potential seems. . . large.”

Aria smirked. “Is that you exercising your brilliant facility for understatement?”

“Perhaps.” Hunt was sober. “You know me, Arabella. I don’t flatter myself further than that. Your father and I go way back. I’ve returned to offer him my services again, but I want

something in return.”

“If it has anything to do with that little girl, I’d think about writing another wish list. He’s been, shall we say secretive? I don’t pretend to know my father’s mind. But what he wants is his. End of story.”

Hunt shrugged. “You’re probably right. I guess I’ll go see her, and then say hello to him. Maybe we can strike one of our old earth-shaking bargains.”

Aria laughed merrily. “Put in a good word for me.” There was a dangerous darkness underlying her words. “And – maybe you can do some good works for me as well. Feel up to some small amount of terrorism?”

“Always.” Hunt grasped her hand to kiss it, but she pulled it away. On one of the slender fingers was that self-same glint of red he’d noticed before. He didn’t mention it again; her reaction the first time had been enough to convince him of its importance. There would be a right person to ask, eventually. For now, he pointed at the arch in the wall which led to a rough-cut stairway of stone. “Than that the way to Char?”

“Yes.” She tossed the loose curls framing her face. “And the girl, since you want to know everything about her, and are afraid to ask. Actually, I thought you might pay a little visit to someone dear to me on the way.”

“I’m all ears, darlin’,” said Hunt.



Peter slept, his head on Scott’s knee, tucked in against the great door of the chamber. The murmur of water was soothing, but Scott couldn’t sleep. The world was on pause, he thought. What had they done to Jason? And what was going to become of him?

The little boy shifted, and Scott stroked his white hair. It was easy now to understand the boy’s absent manner, and his difficulty expressing himself. Time underground was meaningless. There was literally nothing to do.

Scott had surveyed every inch of their prison with minute attention, and had come up with no ideas of how to get out. Not a single one. Also, he had never realized how much noise there was in every day life. He would have killed at that moment for a television on in the next room, even for Emily shouting at him from upstairs.

Peter rolled over, his head still on Scott’s knee, and opened his eyes.

“Scott,” he said, still with huge conviction. It was as if he needed to re-affirm, every time he woke, that Scott was indeed still there, and still carried the same moniker.

“Yeah, buddy,” said Scott. Peter had senses beyond his own comprehension, that he knew. But knowing more, knowing anything at all in specific terms, was not possible. The most he could do was wait, and savor the strange fierceness growing inside him to protect this lonely little boy at all costs, from whatever would come.

A wind blew through the cavern, sweeping pillows and hangings before it. The light dimmed, and Scott was looking in the right direction to see the man appear, out of nowhere.

“Good evening,” said the man, and his black cloak billowed in the breeze he’d created. “Well?”

This last was addressed to Peter, and the little boy disentangled himself from Scott’s arms and clambered slowly down the steps to the man.

“Who are you?” asked Scott, shivering and caught between fear for Peter and for himself. At this, the spectre seemed amused. “Call me,” he said, “the Burnt Man.”

Peter sang as the Burnt Man's cloak enveloped him, but his voice was shaky instead of glorious. The man knelt, taking Peter into his arms, then looked piercingly at Scott.

Scott shivered.

"Welcome, Mr. Saunders."

Scott nodded, unable to do much more. The initial greeting now took on an element of mockery in his memory. Arabella was intimidating enough, but this was ten times worse.

"I am sorry for your discomfort," said the man, in a tone Scott supposed was meant to be soothing. "I am also sorry for the brutality of your abduction. The death of the policeman was neither planned nor necessary."

Scott swallowed, and then, because he felt he should reply somehow, said, "That's okay."

The Burnt Man laughed hollowly. "No, Mr. Saunders, it is not 'okay.' But you are here, and that is what matters. I have a test prepared for you, if you would like to try it."

*Do I have a choice?* thought Scott, but couldn't say something so cocky out loud. Instead, glancing at Peter, he nodded.

The Burnt Man seemed amused. "No harm will come to the boy, Mr. Saunders. He is worth more to me than several kingdoms won and lost. Be as precious to me yourself, and you may just survive."

Scott put his arms out to Peter, and the little boy ran back up the stairs to his embrace. The older boy was shaking, but Peter's face, in stark contrast, was wreathed in smiles. "Time to pay me a proper visit, Mr. Saunders," said the spectre, and, as Peter began to sing, the room around Scott faded into shadows.



We slept, and after sleeping we woke and ate. There was little to say about the food; as Aaron had noted before, it was bland and filling. The hours dragged on, and we talked about nothing things, about school and memories and family. Scott was a common friend for Aaron and Jason, closer to each of them than they were to each other, but the circle was not so great that they couldn't find conversation. I added what she could, but was aware always of the distance still separating me from the two boys, more than just the corridor between us that put me on an island away from their shore.

When the subject was turned to the matter of the abductions, Jason and I listened quietly to Aaron's description of the dark-haired Damon's brutality. It was frightening how fast you adjusted, Aaron said at one point, one moment a terrified hostage thrown into a situation where you think every move, every word could be your last, and in the next you're planning your captor's downfall.

Then the sound of marching feet cut their conversation short, as Damon entered our cell-tunnel surrounded by guards. His face was hard, whether tired or angry I wasn't sure. Instead of playing the smooth charmer, Damon seemed to care little for how he came across to his captives. Me he wouldn't even look at. The two boys were released from their chains and marched down the halls of the labyrinth to the great doors, leaving me behind, I imagined, as a pale moon-faced shade in the prison's murk.



Damon opened the doors himself, by hand, and stepped behind the boys. A shove sent them inside, and they heard Damon groan in exertion as he pushed the heavy doors shut, leaving

the captives within and himself without.

It was dark and warm, and there seemed to be a wind. Jason got the impression that he was standing in a very large room, bigger than any room he had been in in his life. He reached out beside him and touched Aaron's arm, and felt the other boy grasp his fingers and squeeze just enough for reassurance.

They stood, until Jason had given up that the situation would change. He was torn between trying to find the doors and searching for a way out that direction, or treating this like a test, and going forward into the unknown. He was saved from any decision by a light ahead.

It started as a pale smear, like the after-image burned on a retina plunged suddenly into dark. The intensity of the light grew, and spread, slowly, matching, it seemed, his ability to adjust his eyes to it, until he could make out a raised platform and four thrones.

On one of the center thrones, the highest of all of them, he saw a man, legs draped carelessly over the arm of the chair, and the source of the light was a glowing ball in the man's hand which he tossed up from his fingertips like a baseball. This man watched them, and Jason felt him fix his gaze on his own eyes, then slide beside him to Aaron's, as the ball floated up and returned to the long fingers in the idle game of catch.

He felt Aaron's body moving, down, and felt himself follow until they both were kneeling on the floor. A path of light, starting at the man's feet, reached out to them, inching its way along the ground, illuminating a mosaic pattern square by square.

"Welcome," said the man as the seeping light reached them, his voice covering the distance clearly. The sound was sibilant, like that of an old film actor. "I trust you have been comfortable."

"He's laughing at us," said Aaron, under his breath.

"Yes," the man said, chuckling lightly. "My compliments, Mr. Scribner. I've been looking forward to meeting you. I'm sorry your welcome has not been up to standard, as I regret I haven't had time before now to see to you personally. You are not, as Mr. Lawson has guessed, my prime catch. That honor is held by Marguerite Stuart – yes, you were right about that as well. You are here, as it were, at her unconscious behest. It is important that she have familiar faces around her. How else will she have anything to fight for? And if she doesn't fight, why would I consider her worthwhile?"

Aaron cast a glance at Jason, who looked back and shook his head. He wasn't getting much out of the man's monologue either. But since he seemed to be waiting for some kind of reaction, Jason spoke up: "Sir, we would like to know what's going on."

The man laughed. "Of course," he said. "No one speaks to you here but to confuse you. Misinformation is more useful to me than ignorance. Your tasks are assigned; all that remains is for you to carry them out. I see that you prefer not to waste time, Mr. Lawson. Let's hope you decide not to attempt premature departure from my domain again. And you, Mr. Scribner – let's see that your doggy didn't die for nothing, hmm?"

With difficulty, Aaron looked away. What he really would like was to teach both this guy and Damon a lesson in bullying. He wasn't sure which he hated more.

The man laughed. "No, Mr. Scribner, think that way and you'll fail your test. Logic is your forte. Leave bullying to Mr. Lawson. That's what you like, isn't it?" He turned his gaze on Jason, and Jason strove to meet it. He saw black, then red, like the irises of an animal flaring in a headlight.

A contest of sorts seemed underway, Jason realized, and it was not completely sewn up in the stare. There was a whisper of cloth, all the warning he was given, and Jason reached out

instinctively to catch what was hurled at him.

The man's sphere burned for a moment in his palm, then went dull and leaden. It seemed about the size of a softball, cool like metal but not nearly as heavy as it should be. Jason felt a falling sensation, like disappointment. Unlikely as that feeling was, he was sad the ball hadn't stayed lighted. Had he failed?

But the man, when he looked up again at the sinister face from the shape sitting grey and leaden in his hand, was regarding him carefully. There was no indication of what that consideration might be contingent on, but there was a space in the room that went on and on without anything to fill it. Beside Jason, Aaron shifted, left out but not unhappy the focus was off him for the moment.

At last, "Interesting," said the man, and that was all. Deliberately, Jason dropped the bauble, the glow once more taking hold and nipping at his fingers like a small fire as it passed between the digits. Aaron bent to pick it up, one handed, where it had fallen to the floor and, no bounces or rolling, lay still, but the brightness of it was undimmed and so was its heat. He pulled his fingers back silently, but Jason could tell the sphere had hurt him. The man nodded, and Aaron got the impression what had happened was important, although why he had no idea.

"What happens next," said the man, "is up to you."

Jason and Aaron exchanged glances. It was hard to look at him, this strange, intense man. If he didn't look directly back, you felt like you would never be able to get his attention, and if he was looking right at you, he was scary. His eyes were all wrong.

"This is a challenge to you, like it was a challenge to Marguerite, like it is a challenge to your friend. The nature of the test is up to you. The winning of it will be up to you. I am telling you this so you will know, I have no control over what happens to you from the moment you begin to enter your own mind."

"Friend?" said Jason weakly.

The man continued, intoning solemnly. "Marguerite's experience will not be yours. The Dreamworld is different for everyone, unless you have the rare ability to tap a Dream that has already been Dreamed. I will not be a part of your Dreams. I will take no hand in your test. The test is up to you."

Aaron tugged on Jason's arm. "There," he whispered.

Jason looked, hardly able to take his eyes away from the man. The light had continued its slow spread, a stain of pale illumination across the floor like a mist. It had revealed a curly dark blond head, and the back of a neck. It was unmistakably Scott Saunders.

"You. . ." whispered Jason, "You had him all this time."

The man continued smoothly, giving no indication of changing modes of thought. Aaron shook his head slowly. All was orchestrated, he thought, down to the exact moment I saw Scott and pointed him out to Jason. Everything. "Mr. Saunders has gone ahead. He is not hurt, but the warning I shall give to you is the same I gave to him. There is a way out of the Dreamworld. I shall send you there, but it is your task to find your way back. And the warning is this: If you don't find the way, you will not come back."

Without moving, the man seemed to suddenly loom up closer, and Jason and Aaron pressed against each other shoulder to shoulder. They clasped hands.

"Scott," said Jason almost silently.

Aaron felt like the man had suddenly lost patience with them or had just now realized he was overtime for this interview. The timbre of the room had changed, sounds thick and heavy, like the moments before a summer storm. Something was building.

The room was plunged again into dark, and Aaron found he had lost Jason's hand. He whispered Jason's name, and reached out in the blackness, but found no one, heard no reply. "Bring on the test," he whispered, damning himself for being afraid to raise his voice.

"Are you still conditioned?" The man's whisper came out of the blackness, and then a strand of melody.

Little Peter's voice, a thin thread growing and thickening, until it was great ropes of song filling the cavernous room. Aaron had already collapsed to his knees, and then onto his side, fast asleep, when Jason felt the trance take him over. "The singing," he said, almost bemused. It was the singing which made him sleep. He keeled over as well, having lost Scott and Aaron, and knowing only the test was still on its way.



When Scott went into the Dreamworld, he was still fighting.

It was perhaps surprising that his separation from Peter was so difficult, but Scott didn't see it that way. What he knew was Peter was lonely, and needed him. This was his perception. It was fairly obvious Peter would survive without him. The little boy could feed himself, even if not sensibly, and had been entertaining himself long before Scott came into the picture. None of that mattered, as far as Scott was concerned. Someone had made a trophy out of a human child, locked him away in a forgotten cave, never to let him see the sun. This was criminal, and Scott would see the situation changed. That was why Peter needed him.

When the room with the pool disappeared around him, another had risen to take its place, a huge bleak place with thrones and walls hidden in the shadows. Scott was torn between running and dropping to his knees, to pull himself into a ball and hide. In the end, he kept his head and stayed calm, asking the Burnt Man to be returned with Peter to the outside world in the most rational terms. But then, his desires were irrelevant, weren't they? He hadn't wanted to be kidnapped, and he hadn't wanted to meet Peter. Someone else was making all the decisions for him.

And so he listened as the Burnt Man explained the rules of the game to him, how he would be sent to the Dreamworld, and how his release depended on him. This was something Scott could nod to in response. Something finally was up to him.

But, he was learning, the one thing this place never allowed you was to keep your composure for long. He should have hardly been surprised when the Burnt Man swept aside his Dracula cloak and there was Peter, standing frail and small. There was an expression of intense seriousness on his small white face, and he seemed oblivious to Scott, and indeed to his situation. Peter nodded, and Scott had it – the Burnt Man was talking to him inside his head, the same way he had talked with Aria before. Peter's mouth fell open to start singing, and in the moment before he felt the force of the music hit him like a wave and bowl him onto his back, Scott saw the little boy recognize him and saw the pale pink eyes fill with confusion and sorrow.

"No!" screamed Scott, but the music was upon him and he was falling. For an instant, he thought he had a hold of Peter's hand, the thin fingers grasping his with all their lean strength, and then he was torn away. He could feel Peter's singing crash over him like a torrent, sweeping him away.



When Damon was summoned shortly afterward, Maggie's Burnt Man was sitting poised

and still on his throne, one finger to his lips in contemplation. He acknowledged Damon slowly, emerging from deep thought.

*My Son*, he said, into Damon's mind, then changed modes. Damon wondered if his father was tired as well. "Everything is in place. These should be made comfortable." He indicated the three boys, each lying awkwardly on the floor in a heap of his own limbs. "The Mirror Room. Damon - " he said, as his son turned to carry out the order. Damon straightened his back and faced his father squarely. It had been a long time since his father had used his name. He thought back, and knew when the last time had been. " - You've done very well," said the Man. "You are a comfort. Come to me when the arrangements are made."

Damon bowed low and left the throne room to call soldiers to help him, aware of a jumpy feeling in his stomach. It didn't mean anything, of course, just his name from the lips of a father he thought had all but given up on him. Even with a virtual eternity, there had never seemed to be enough time to know his father. Maybe his obedience had said the things he was never able to give words to out loud. Maybe there was time. Buoyed up, he returned to the throne room.



Arabella watched from one of the few good hiding places in the upper catacombs as the prisoners were carried by. He had three of them now, three sleeping-beauty boys. One of them was by rights hers, but she understood the law of possession better than anyone. She had lost this ace, and perhaps the Hunter would no longer be enough either. It hadn't taken long for her position to go from secure to a shambles.

Damon was at the head of the group of soldiers with boys in their arms. More and more trusted. She was being forced out. There didn't seem to be much use in going to her father now, not without some more cards to play. This was a lesson of her past, and she was not about to plead with anyone. There had to be a new plot, something fabulous and exotic, and completely unexpected.

The Hunter would help. Damon was acting as Char's lieutenant, but wouldn't her father want to have the Hunter's loyalty when he learned his old nemesis was hanging around, and was there any way to get allegiance from the Hunter except by offering power? If she could manoeuvre the Hunter close enough, Char should put his aspirations for Damon aside in favor of pulling in the Hunter's loyalty. Wasn't that the way it would work? After all, Damon was family and should hardly expect special treatment. The Hunter was a valuable but unsure asset. And why should Char put any faith in Damon at all except for the void created presently by her own absence from the equation? She must use this time to consolidate her own power, and to do that, she needed a dramatic idea.

The one thread of Char's tapestry she wouldn't touch was the girl. It was already too complicated, all this bother over a child. The Dark Man might have his reasons, but she was beginning to have doubts about her father's sensibility. After all these years, he finally seemed less than perfect to her. Hadn't she seen the evidence? Hadn't he looked pale and worn recently, and hadn't his mind wandered when she spoke to him? This was not the all-powerful father of her own childhood. Sometimes he was a stranger.

*The girl, then.* He would be focused so much on her for the next while he wouldn't have time for his daughter, and that was fine with her. Time was what she needed now. It all came back to finding what could offer her a victory.

And when her time came, anyone in her way better have something to pray to.



“You wanted to see me, Father?” *Maybe Arabella’s right*, thought Damon, *maybe I am getting some nerve finally*. Maybe he was getting stupid and suicidal.

*Yes, My Son*, came the reply from the Burnt Man, nearly invisible in the depths of his throne.

Damon approached, listening to the echoing thud of his boots across the stone floor. These were boots he wore hardly ever for this very reason; usually he had no desire to call attention to himself. But he felt really good suddenly, really strong and sure, and even the confrontation with the Hunter hadn’t thrown him off as much as it might have another time before.

“Is there something wrong?” he said.

The Burnt Man was silent for a long moment.

Damon felt a brush of coolness along his neck, which put a chill in him and took away some of his jauntiness. “Is it Marguerite? Is everything going according to plan?”

“My business with Marguerite is proceeding correctly. I will see her again soon.”

And the silence. “Did you want me to fetch her?”

“No.” He rose slowly to his feet. “There are plots and plans besides mine, and it has come time to put a check on some of them.” He beckoned, and Damon crossed the floor to the foot of the dais. “My son, we are not close. Neither, despite your beliefs, am I close to your sister. You will no doubt understand the reasons for this.”

Damon nodded, although he did not, not for certain and definitely not fully. Usually, the power of his father’s presence overshadowed any distance, and belied any problems. Damon was not his father’s confidante.

“I have looked for her,” his father continued, “but she is hiding herself from me. I had thought to ask you to look for her, to save me from it. I fear there will be a confrontation. My son, do you see the danger we all now face?”

Damon’s face drained of color. “You can’t think – Father, Father, I have never ever considered disloyalty to you or to anyone in our family. I’ve tried with Aria until I’m tired nearly to death, but I would never do anything to – You can’t think I would –”

”But the thought did enter my mind, and even if it is not true, I will still have to struggle with the idea. And if you are not a traitor, and I cannot imagine it of you, what of Arabella?”

“She wouldn’t either,” he said, not particularly convincingly.

“But it is a possibility I also must consider. Already, she has failed me in an important task. I am at a difficult crossroads, my son, and need to have something I can count on.”

“On me!” said Damon raising his foot to the second step of the dais. “And if you can’t trust me, use me and count on yourself. Who better? You can’t be a traitor to yourself.”

The Burnt Man’s face shifted, and Damon realized his father was smiling, faint and pale. “Ah, my son, but that is where you are wrong.”

For some reason, Damon thought of Maggie at that moment, and felt, with the memory of her face, an overwhelming surge of loneliness. What was this? A feeling and thought of his own, or something sent by his father? What could he be thinking, to have this wave of emotion leaking out of him?

“What about Aria?” he said, eager to get quickly off the subject of what he could only see as his father’s weakness.

The man seemed disappointed in him, and turned away with a whisper of fabric. “She has disappeared,” he said, the words soft at the brush of his silk cloak.

Damon stared. “I saw her – recently –” but it had been probably twenty hours or more, and a lot could happen in that amount of time, especially when it came to Aria.

“If she is not gone already, she will be soon.”

“Gone – ?” This was so surprising Damon didn’t know how to respond. “Gone – how? What do you mean? Where?”

“Scheming,” the man said. “Scheming. She believes me to be her enemy. She thinks being loyal is now a liability, and to gain the power she seeks she needs only to find a way to take it by force.”

Damon was cold. “Is that true?”

His father turned to face him, looking down from a height that seemed suddenly unnatural and towering. “Is this how I raised you and Arabella? In the absence of – was this the best I could do? To foster children to be vicious without thought, and to think more of supremacy than of family? Do you think power will not come to both of you?”

“No!” Damon shouted, surprising himself. “No, I think Aria and I will never ‘inherit’ anything, no matter what you say. I think you’re holding onto every scrap of influence and power you have. I think you’re keeping us from learning to use our abilities, and I think you’re afraid of us. I think that’s what’s wrong, not Aria, not me.”

Thunder broke over his head. The Burnt Man’s arms rose from his sides to point upwards. The black cloak was a fury of whipping material. Damon was forced to his knees, boots scraping stone, buffeted by winds and sheer energy. Above him on the dais, his father was howling like an animal.

Then, as suddenly as the attack had started, the room was quiet again. The wind disappeared and his cape, released from its clasp, floated to the steps between father and son.

“First lesson,” said the man, low, “defend yourself.”

A crackle of energy sounded in the air between them, and Damon felt the spark of it on his wrist before he managed to throw up a screen. He pulled it around himself, a bubble of energy.

“Now,” said the Burnt Man, “why didn’t you do that before?”

Damon, confused, said nothing. His hands were out in front of him, the physical component of his defense. The energy in Damon responded best to large gestures, or perhaps he hadn’t the natural ability of Maggie to feel the power and direct it subtly.

“My son,” said his father, “your power is not a gift, a present given to a child on its birthday without condition or price. It is your heritage, your birthright. Little Marguerite, who should be out of her depth, having been neither born to power nor to even have experienced it to believe in its existence, she surprises me. Every time, she surprises me. She is learning to use her power, and it responds by expanding and hardening. She is developing the muscles that not only aid its use but actually cause its development. If you cannot do as much with your power as you wish, look to yourself as the cause.”

Damon lowered his head. None of this was new instruction, but it had been long since forgotten or lost to his everyday routine. The drills – his mother – there was so much. “How do I begin? How do I get back on the right track?”

“Go back? Go on, my son. You know where your power resides, you have the feeling for it. You have never lived without it. It is a part of you, and it will grow if you use it. Use it at every opportunity.”

“I’ll make you proud,” said Damon, resolved. It was a funny kind of reversal, that he would have come to his father today full of himself just to be beaten back into the reality of his

situation – to see how far he had fallen in the centuries of his existence – and to be given hope for the future. Not easy on the ego, of course, but then, his ego tended to take a beating in most circumstances.

“Your eyes are shining,” said his father, and Damon smiled. It was such a nice, casual, familiar thing to hear.

“I’m happy all of a sudden,” he said.

The Man lowered his head. “The fruits of all our lives, all my plans, all my hopes. What will at last bring us into the next stage?”

Damon waited, but the Burnt Man seemed to have dropped into his own thoughts without him.

“I’ll look for Aria,” he said at last, and turned to go, leaving his father like that still, head bowed, body straight and tall, the cloak spread before him like a regal train.

*Thank You*, said his father softly into his head, and Damon went.



I woke to find myself lying cramped on top of my chains, the metal rings biting into my back.

Cold, exhausted, frustrated, I burst into tears.

It wasn’t bad enough that I was a prisoner. It wasn’t bad enough that I was thirteen, barely any of my life gone by, and already a pawn in an evil game. I was alone, and all the action was somewhere else. There was nothing to do but wait, and imagine that everything important, everything I could take a hand in, was passing me by.

It was better to imagine that time had stopped completely than to know it was creeping so slowly. That, dwelling on not knowing, would be what would drive me mad. I could hardly imagine the sun – was it true, I had read it somewhere, that humans in this century spent an average of twenty to twenty-two hours a day inside their houses? If and when she escaped this place, I meant to spend a lot of time outdoors.

By hanging almost off the rock, twisting my back into an c-curve, and craning my neck, I discovered I could see, just, into the outer hall. It was a victory of sorts, because it changed my input a little. After all, there was only so much interest a person could find in a blank stony wall and a couple of empty sets of shackles endlessly across from them. What was he doing to Aaron and Jason? I couldn’t bear to consider, with so little hope of knowing.

There was no use in worrying until I learned more. The power was little comfort because I was dampened, the shackles having fallen on my mind as the physical ones had closed on my wrists. I flexed my hand, feeling a trickle, then a fizzle as the energies dissipated back into my fibers. It was there. It was just – impossible to reach.

Something caught my attention, a sound? Just a feeling?

I held my breath and waited.

In the distance, down the corridor, I could hear a single set of feet walking with more than usual care. This person didn’t want to be heard, and that might mean something good for me. Maybe – what if Jason had escaped?

Waiting was unbearable. My neck was strained; my back obviously was never meant for this kind of abuse, to lie in this particular contortion across cold stone. But then *he* came around the corner, and made it worthwhile.

Mr. Hunt.

My mouth quirked into a smile, and I felt relieved, relaxing for the first time in . . . days, I guessed. Would he see me? would he find me? I hissed, almost silently, but his senses were like a cat's. His eyes darted in the direction of the sound, met my eyes almost hidden behind the rock column.

A few steps, his eyes returning the corridor ahead, brought him inside our little prison tunnel. I untwisted myself and found a position that was comfortable enough and would help stretch out my overextended muscles.

Hunt stayed a few paces back from the rock, making no move to touch me or examine my bindings. I found myself casting furtive glances back in the direction of the corridor which was, in this position, fully out of my sight. He appeared less concerned, a corner of his mouth cocking in what was not necessarily a pleasant smile. It was the same feral toothy grin he used in class to frighten homework shirkers and talkers alike.

"Finding your way around?" he said, and tapped a crooked finger to his temple.

I stared. This was not the opening remark I had expected. This, like the beginning of the conversation with the Burnt Man, was a gambit. More games. "Feeling fairly suppressed," I said, shrugging and lifting my hands. The shackles rattled. And without wasting time, "Interested in helping me off this rock?"

He looked away, smiling, checked down the corridor, but made no real effort to lower his voice. "I'll tell you what, Maggie May," he said, "I would love to, but I'm not sure about some things yet."

*Like what,* I thought, but just narrowed my eyes at him. The first familiar face I had seen in this dungeon since Jason and Aaron – and he was stubbornly determined to be enigmatic.

"You see," said Hunt, "I'm an old hand, and I'm only alive because I hedge my bets." He reached out a big, tough hand and took the chain between my wrists in two fingers. "Maggie," he said softly, shook his head, then gave a jerk on the chain. I wasn't expecting it, and felt my shoulders wrench.

"Stop. . ." I managed, also quietly.

"Just not tough enough, huh, Mags," he said, pulling more steadily on the chain, moving it up above my head.

I scrambled for balance, gritted my teeth, felt my eyes close, and reached out with my mind. *Ignore the stupid restraints, push away the layers of cotton the Burnt Man had smothered me under, strike!*

It was not much, but it was enough. Hunt released the chain and stumbled backwards into the opposite wall. "Good, very good," he said. "You see why my decision is so difficult."

My fists clenched, and I scrambled to the edge of the shelf, mouth twisted. "Games! All of you, only playing games. I'm sick of it, no more Maggie-pawn!"

I felt angry tears rising, bit them back, gave a wordless grunt of frustration and was silent. The power was already getting away from me, seeping back into my extremities and with it went my fury. Accessing even that trickle of power had drained me of all energy.

Hunt cocked an eyebrow as if to say, *Are you finished now?* To think that this man had been my favorite teacher. And now – had all that been an act? Mercenary, Machiavellian in the worst sense of the word.

But there was something to be gained from him, obviously, if he was valuable enough for the Burnt Man to allow to wander freely even with his loyalty undecided. And I could use an ally.

"So – what would it take to prove to you that I'm going to come out on top?" I said,

hoping I didn't sound like an idiot.

He laughed, but not condescendingly. "If you feel the need to prove anything, you're not strong enough yet. However, I'd give it at least another week before everything comes to a head – more than enough time. I'll drop back, check on your progress."

"What I really want," said I, surprising myself with my self-assurance, "is information. Jason, tell me about him."

"The others too? Or just your beloved Mr. Lawson?"

I squinted, then, over the protests of my body that it was *too tired*, I reached out with a trickle of energy, all I could muster, and listened. Tiny vibrations surrounded me, scrubbed into the rocks like polish on a floor, and sitting free for my examination on the surface of Hunt's mind, a name I hadn't expected, and one I didn't know.

"Jason, Scott, Aaron – who's Peter?"

He smirked, pleased, I guessed. "Well done. I had no idea about Aaron – Scribner, is it? What *is* the old devil up to?" He turned away from me, to the other shelf across from me, and picked up the chains linking the other sets of manacles, repeating the motion he had used on mine to punctuate: "Jason and Aaron are safe, from what I can gather, although uncomfortable. Scott Saunders has been unfortunate enough to become a pawn in a little bit of sibling rivalry – I can't tell you more –" He gave a tug on my chain, setting up a few seconds of rattling.

Tired of this, I jerked the chain out of his hands.

Hunt laughed briefly and went on. "My guess is, they're all to be tried, like you, in the Dreamworld. It'll be different for them, of course, it's different for everyone. I wouldn't expect them back any time soon. Lots of time for us, dearest."

I opened my mouth to speak – but Hunt swept by me without another word, gave me a condescending pat on the head, and disappeared beyond my view into the hall.

Incredibly, Mr Hunt had begun whistling. Eventually, the tune and the footsteps had both faded and I was left alone again to ponder.

Then I knew, of course, that he was really a teacher after all. "Mr. Hunt," I whispered. "Mr. Hunt." He'd just come to give a taste, to demonstrate that he had a lot more to teach me. I wasn't about to let him get away keeping his knowledge to himself. If – no, when – he came back, I'd be ready.