

Chapter Nine



In the first moments of his trial, the world turned on its side and Jason realized he had lost all his senses.

Slowly, he came to feel pressure on his body, surrounding him. He was aware neither of being able to breath nor of needing to. Every part of him was being held softly but firmly, nothing imposing. He tried to move and found himself immobile.

He tried to remember everything Maggie had told him. The Dreamworld was a place of games and tests. The Burnt Man wanted her strong and scared, she had said. Her trial had been in an alternate, alien Toronto where the city was real and not real at the same time, and where she could change her circumstances with her will.

Nothing, of course, said that his experience would be the same. Strength and fear. Was that all he had to remember? He tried to shift. There was a smell now, something he couldn't really identify. His eyes were closed, but he couldn't move the eyelids. Even his muscles were quiet, no spasms from the strain of trying to translate signal from his mind into action.

The smell in his nostrils was pulling shards out of his memory, nothing concrete enough to grasp. Being a kid, hiding, playing with his brother, the farm where his cousins lived when he was ten - and then he had it. Earth. Warm dirt, surrounding him, packed tight. He could feel the texture of the dirt now, clods and grittiness.

He was buried alive.

This, then, was his testing ground.

Jason, if he could have opened his mouth, would have screamed.



Damon received the summons fast asleep.

Bring Her To Me.

A simple, emphatic command to his sleeping mind.

Barely awake, Damon struggled into his clothes and down the dimness of his room into the brilliance of the main hall. There was no real night in the catacombs; Char had banished it with his own brand of artificial day.

Maybe because he had been in the middle of a dream, maybe because he was having trouble waking up, Damon's thoughts turned only slowly to Maggie and their last two meetings.

Often since, he had held his hands out in front of him, daring himself to see her distress, to see her shackles clenched in his fists, to see her twisted discomfort, and below that, a glimpse of the same calm kindness he had seen in the Dreamworld.

She had been surprised at his identity, that it was separate from his father's. Quite an irony, considering the lack of any real connection between father and son in any way you cared to name. She couldn't have known, of course.

She was asleep too, her sleep patterns maybe having settled into a routine not far off his own. If I had some kind word, Damon thought, something gentle to say to wake her –

But what was the point? Speaking with generosity of intention didn't automatically engender a kind response. What could he want from her anyway that he shouldn't be looking for instead from his family?

At least you have a father, she'd said. At least she'd had a mother. And Damon had had a hand in taking her away from Maggie forever. He had left her mother to die, all the family Maggie had left.

Damon felt inside himself for some response, and came up with nothing but a spacious coldness. No, no kind words. But Char should realize – this girl, on her own, would solve nothing.

He unlocked the shackles, waking her slowly as he did so. Without waiting to acknowledge her, or letting her orient herself, he dragged her off the rock shelf and pushed her ahead of him into the corridor.

Maggie was as groggy as he had been earlier, only a little more than he still was. Neither spoke, as if any words would be more than either could stand. She fell, more than once, and each time he lifted her to her feet by that same shoulder bruised by the Burnt Man's grip in the Dreamworld.

At the end of the maze, he thrust her ahead and into the throne room, slammed the door behind her, and left her in darkness.



Knowing I was crying piteously and very audibly, I hid behind my hands and pulled my legs into my body.

The coldness of the room was something more than the temperature of the stone floor I knelt on. But I was free of the shackles; I had a way to find out why. Slowly, I reached out, afraid every second of a reprisal.

The Burnt Man's voice came to me along with the faint glow rising lazily above his hand. A ball; he sent it upwards with a flick of its wrist and caught it an inch above his fingers on its descent. When he spoke, his tone suggested placid amusement.

"My son has quite an effect on you," he said.

I pulled myself to face him, kneeling, but knowing the posture had nothing to do with obeisance to the Burnt Man. No, maybe it did. Maybe it did. The fact Damon had gotten to me so much could mean he, the Burnt Man, was getting to me as well.

When he spoke next, it was into my mind, and the tone was level and gave away nothing. Why did I think this interview was building to a confrontation?

Marguerite. It Seems For Once You Have Me At A Disadvantage.

For Once, I sneered, and realized I had managed to send it to him. There was a difference, in having a feeling and in projecting it. I had done it. The look on his face told me. The tingle raced through me. She was released from the chains that bound her power, and again, I was dangerous.

Do Not Attempt To Rise Against Me, he said, and I felt my hurt shoulder tweak with pain. He was able to touch me with just his mind. This was something I hadn't tried yet as an offensive gesture, because I hadn't thought of it. Store it up, another experiment, something else to learn. Could Hunt teach her to do use my mind as a weapon?

Then I realized, of course I had. I had pushed Hunt away from me, into the wall. What was I capable of now, without the shackles?

Caution Becomes You, he said, following my tactical retreat. If he couldn't plumb my mind for the extent of my abilities, he certainly could sense my intentions. What is the limit of what he could do? And more seriously, I thought, how much damage would I do if I really did try throwing everything I have at him? A shiver raced through me at the consideration, fear, not power. The lesson of the Dreamworld: control yourself.

A look appeared on his face, and I thought I might be right. This was not a social call, so what was it? He seemed dangerously on edge. Maybe this was just what he wanted me to think. So little to go on. So little to make decisions on. And maybe, so deadly to me and the others to refrain from deciding.

There was a small motion of his hand and my eyes followed it to a newly illuminated portion of the floor where Mr. Hunt lay stretched out on his stomach. A tone entered the Burnt Man's voice that made me want to draw back, cringing. Murderous, cold with fury: *You Brought Him Here*.

"No," I said, forgetting about communicating with the voice in my head. "I saw him for the first time today. I mean – no, he's my teacher. But I didn't bring him. I didn't know anything about him."

What Do You Know Now?

His anger was physical, pushing me back into the darkness toward the doors. "Nothing! Nothing! He's my teacher. What should I know?" In the respite from his voice, I looked and, dragging my feet, tried to get closer to him. "Did you kill him? Oh god, did you kill him?"

The Burnt Man's fury receded, tidally, but I could sense his power there, hovering. I had an urge to put my arms up over my head as if that way I could fend off the next onslaught. Monsoon season. I was panting for breath. Hunt. Mr Hunt. I felt his heartbeat, swimming in a sea of the Burnt Man's power.

He Calls Himself The Hunter, said the Burnt Man, *And He Is Well Known To Me. He Should Not Be Part Of This Equation. He Should Have Nothing To Do With You.*

I straightened and faced him slowly. More confusion? I rallied. *So Maybe He Came Here On His Own. Maybe He Put Himself Into The 'Equation.'*

The Burnt Man, tight and tense, said, *Do You Know What He Did To You?*

I looked at Hunt. The only parts of the conversation he would be able to follow were the ones spoken out loud. Perhaps it was time to give him a chance to explain himself. "You want to know what Mr Hunt did to me," I said. At the same time, I reached over with a touch of power and investigated the way Hunt was being held to the floor. With the same quick incaution I had used to nearly kill Mr. Sterling, I batted the weight on him aside.

The Burnt Man, registering gratifying surprise, opened his eyes wider and stared into mine. I heard Hunt struggling to a crouch, as high as my adversary would allow, but didn't let my eyes leave his. *Very Good*, said my adversary, with just a little condescending approval.

"Don't patronize me," I said. "We'll fight if you want."

Hunt was trying to draw himself to his feet but the Burnt Man wouldn't allow it. There was an air of restraint about him I could feel. No, I couldn't read minds, unless the Burnt Man was sending specific words on purpose, but the manner in which someone was thinking seemed easier all the time to discern. He didn't want me to force the Burnt Man's hand right now, I guessed. Did this mean he had decided to help me?

No, I said, reverting to our private mode of speech. There was no need to include Hunt here. I didn't trust him. *Not Yet. There Is Something More You Want From Me Than Just A Battle Of*

Wits. Or Of Powers.

The Burnt Man smiled, almost imperceptibly. *Yes*, he hissed into my mind, softly. I shivered but, unexpectedly, found there was a thrill to it.

“Char,” croaked Hunt. He had found his voice, and was still struggling to stand. “I planted a beacon in her. I found her, and I knew you had her. I knew someone was tampering with her. I found you myself.”

“Then why did you come?” said the Burnt Man, out loud.

Was that what he was doing in the nurse’s room? I thought suddenly. Was that what the chalk dust was all about too? Make me faint, so he could plant something? What did he mean, a beacon? I considered my body with my hands and then with my mind.

Following my thoughts, Hunt said, “No, Mags, it’s gone now. It was a chemical trace I can find in blood trace. But you don’t know about that yet either, do you?”

The Burnt Man nodded his appreciation. “Are you my man still?” he said darkly, fixing Hunt with his cold stare.

“And forever, whenever it fits my schedule.” Hunt’s mouth twisted. He, I noted, was scared of the Burnt Man, as much as I was, maybe more. He knew more about him. But Hunt must have decided bravado was a good way to deal with his fear. It worked, obviously, since he was still alive and here.

“Then return her to her prison. You know the way, I would guess.” The Burnt Man turned, and in turning vanished from the dais and the room.

“Well?” said Hunt, indicating the exit. A line of white light had appeared in the growing crack between the two doors. “I’ll leave you your dignity, if you want it.”

I blinked. Suddenly, the tables had turned on me. A moment before, I had been talking to the Burnt Man like an equal, a prisoner of nobility, and now I was a pawn again. Maybe a student. Hunt had the authority here, acting on the Burnt Man’s word. I went quietly, saying to myself, *Char*. Hunt had said it. Was it my foe’s name? *Char*. I looked down at Hunt’s hands, big and rough, as we walked side by side back to my lonely shelf. Jason and Aaron, swept away. Me, swept aside. It was best I comply for now. Who knew what the Burnt Man was, or what Hunt himself was capable of with those hands? I went quietly.



The worst part for Scott was imagining that somewhere out there, Peter was waiting for him, frightened, needing his help. He moved through a thick fog, brilliant in places with fuzzy colors, and dark grey in others. There were no landmarks, nothing but a soft, even surface under his feet that gave slightly as he walked. It was like walking through a swamp, on soaked ground.

He called for the hundredth time: “Peter! Peter!” There was nothing but the echo of his own voice in reply. Once, he thought he heard an answer, a thin trickle of song, but when nothing else came to him, he believed it had been his imagination.

Unlike his two friends, Scott was not likely to reflect about a situation in the middle of it. Sorting out should be done after the objective is accomplished, and time spent thinking in a crisis could be the time you spend doing what you have to to get out of it. He wouldn’t have expressed it in those terms, but in his mind, the more you thought and worried the more likely you were to make a mistake or falter through losing confidence in yourself.

This made Scott a perfectly reliable athlete. He didn’t have the flashing brilliance of Jason, or even the dogged persistence of Aaron, but he had a consistency that was enviable. Scott was the guy who could always be counted on in any situation requiring action. Aaron had said more than

once he thought Scott was perfectly in touch with his subconscious mind, leaving no separation between what he wanted to do and did. The only times Scott got into trouble were when that subconscious mind tuned in to some powerful emotion to use as fuel, and on that he could run nearly forever without stopping to consider.

And this was the case now. All he could be was scared for Peter. Fear for himself had no way of entering his considerations. And until he dropped, he had little recourse in coping with the situation he found himself in besides to run and run until he was exhausted.

“Peter!” he shouted. He couldn’t tell if he was running in place, if he was standing almost still. The colors around him were in constant flux. It made sense to him that persistence would win the day. He would never desert a child in danger. “Peter!”

And no one answered.

Slowly, the mists began to recede and he slowed, realizing where he was: on the way to school.

He was wearing a hat as he came into the school yard. It was just like Westbrook Elementary, except the fence was higher and more menacing somehow. He entered the yard the usual way, from the far end of the school through a gap in the fence. That was the difference, he realized, looking up to the ceramic cones on the tops of the fence posts. The fence was electrified. That’s dangerous, he told himself. There are little kids around.

The tarmac and field were full of students, but they all seemed insubstantial, like they were in the process of fading out of existence completely. Scott took that in stride, like he had the fence after his initial twinge. Then, his heart started beating fast.

Peter.

Mr. Hunt was approaching across the field, big strong hand on Peter’s frail shoulder. *Watch it*, Scott wanted to shout. *You might hurt him. He’s fragile.*

But he said nothing, and the pair crossed to him. Fury painted a red flush on Mr. Hunt’s face.

“Saunders!” he bellowed, and Scott shrank. “Hat, Saunders. How dare you come into this school yard wearing a hat?”

Scott’s hand went to his head and he dragged off the ball cap. It was black and slightly shiny and reminded him of something he couldn’t name.

“Throw it away!” commanded Hunt, and Scott, unthinking, whipped it back over his shoulder. There was a hissing crackle.

“Look what you’ve done now,” the teacher hollered, going redder. Scott turned, and there, at waist height, the ball cap was frozen against the electric fence, trembling slightly.

Peter shivered and Scott went to put an arm around him, but Hunt stopped him with his hand against the boy’s chest. “What are you waiting for? Go get it. You can’t just leave it there, stuck on the fence for all to see. Get it down. No –” Hunt stopped dead. He drew his hand back from Scott and slowly pushed Peter forward. “Get the brat to do it. He’s expendable.”

Scott stared, and shivered like Peter had. “No,” he said so slowly he wasn’t sure he would ever finish, “no, I’ll do it.”

“Suit yourself,” said Hunt roughly. “Seems a far better thing to get the brat to do it.”

Peter’s eyes were welling up with tears, the first Scott had seen there. “Don’t worry,” he whispered to the smaller boy. “You’ll be safe.”

He walked to the fence, the air heavy around him. Sounds of the playground were reaching him now through some kind of filter, making them distant and indistinct. He reached his hand out, bracing himself for the shock. Here was the test, he guessed.

His fingers brushed the fabric, and there was a momentary sensation of it along his nerve

endings before everything was shock and pain and the smell of burning. He had never been in so much pain in his life. He felt himself jerk to the ground, smelled his own flesh, and, screaming, watched the world go black.

Scott opened his eyes. He was walking. The mist was clearing and he could tell where he was: on the way to school. The fence, as before, was electrified, and he saw Mr. Hunt much sooner this time. The other kids playing on the field were as indistinct as before.

“Boy!” the teacher bellowed, “Get rid of that hat!”

Scott, shaking still from the first shock that surely must have killed him, realized he was caught in a loop. This was the test, then. He started to cry, muscles weak and dead. His instinct to protect Peter at any cost surged through him.

He threw the hat, heard the crackle.

“Pull it down,” Hunt commanded. Peter looked at him expectantly. Bracing himself for the worst, Scott went to get the hat.

It was worse this time around. He had not recovered from the first experience, and he understood this too was part of the test. Each time would be worse until he – until he what? Died? or found a way out.

The world went white, then black in an explosion of pain.



A low cough sounded from the darkened room before him. “Hey, baby,” said Arabella. Damon watched as her shadow detached itself from the barely discernible shape of the sofa by the near wall.

“Go away,” he said without preamble. “I’m tired.”

“Oh, sure. Such a soft reception for your favorite sister. Especially when you don’t want to talk, do you baby, not about what kind of intrigue you’ve decided to be capable of.”

“I don’t. I just want some sleep.”

“I’ve seen you with her, you know. Your little sweetheart. Trouble in paradise, is there? You shouldn’t make your girlfriends cry, Dame.”

Damon, frustrated beyond any kind of control, lurched up from the floor throwing off her hold. She froze for an instant in confusion, then reacted, meeting him halfway through the room. They fell together clawing at each other in a sea of restrained energies.

Aria felt the power rising in Damon’s grasp. “You little reprobate!” she growled. “You’ve been stealing from him. Stealing from him!”

“So have you,” he gasped, “and don’t try to deny it.”

“I’m entitled. I’m his heir.”

“He’s not dead yet,” Damon snarled back, breathing hard. “And I haven’t heard him say much nice about you lately. I think he’d probably be even less happy if he knew about this.”

“Stupid little girl,” Arabella said, a different tone entering her voice. She disengaged and rolled away from Damon. He, relieved, sat up and massaged his temples, feeling for tenderness.

“Stupid little girl,” he repeated. “How strong is she?”

“Completely untrained, inexperienced,” said Aria, rubbing her nose. “Ouch. She still could get lucky. For Char to be doing all this there must be a fantastic potential.”

“Or he’s lonely enough his judgment is suffering.”

“I won’t hear talk like that,” she spat, turning to fix blazing eyes on him. Damon narrowed his own eyes, astounded as ever at her quickness to anger and braced himself for another fight.

What he'd said had come as much of a surprise to him as to her.

Instead of returning to the fray, she seemed pleased and smirked instead of escalating the confrontation.

"The Hunter's here," she said, and looked pleased when Damon's jaw dropped.

"Yes, I know."

Arabella grinned, showing teeth. "Our old friend has lost none of his tricks. I found him wandering in the catacombs."

"And what?"

"And what do you think? He found his way to Father."

"Of course," said Damon, but he wasn't sure what else to say.

"So the facts are these. We have two unknown quantities, the girl and the Hunter, both of whom Char knows something of. He's at an advantage over the girl, and the Hunter has always been manageable before – but – *but* there's never been a time when both his children were siphoning power away from him for their own ends. Correct?"

Damon paused a moment before agreeing. "Yes."

"So – stop."

"Stop? Taking the power? I'm so low right now myself, it would take a month to recover. He's had me doing so much. I need just a bit, nothing that would hurt him."

"No, stop." Arabella's mouth twisted. "I'll take care of the Hunter, you get the girl's trust. It would be good if she didn't survive the next trial Char sets her. You won't need power for that, just good old-fashioned charm." She moved close to him and pinched his cheek.

Damon felt the fury rising in him. This must be what it was like for Arabella, he thought, only even more violent. "And you do what? Go right on stealing what you need from him?"

"I'm going to take on the Hunter," she said ingenuously. "I've taken the hard task. I need it. You don't."

"I don't believe I'm hearing this." Damon brushed her hand away as it strayed to his face again. "Get away from me. Plot and scheme but don't think for an instant I'll be your pawn. You're trying to ride out his mistrust, but I think you've lost. Even if neither of us inherits anything, I'm satisfied. You've done it to yourself. You're crazy if you think you can make me do anything. It's not worth it."

It was a backward way to call a truce – was that what he was doing? It seemed obvious she was not finished trying to gain back her lost standing. Char would have very little trust left for her after the whole thing with Scott Saunders, and most of all the use of Peter as a pawn. Peter was a vital resource, not a plaything. Who knew what an outside influence would do to him. Peter's usefulness, Damon always had understood, lay in his purity and isolation.

Char is getting old, Damon thought, with more regret than he thought he might feel. Maybe the girl was good for him, bring things back to the way they had been. It would be worth a great deal to him to see Arabella thwarted - but not at the cost of everything he held to be of value. If Char wanted a plaything, and if he was going to strip her of her potential, and if that would revitalize him, that was worth almost any price.

Arabella was standing, staring at him. Something was going through that devious mind of hers, he thought, and hoped it didn't involve him.

"I'm going," she said, more in the way of getting the last word than in politeness. She turned and left, and there was enough of the sleepwalker about her Damon knew she was plotting.

"As usual, a completely unsatisfying encounter," he said to the mirror, and threw up his hands in disgust. She always seemed to get the better of him – even when it seemed clear she had made no real gain. This time, she had told him about the Hunter, and made him aware that they

themselves might pose a threat to their father and the family, no matter what their intentions. Most of what she'd gained had been in badgering him about Maggie, and what use was that? She had cried. She had cried all the way to Char. She was a scared, scared little girl.

But could have she been reacting to something other than just blind fear? It was in the way she looked at him with so many questions, her brow creased and her hair –

This is dangerous, he told himself firmly, but it was hard to erase her completely from his mind. Thinking she was just a part of the Dreamworld, there had been no harm in taking her home and liking her. In the catacombs, in the real world, she was something else completely, and when she was destroyed, he had better have lost whatever fondness he had for her.

It was in the back of his mind that he had been the cause of her crying, his cruelty, his abruptness. Because of the way of my world, Damon thought, I don't believe any more I can have an effect on anything. Situations run me, not the other way around. Maggie and I are both being swept away. Maybe it's just as well. And just a little bit, he envied Arabella. She would figure out something to do in his place.

Realizing that further pondering would be little use without more information, Damon crept into his bed, bothering only to remove his shoes. The argument with Arabella had given him a short-lived second wind, but now he was exhausted again. The Hunter. Everything would be dealt with. He dropped into slumber and finally succeeded in turning his thoughts away from Maggie.



Aaron brushed a bit of hair back from where it had fallen over his lenses. The haircut suited for his face – and besides, it had been this way as long as he could remember, cut just above his ears and parted slightly to one side – but it always got in his way.

There was nothing much to see, anyway. The blackness of the Dark Man's throne room had dissolved into a grey, blank sky over the prison yard he stood in. Armed guards patrolled the high fence and stood silhouetted against the grey in towers at the corners. He could see the entire confines of the yard from where he stood, a shovel in his hands. There were no buildings, no gates, just an expanse of flat, dry ground.

The first thing he became aware of was how cold his hands were. He looked down and his knuckles were red and cracked.

He, it seemed, was the only prisoner.



“Take a girl out of her family, out of everything she knows, and threaten her with something she's not allowed to understand.”

I woke with a start, confused, thinking for a moment I was back and dreaming in my own bed.

Hunt's face was a few inches from my ear. A long strand of my hair was tangled in his fingers. It must have been his gentle but insistent tugging which had woken me as much as his voice.

He continued, still whispering. “Take a girl out of her normal context, out of the normal world where she feels small and ordinary and make her special. Tell her by your actions that she is unique and dangerous. Then batter her, torture her – how does she survive?”

He stopped dead and smiled. Not cruelly, I thought, but I had no trust to give him. I could hardly bear to breathe – but the one thing forcing me to was the desire not to let him see me scared.

I had no wish to lose this round of their game before it had even begun, and appearing too eager to talk would probably do it.

He chuckled, enough for me to see some of the old Mr. Hunt, the one I had so liked at school.

“Okay, Mags, ask,” he said. My hair slid slowly out of his fist.

“Talk to me,” I said, my voice gravelly. “I need information.”

The last ends of hair slithered off his fingers. A chemist’s hands, they were acid-stained, the cracks and indentations clearly darkened, permanently, by years of teaching. More and more, I was in awe of the man. There was so much to him, so much he must have done. And now, most of it seemed to come down to me. Feeling special. Surviving. What did he mean, how? He turned away. “What can I tell you?”

“Tell me why I’m here. Tell me why, why me. Tell me how you come into it. Did you end up at my school because I was there? Was it a coincidence?”

“What about your friends? Don’t you want to know why they’re here?” said Hunt, his back still to me. “Are you that egocentric you don’t think to ask?”

“They’re here because of me,” I said. “You can’t tell me otherwise.”

I watched him nod, considering.

“Well? You said it yourself. He’s making me feel special, singled out. Instead of Maggie the scared kid, I’m Maggie the center of attention. And somehow that’s necessary. He’s playing some kind of game to –” I stopped, an answer hovering in front of me just out of reach. *Why?*

“No, Mags,” said Hunt in the space. “It’s all in what you have to work with. Your salvation. My profit. Not knowing some things may be all that you have to rely on eventually.”

I bolted upright in exasperation, chains rattling over the stone. “What, you’re worried I’m going to be – paralyzed with fear at the deciding moment? I’m scared all the time. It’s just degrees now. Nothing’s going to stop me from fighting when I get my chance. Nothing. Not fear, not you – and definitely not knowledge. I want out!”

“And you’re so far in,” he said and turned slowly so I could see the tears glittering in the corners of his eyes.

“Another trick?” I whispered.

“Obviously,” he said, telling me absolutely nothing, and wiped the wetness aside with one angry motion. His eyes narrowed, a redness clouding them. Was he sad for me or not? It seemed the only way with Hunt was to ignore the game and just head directly for my objective.

“I’ll tell you what I want,” I said. “You’re going to teach me. You don’t have to tell me anything about this place, or about my opponent. You can just give me the chance to use what I’ve got when the time comes.”

“And that’s it?”

I smiled, trying to imitate his narrow-eyed snarl. “That’s it.”

He cocked his head. “And what do I get out of it?”

I looked at him squarely. “About the only thing you’d admit to being interested in. A good fight.”

Hunt’s eyebrows went up, and he grinned. For a moment I thought he was going to laugh. “Deal,” he whispered, and left. Down the hall, I could hear him whistling.

“This round to you as well,” I told myself. “I still don’t know what you’re going to do.”

I swung myself around and began stretching, feeling the power trickling to my fingers as I flexed. So tender, so distant. How was I going to get at it? If there was ever a chance, with or without Hunt, I had to be ready.

Take a girl – I thought. Take a girl out of her home and what?



He returned, some time later. One meal had come, something that I had chosen to call ‘breakfast’ and arbitrarily assigned the designation ‘one third of day’ to the time between waking and it. This time, he was carrying a small sack he hadn’t had before.

“First lesson,” he said. He spread the contents of the sack out in front of me. “The tools of my trade.” He watched, let me pick up the rusty knife, finger the chalk. My fingers touched the book, and there he made me stop, rapping my hand away. “Tools of *my* trade,” he said again. “You, lucky girl, are going to need nothing so crude. You have a gift, as you have gathered.” He grabbed my wrist before I could wrench away. “All the mumbo-jumbo I have to go through to tap my very limited powers will be like swimming for a swan like you. No spells, no rule books. Just an effort of will – and you’ve already started to learn about some of that.” Still grasping my wrist, he took hold of my fingers with his free hand, bending them up and down. “Storage space,” he said. “Fingers, toes. Your ears. Anything to get it manageable.”

“I know,” I said.

“I’m just confirming,” he said, not missing a beat. “You don’t only have to know, you have to be sure you’re right. This is a good way to keep things under control. It may also be a good way to stop Char from knowing how strong you are. So far, you haven’t given him much chance to underestimate you, and that may not be a good thing in the end.”

My temper flared. “Hold on, you want me to play dumb?”

“Not at all,” he said. “Just don’t lay your cards all on the table at once. I told you you weren’t a gambler, but you may want to turn yourself into one.” He waved at the walls. “He can hear everything we say, you know.”

“He can. . .!” burst out of me. “What are we supposed to – what about –”

“He knows I’m here,” said Hunt. “Relax, Maggie May. He doesn’t disapprove.”

“I can’t trust you,” I said, resigned. Hope was evaporating. “You’re manipulating me just like him. I can’t afford to listen to you.”

“Hold on,” he said. He rolled up the book and the other things in their leather case and tied it. “I obey Char in some things, but I am nobody’s creature. I would be no use to him if I was. He doesn’t force me in issues of loyalty, because if he did, I wouldn’t be the Hunter, and that would end our association. Do you see? I’m the free agent here. Char leaves me alone because what I’m doing here benefits you, but it also benefits him.”

I stared. This was supposed to make me feel better? “How?”

“By getting you ready.”

He looked at me steadily, one eyebrow cocked, and reached out to take my hand in his. He rolled it over, palm, back, palm. “For what?” I said.

“A good question, isn’t it?” he said. “And unfortunately, as far as that’s concerned, Char is keeping council only with himself.”

I pulled my hand away. “I thought you’d say that,” I said.

I bit my lip. I couldn’t afford to be in the dark like I was. I couldn’t trust Hunt to tell me the truth. Could I? “Why should I believe anything you say?” I asked him.

“Because,” he said, “I’m still your teacher, you little runt, and you shouldn’t keep asking questions.”

I felt like laughing, but shook my head. “Not good enough.”

“Because I may need a favor someday,” he said. His voice dropped, became solemn, but he was also whispering. There was something here he didn’t want the Burnt Man to know. “Char would never do it for me. But you might. Why do you think I’m so eager to flout his authority? For

my health? Hardly. You know I want something. I have to make sure you have a chance to say yes.”

I looked at him, searching the familiar face. I knew so little of what went on behind those eyes. “All right,” I said. “Teach me.”

He grinned, a little victory for him. “Blood,” he said. “That’s what we have in common.”

I sat back. A teaser, a lesson on its way. The style was all Mr. Hunt, even if it was a class of one and science probably wouldn’t be anywhere on the menu.

“You can do a lot with power alone. I can do a lot just with a book and a candle and something scratched in the dirt. But a ritual of a certain size, for either of us, needs blood.”

By way of demonstration, he drew a few drops from his arm with a small knife from his belt. He noted my concentration, and shook his head. “Believe me, you’d never get it away from me, now or ever. And it wouldn’t help.” He flicked my chains with one finger.

“Right,” I said.

“Blood,” he said. “It has its own power. There’s different strengths in blood just like there’s different talents in people. I’m not going to teach you the way of recognizing bloods. The important thing to remember is blood equals big ritual, and big ritual equals blood. For both of us.”

“Hunt,” I said.

He stopped. “Yes?”

“Tell me about Char, the Burnt Man.”

“The Burnt Man?” He laughed. “Does he know you call him that? I bet that would tickle him. Now. The Burnt Man.”

Hunt stood. I watched him move, never really having noticed before how strong the man appeared. He was not tall or particularly thick, but his forearms were corded and seamed. “The Burnt Man. He’s very old, you understand that?”

I nodded.

“The children are old, too. Damon I’ve know since I’ve known Char, since I looked not much older than him.” He considered me, trying to take all this pretty much in stride. After all, I’d guessed Damon was older than he appeared. . . but it was a little disconcerting still to hear it confirmed. “Aria’s been sixteen, or however old she’s supposed to be, as long as you’ve been alive.”

“Aria,” I repeated.

“Arabella. You haven’t met her,” said Hunt, a little surprised. The way he said it, it was like he’d just assumed she would have a hand in all her father’s plans. “You knew Scott Saunders was here.”

“From the walls,” I said, waving. Then, a bit alarmed at this evidence of my own abilities, “He’s recorded there. There are echoes.”

“Marvellous,” Hunt said, impressed. “No, he’s been with Arabella, Char’s daughter. It appears she’s taken things into her own hands a bit. He doesn’t fully approve. If you think Damon’s unpredictable and dangerous, just wait ‘til you meet his sister.”

I was troubled. “I wonder why I haven’t seen her,” then, more generously, “Is Scott okay?”

Hunt neglected to delve more fully into Arabella’s plots, especially since there was more he needed to know for his own benefit. “Scott’s the same place Jason and Aaron are. A certain Mirror Room you might have been yourself.”

“Pseudo-Toronto,” I said.

“The Dreamworld,” he corrected me. “That’s a lesson in itself. But let’s get back to your question. Char.”

I didn’t like being directed away. “Are they running away from Char in there? What’s

happening?”

“Mags,” said Hunt with a sigh. “I don’t know. I don’t have any idea what Char plans for the bunch of you, and frankly I don’t care. I have one objective here, and when yours matches mine and you’re ready to concentrate, we’ll continue. All right?”

“Hunt!” I yelled after him, not caring who heard, but he was gone. “Damn it,” I told myself. *Patience, Mags. You’re finally starting to get what you want.*



They made a pretty good run of it in the end, especially since they had very little to go on. Jan had a vague feeling she was in contact with Maggie, felt an even vaguer pull toward the west and north. She drove slowly, weaving through the country roads over gravel and less frequently pavement, and Nick marked on the map of Ontario the direction the Maggie sensation seemed to be coming from.

It had been understood from the start between them to stay away from the subject, Jan’s idea Maggie was calling to her. It was so impossible as to not bear examination. Too many things had happened which were odd, but none had been strictly impossible like this.

Curiously, the taboo over the one subject made it easier to talk about other things.

“Okay,” Nick said. “Ninth birthday.”

“Ninth,” Jan replied. “Right. Quiet night at home. We rented the first two Star Wars movies and got a pizza. I can’t believe I’m actually getting all of this.”

“It’s great,” he said. “All sorts of information you store up all your life, thinking some day it’s going to come in handy. You think the time’s never going to come and then bang, someone walks in and asks, tell me everything.”

“What about you?”

“Me? Okay, that was nineteen. . . Madrid. I was in Madrid. A legitimate job in the summer. And making money within my vocation for once. I painted sign boards for a travelling circus.”

“No!” she said. “I was working in advertising. Doing glamorous spots for plumbing companies. Lucky bum.”

“Come on,” said Nick. “You never wanted to join the circus, did you?”

“How do you know? I wanted to be a tightrope walker – there was this book I used to read to Maggie, in fact – Hold on, I can feel it pretty strongly that way.” She indicated, with a sweeping gesture, most of a field to their right. “Does that make a difference?”

He used the pair of compasses they’d found in a pile of Maggie’s old school things in the car to estimate their position. “What’s the odie say?”

“Seventeen kilometers since the junction. This road is destroying my car. I wouldn’t be surprised if the windshield cracks.”

“We should check the tires at the next gas station. We’re riding pretty low. No - It’s another piece, but we’re still only closing in. Nothing for sure yet.”

“Okay, let’s make another pass. Is there anything left of that sandwich?”

He checked as Jan turned up the next concession for a parallel route. “Nada,” he replied. “Unless you can fill up on hot peppers. It’s getting dark. How about we find a place, since we’ll be getting near to civilization in a few minutes, and get a sit-down meal?”

“I’m not ready to stop looking yet,” she said.

“Jan.” Nick put his hand lightly on her arm. “You’re not going to help Maggie by falling asleep at the wheel.”

“I’m not tired.”

“What if you can’t feel where she is effectively if you’re half-asleep?”

“What if I’m more susceptible when I’m tired?”

“So you *are* tired. Sorry – sorry. I wasn’t trying to be argumentative.”

“Oh, hell.” She put her foot more heavily on the accelerator. “You’re right. I’m starving and I’m exhausted. My brain’s going to go on the fritz pretty soon if I don’t get something going into it besides worrying and long country roads.”



Later, settled in to a motel in a double room, Nick checked out the television paper while Jan washed her face.

“That wasn’t so bad,” he said.

“What wasn’t?” she yelled back, muffled slightly by the sound of running water.

“Checking in,” he shouted back. “I didn’t put my foot in my mouth, not as far as you’ve told me, and we’re sharing without biting each other’s heads off.”

“Right,” she said, turning the tap off. She emerged from the bathroom with a towel around her neck. “Let’s get some dinner.”

“Room service?” he said.

“Not on your life. Let’s try the restaurant across the street.”

He twisted up his lips. “Jan, baby, we are fugitives from the law, you know. We could have registered as Smith and Smith, and I would have felt a bit safer. But since we didn’t, couldn’t we at least lie low until morning?”

She went to the window which looked over the major road below.

“Didn’t you see?”

Pointing, she drew his attention to the maroon sedan in the parking lot below.

“Christ,” he swore. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I didn’t see it until we were already registered. How were we supposed to get out then without attracting attention?”

“We could have got back into the car and driven away. If you were too tired, I could have driven us.”

“Nick,” she said wearily. “Look, he was bound to catch up sooner or later. I want dinner and a good night’s sleep. Your idea, remember? They won’t deny us that.”

“Okay,” he said. “So. . . Where do you think that detective’s sitting?”

“If I was him, I’d already have us. Oh wait – maybe he got here just about the same time as us. We’re parked in the back, so –”

”Maybe he’s just watching the road and hoping.”

“Maybe he knows the area we’re in but nothing else. We’ve been cutting back and forth a lot.”

“Do you still think we should give ourselves up?”

She considered, pursing her lips. “He’s in the restaurant. If I was him, that’s where I’d be, watching the road from the window.”

“And if we came by, he could be out and on the road in two minutes. And he could catch us, because the road goes straight without any options for miles on any side of us. Not too dumb really. Let’s have some fun.”

“What kind of fun?”

“Well –” he said. “He’s supposed to be looking for Maggie, right? So if we can help him, he’s not going to take us back to Toronto. So there’s no harm in letting him know we’re here.”

“Granted,” she said.

“*But* – but how about we get him at a bit of a disadvantage first?”

Jan saw the mischief in his eyes. “Nothing illegal?”

“Nothing illegal.”

She flopped down onto the bed. “I’m all ears. Just get me to a meal on time.”

“Sure,” he said, and told her what he had been thinking.



Ten minutes later, they crept into the restaurant through the back door after circling through the fields behind the motel and taking advantage of a pair of turning transport trucks to hide their run across the road.

“We’re meeting someone,” said Jan breezily to the waitress as they sauntered past.

“There he is,” whispered Nick when she joined him at the door. “What do you think? I’d say he’s a coat-pocket man, myself.”

“You just do your thing, and don’t expect any professional advice from me.”

“You got it. On three?”

She turned her head to him, and grinned. “Whatever you say.”

“Oh hell,” he said, and she noted, another one of her expressions he still used. “Three.”

This was not a skirmish calling for exact timing, only stealth. And they definitely had the element of surprise on their side. Jan slid into the chair across from the detective just as Nick took up his place behind. She noted the coffee on the table: he took it black. He’d ripped up one napkin into neat strips.

“Good thing for the paper products I got here when I did,” she said, making herself comfortable, one hand under her chin.

He was gratifyingly surprised. “Ms Stuart –” he said, jerking upright.

“I’m not worried about your posture, detective,” she snapped. “I am however concerned with how easy it was to sneak up on you completely unawares. Coffee, please,” she told the waitress. “Oh, and a menu too.” Behind the detective, Nick straightened up, prize in hand. “Hello, Nick,” she said.

“Hi,” he responded. “Menu for me too, but no coffee. On second thought, yes. I suppose an espresso is too much to hope for,” he told the now-confused waitress, not giving her a moment to ask what he’d been doing crouched behind the other man’s chair. “It was nice for you not to start without us.”

Tamblyn looked from one of them to the other. So, after all his work, they had caught him and not the other way around. “Where are you parked?”

“Behind the motel. You didn’t check, I guess.” Jan perused the menu. “I could really go for a good grilled cheese.

“Eggplant parmesan,” said Nick.

Tamblyn blinked. “You two wait here.”

He left and they watched him out the window walking to his car. “Too cheap for quarters,” Nick said. “Bet he writes off everything on the cell phone to the department.”

“No doubt,” she said, watching the detective hunt through his pockets and eventually give up. “Just where you thought.”

“Now, here’s the clues. Man’s not organized; you can tell that just by looking at him. It follows, no proper sense of where to carry his keys.”

“Brilliant,” she said. “Here he comes.”

The detective was putting a good face on it, but he was certainly distressed. He returned to the table in passing, to say: “Don’t go anywhere,” and disappeared to the telephone at the back of the restaurant.

“This is fun,” said Jan. “What next?”

“We should probably give the keys back, after eliciting some promises. Or, we can insist we drive him around, and that would hobble him a bit.”

“Let’s play it by ear. I’ve had my enjoyment at his expense. I might be willing to be nice.”



An hour after that, they brought Tamblyn back to their room, leaving a message with the desk about where to find him when the locksmith arrived. It had not sounded promising to get someone out before morning, and the detective was not in a great mood. Even, as Nick whispered, the wonderful dinner conversation hadn’t picked him up. Maybe, said Jan, he didn’t get a kick out of dining with the enemy. Maybe he was really attached to the car. And she said something about boys and toys that Nick took instant offense to.

Then, after a solemn lead-up, they told Tamblyn the big news.

“You’re in contact with your daughter?” said Tamblyn. “How much – that is – ?”

Jan stared at him haughtily. “I would hope so.”

The detective’s eyes blanked. “You’ve always been able - how long have you had this –” He stopped dead, thinking he’d been had.

Nick’s mouth quirked and he began to laugh. Then Jan’s hardness broke and she joined in.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m just trying to torture you. It’s not nice at all.” She sobered a bit. “But it’s true, to some extent. I keep getting the feeling she’s out there –” and she flung her arms wide to the west. “Out there. Once I thought – no, that’s crazy. But that’s why we’ve been heading this way. It’s stupid. It’s just a feeling. Not even all that strong.”

“Ms. Stuart.” The detective moved his chair closer to Jan’s. “Ms Stuart. I’m going to ask you something. You’re perfectly free to say no. But we may, if you allow it, be able to help Maggie more than I dreamed.”

“Jan,” she said, her forehead furrowing, wondering what he was suggesting. The pull was there, so obviously there. It was like knowing north wherever you go, having a compass built in to always know the way. The strength of it changed moment by moment, but if she lost it, all she had to do was wait a bit and it returned. It was Maggie, and she was alive and calling for her.

“John,” said Tamblyn. “Although I’ve been getting ‘witch-boy’ for more years than I care to recall.”

“Witch-boy.” Nick chuckled. Appropriate. He collapsed on the edge of the bed. “Well, Jan?”

She looked at Nick, then at Tamblyn, daring just a little to hope, and full of gravity.

“Anything.”

Tamblyn sighed. “I’d like to hypnotize you.”

Jan’s eyes opened. “You want to what?”

“What a great idea,” said Nick. “Does this mean we’re all on side? Call me Nick, if we’re doing the first-name swap.”

“I could probably get a fix on what she’s doing to call you, help you home in.”

Nick brought over the map. “We’ve been trying to do that for two days. Nothing’s conclusive.”

Tamblyn nodded, impressed. “This is good, though. It’ll save us a lot of time. We can

probably get a pretty good fix from here, and then if we keep trying as we come closer, we should find her in no time. I guess we're taking your car."

Jan exchanged a glance with Nick. "You're really committed to finding Maggie?"

Tamblyn nodded.

"And you don't want to press charges against me or Nick?"

"No," said the detective. "That was never an option. You got me mad, but I can deal with it. You haven't broken any laws – that I know of."

"All right then," said Nick, and handed back the keys. "We've behaved disgracefully."

Instead of blowing up at them, the detective, surprisingly, laughed. The sound he made was throaty and low, and also a bit too loud, which made Jan think either he laughed very seldom or was in dire need of releasing some tension. Maybe both.

"I thought you were humorless," said Jan, beginning to smile.

"You don't know how refreshing that is," said Tamblyn. "You know how long it's been since anyone tried to pull a practical joke on me?"

"Who says 'tried?'" said Nick, pretending to be peevish. "And who says it was a joke? We might have killed you, depriving you of your phone like that."

"What happened?" said Tamblyn. "I'm in shock, a bit. Last time I saw you two, you were at each other's throats."

"Don't press on that point, John," said Jan. "We're not sure ourselves. It might not hold, and I don't want to make any guesses."

"Besides," said Nick. "Maggie needs us."

Tamblyn noted something; although they were acting friendly enough, they were physically very separated. There was no reconciliation of the marriage here, just an agreement to get along. As if to reinforce his thoughts, Jan said quietly, "Yeah."



"All right, Jan, on the count of three, I'm going to ask you to wake up. When I do so, you will be able to open your eyes, and you will remember everything we've talked about. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"One – two – three. You can open your eyes."

She did so. After looking at each of the two men in turn, she shook her head. "Oh my god. That was incredible."

Nick held up the map. "Much better, huh?" There were a number of new lines on it, and an area vaguely circular marked off. "This area is only about twenty k around. It's about a tenth of the area we started with. Even without anything else to go on, we've got a good shot at finding her, I'd say."

Tamblyn held out his hand to Jan and helped her up while Nick popped open a can of Sprite from the minibar. "How are you feeling?" said the detective.

Jan took the can and held it between her palms, trying to use the cold to get her bearings. "A little – odd. No, I'm overwhelmed. I could – this is incredible."

"Ms. Stuart. You have to understand – experiences like the one you're having with Maggie are very rare. Not many people have the ability to communicate like this over distance."

"Are you suggesting," she said, "that I don't talk about this to my friends and co-workers, because, not having had experiences like this themselves, they'll either call me a liar, or pester me ad nauseam for an autograph?"

“No, you mistake me.” Tamblyn sat. “I want to tell you how lucky you are. The capacity, I think, is mostly Maggie’s. She’s sending, the active role, and you are passively receiving. She may not even realize she’s doing it. But you are very lucky to be able to experience this. I’ve been involved with this kind of phenomena all my life, pretty much, and I’ve almost never received signals like this. All my experience has been in observation.”

“Looks like you observe too closely,” said Nick. He pointed to the other man’s bare arms. Tamblyn had rolled up his sleeves before putting Jan under, and Nick had been drawn to the mess of pale scars on his forearms.

Tamblyn, self-consciously, began rolling down his sleeves. “Yeah, well, let’s just say I’m not always quick enough on my feet. I’ve been carved up fairly regularly in pursuit of my profession. There’s only one person I can have the sort of link with that you have with Maggie, and when he calls, I always have cause to regret it. As for native ability, I’m completely bereft.” He said it with such longing Jan was moved, and had no idea of the significance of the ringless finger Tamblyn was compulsively rubbing.

“That’s tough,” she said. “Like the kid at school who knows he’s never going to be a football player, so he offers to take care of the equipment.”

“More like a guy who volunteers to be the ball,” said Tamblyn. “Shall we all get some sleep? I’m going down to the desk to rent myself a room, and cancel the locksmith.”