

ONE

I didn't choose to be him. I didn't pick Cassiel Roadnight out of a line-up of possible people who looked just like me. I just let it happen. I just wanted it to be true. That's all I did wrong, at the beginning.

I was in a hostel, a stop-off for impossible kids in east London somewhere. I'd been there a couple of days, walked in off the streets half-starved, because I had to. They were still trying to get hold of me. They were still trying to find out who I was.

I wasn't going to tell them.

It was a tired place run by tired people. It smelled of cigarettes and floor polish and soup. They gave me old clothes, washed thin and mended and almost the right size. They asked me lots of questions in return for two meals and a dry place to sleep.

I tried to be grateful, but I didn't speak to them.

They locked me in a storeroom for fighting. Hot and airless, four pale walls, a shut and rusted filing cabinet, a shelf piled with papers, a stack of chairs.

The boy I fought with was hurt. That's why I was locked up really, for winning. You're not allowed to do that. I don't remember his name. I don't remember what the fight was about even.

I was in there for over two hours. I wanted to wreck it. I watched myself doing it, somewhere in my head.

I heard one of them coming, saw the wavering, moss-coloured shape of her through the mottled glass of the door. I banged on it hard. She stopped and turned and took a quick breath of her disappointed air.

Her voice was small and jumpy. "What do you want?" she said.

"I want you to let me out."

"I can't do that."

I put my head against the cold skin of the wall. "Please help me," I said.

"Are you hurt?" she said. "Are you bleeding?"

"I'm thirsty."

She didn't say anything.

"You can't deprive me of water."

"I'll go and ask," she said, and through the glass she warped and gathered and was gone.

I counted to four hundred and thirty-eight.

When she came back, she had someone else with her.

They unlocked the door and swooped in with a plastic cup half-filled with water. I drank it down in one. It wasn't enough.

The man had a hooked nose and loose, curly hair. I'd seen him before, but not her. He sounded like keys jangling.

He said, "Have you finished fighting?"

I shrugged. "Probably not."

I didn't like the way the woman was looking at me. I stared back so she would stop, but she didn't. Between us there was just the blood in my ears, pounding and pumping, and the look on her face.

She kept her eyes on me while she spoke to the man, and when she left the room. "Hang on a minute, would you? I'll be right back."

The man sat in one of the chairs, shifting, trying hard to look relaxed. He leaned towards me and his black eyes blinked, quick and vigilant, like a bird's. I wondered if he minded being alone with me. I wondered if he was afraid.

"Why won't you tell us your name?" he said.