

Borderland

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For Frances Hardinge, the fairy-godmother to this book

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Prelude

The Chamber of the Wheel is dominated by a circular table, in the surface of which is inlaid a spoked pattern of red on black. It is the one distinguishing feature in a room otherwise unremarkable. The shelves which circle the chamber hold regiments of black- and red-bound books each with a neatly stamped line of glyphs on the spine. In this region the symbol of the Wheel is a familiar image to those who traverse the book-lined corridors of the Great Library. It is used by the faction who claim this area as their own but the original significance of the Wheel is lost in obscurity.

In all the known worlds the Great Library is a thing apart. Inhabited solely by agents of the mysterious organization known as the Collegiate, it is said that even they do not know its true purposes or extent. Beyond this plain room lie hundreds of thousands more, all with the same book-lined walls, the same unassuming wooden furniture, the same open archways leading through more

shelved corridors to more book-filled rooms. Papered with books and riddled with Doors, magical portals to other worlds, the Great Library holds more secrets than a lifetime of study could encompass.

This maze of knowledge is home to the Collegiate. Librarians, world-travellers, and magicians, the members of this secretive society have little in common other than the Great Library itself. Different areas of the collection are organized and indexed by various groups. The Wheel is a known force in the Collegiate; they have organized and catalogued their section and the Doors under their control, they maintain friendly relations with neighbouring factions, and they trade widely to obtain books which fall into their sphere of interest. But that sphere of interest extends wider than many realize, for the Wheel use their organizational skills not only in their area of the Great Library but in the worlds that can be reached through their Doors.

Tonight the faction's head council has met in state. The glossy surface of the round table gleams in the low lamplight and the book-filled shelves that stretch from floor to ceiling are cast into shadow. The councillors themselves are elderly and, like many Collegiate members, secretive and suspicious. Power is evident in their dry, measured statements and in the watchfulness of their hooded eyes. Since the Wheel is a large and potent faction there are hidden alliances here; plots and counter-plots abound as the meeting progresses with deliberate order.

'We come to the matter of the new Door,' Periphrastr Diabasis, the secretary of the council, announces in a dry voice like a pen scratching across paper. 'The expansion along the new corridor was a success and we now possess access to a new world. Our agents have classed it as a Thaumaturgical Autocratic Mercantile Theocratic Imperium with Barbarous Marginals and a possible Rogue Element.'

All Collegiate members, of every faction, carry books. There is a susurrant of sound as pages rattle and pens move smoothly, tracing the ciphers and glyphs of the councillors' codes and notations.

Golconda Moraine, a powerfully built man whose thick grey hair is still peppered with black, stirs abruptly in his seat, drawing the eyes of the rest of the council as he enquires abruptly, 'I have heard nothing of a Rogue Element. Why was this information withheld from the circulated agenda?'

'The agents have only recently returned from their initial assessment,' Periphrast explains without lifting his eyes from his own notes. 'I myself only received the full classification upon our arrival this evening.'

'Well and good then,' Golconda says in mollified tones. 'I beg the council's pardon for interrupting.'

Periphrast nods in acknowledgement. His eyes are disguised by the glass lenses set into his wire-framed spectacles and his voice as always is untroubled by any hint of emotion. Periphrast Diabasis has held the position of secretary of the Wheel's council for many years and is equal to any interruption or altercation among councillors.

'The new world is dominated by an Imperium cognominated the Tetrarchate. The Door opens near its capital city and our agents found information readily accessible to them. Through a succession of aggressive trade alliances and military actions the Tetrarchate has managed to bring the majority of the populated land under its sway. However, a state of conflict exists with certain Barbarous Marginals and here the agents advocate further study.'

'What progress has been made with the government?' a councillor asks and Periphrast flicks through his papers and replies:

'The Tetrarchate is powerful but their civilization is not advanced. With the right persuasion the government can be brought under our control.'

Another ruffle of paper is overlaid with a few murmurs of satisfaction. The Wheel's aims and ambitions stretch far beyond this single world, but the idea of the Tetrarchate is catalogued neatly in their tidy minds among hundreds of similar instances and the expressions are thoughtful. Golconda Moraine is again the first to raise his voice.

'What of this Rogue Element then?' he enquires and, around the table, other councillors look up involuntarily or listen with pretended impassivity for Periphrast's answer.

'At the edges of Tetrarchate influence there are Borderlands. These are in the main inhospitable areas of desert or wasteland inhabited by Barbarous Marginal groups which attempt to maintain independence from Tetrarchate rule. Most of these are gradually being eradicated, but in one area they appear to be increasing in might.'

There are frowns on the faces of the councillors as they consider this. The Barbarous Marginals sit uncomfortably in their thoughts, a chaotic factor needing to be brought under control. All eyes are on Periphrast as he continues:

'The agents state that the inability of the Tetrarchate Imperium to quash these Barbarous Marginals is inexplicable by observed factors and suggest among a number of possible explanations the sponsorship of more adept Unknown Hostiles. A Rogue Element is postulated as potential sponsors.'

'That's fairly tenuous,' Golconda Moraine expostulates, raising his voice unnecessarily in his annoyance. 'There could be any number of reasons why these barbarians haven't been fully suppressed. The influence of a Rogue Element is an exceedingly unlikely scenario.'

From out of the shadows a thin figure leans forward from his seat, revealing the aged features of Vespertine

Chalcedony. The milky whiteness blurring his eyes betrays that he is half-blind and his claw-like hands tremble on the table, but his motion is greeted by a respectful hush. It was Vespertine who first discovered this section of the library, and who founded the Wheel faction when he persuaded others to take control of it. Now he speaks in a voice like the rustling of dead leaves.

‘Unlikely, you think?’ he rasps. ‘I consider it unlikely that we haven’t encountered opposition by now. Need I remind you that the rest of the Collegiate does not share our aims?’

‘I only meant that the possibility is remote,’ Golconda protests. But, as Vespertine’s white-rheumed eyes focus on him, he subsides into his chair.

‘We occupy a universe of infinite possibility,’ Vespertine croaks. ‘Each new world we control opens up more borders beyond which neither our knowledge nor our power extends. We must be alert on every front.’

Golconda Moraine bows his head in acceptance of the elderly councillor’s argument and the secretary reels the rest of the councillors in with a smoothly interjected comment.

‘Further study is called for,’ Periphrast suggests and there are murmurs of support around the table. ‘Shall we instruct our agents to return?’

There is a slight frisson of tension around the table, a suggestion of things left unsaid, before a questioning voice is raised.

‘Are these the two siblings? They are very young.’

‘They have certain specialities that make them valuable,’ Vespertine answers. ‘And like all the young they are power-hungry and ambitious.’

There are smiles around the table. All the councillors understand the secretary’s words. They were all once young and arrogant when first initiated into the Collegiate;

they too have followed the smell of secrets, learning of the wheels within wheels in the organization that controls the catalogue of the worlds. The council of the Wheel comprehends a lust for power: it is what has brought them where they are.

'Before we decide to send them back I would see them for myself,' a councillor says and Vespertine nods his ancient head gently.

'By all means.' He spreads his hands in a gesture of openness. 'They await the summons of the council.'

When the council of the Wheel summons you it does not do to delay. Within moments two figures present themselves at the entrance of the chamber and bow their heads before the councillors.

'The reporting agents,' Periphrast announces and the councillors direct their shrewd stares at the new arrivals as he adds their names: 'Ciren and Charm.'

Oddities abound in the Collegiate. It is not to be expected that people from a wide variety of differing worlds will have much in common but Ciren and Charm are unusual even by the Wheel's standards. The boy and the girl who stand before the central table have identically composed expressions despite the august company of councillors. Both have the same white-blond hair, cut neatly to their shoulders, and both wear the same sober black. The obsidian arrowheads that hang around their necks identify them as Collegiate agents. The wheel symbols sewn onto the right shoulder of their tunics proclaim them agents of the Wheel. Twin pairs of violet eyes focus on Periphrast as they await instructions.

'The council have some questions for you concerning your report,' Periphrast informs them and Vespertine adds in avuncular tones, 'Did you find the new world congenial?'

'It is an interesting culture,' Ciren, the boy-twin, answers him. 'Trade and the arts flourish.'

'But the ruling government is riddled with internecine strife,' Charm, the girl-twin, adds. 'And the administrative and political apparatus lacks cohesion.'

'Nonetheless the military is effectively organized and well-armed. The citizenry is prosperous and complacent. At its current rate of expansion the Tetrarchate will soon be the sole government controlling the world.'

There is a murmur of satisfaction at Ciren's conclusion. As the councillors are well aware, a unified world government is easier to deal with than a hundred minor powers.

It is Golconda Moraine who finally, with an apologetic glance at Vespertine, asks the question that concerns the council the most.

'Your report makes mention of civil unrest at the borders of this Tetrarchate,' he says testingly. 'And you draw somewhat . . . surprising conclusions.'

The twins glance at each other as if deciding silently who should answer, then Charm fixes Golconda with her lambent purple eyes.

'Yes, councillor,' she says in a clear voice. 'The Tetrarchate has expanded to the point where it borders inhospitable areas inhabited by nomadic barbarians. However, until recently it appeared the situation was under the control of the local authorities.'

'What happened recently?' Vespertine asks in a thin, sharp voice and Ciren takes up the thread of the report.

'The nomads appear to have acquired military advantages ahead of their level of technical sophistication,' Ciren says simply. 'They must be receiving sponsorship from someone. Another Collegiate faction seems the most logical possibility.'

Glances are exchanged across the table and Golconda

Moraine's black brows are drawn into a ferocious scowl. Vespertine's hooded eyes study the inlaid surface of the table and across from him Periphrastr Diabasis clears his throat, drawing all attention to him.

'Is it the decision of the council that Charm and Ciren should return through the Door and continue their investigation?' Periphrastr enquires and agreement is unanimous.

'Then it is agreed,' Vespertine says, fixing the twins with his half-blind stare. 'You are now the Wheel's official presence on this world of the Tetrarchate and I expect you to take appropriate steps to investigate and nullify any threat to the Wheel. I presume you are familiar with our customary procedure in these cases?'

'Yes, councillor,' the twins chorus obediently and the other council members exchange glances across the table. The Wheel can be ruthless in its pursuit of order and there is no one here who doubts that the twins have been licensed to be the same.

But as they bow in obedience to the will of the council and depart to make the arrangements for their journey, both twins are thinking the same thing. Loyal as they are, there is one allegiance they hold more sacred than that to the Collegiate, the Wheel, or Vespertine Chalcedony. Charm and Ciren's highest loyalty is to each other.

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The light was already going at three in the afternoon. Zoë stared out through the window across the wet tarmac of the playground to the group of parents clustered at the school gates. They were mothers mostly, some with babies in pushchairs. It was cold and blowy outside and mothers and babies were bundled up like Eskimos in smart autumn-coloured coats and hats and scarves. The babies kept throwing their hats and gloves and shoes out of the pushchairs and the mothers kept picking the things up and cramming them back on without pausing in their conversation.

Zoë could see three scenes layered blurrily in the window pane. Superimposed on the wet playground her own face swam palely out of the darkness, her expression strange and unfamiliar in the distorted light. On the surface of the glass the yellow-lit classroom was reflected full of kids heaping out piles of stuff from their desks and hurriedly packing bags with half a term's worth of

possessions. Zoë's small rucksack was by her feet already packed. She didn't seem to have much more at the end of her first half term than she'd had at the beginning of it. Everyone else had bags and bags of loot; not just the endless books and files and papers and pencil cases but things they'd borrowed or swapped with each other only now being returned at the last moment.

Outside in the playground a flurry of little kids came out of the junior school building and swarmed around the mothers and pushchairs. She could hear their high-pitched voices floating across the playground as they waved lumpy clay models and pieces of cardboard with stuck-on macaroni. The mothers continued to talk over the heads of the little kids while they packed their belongings up into bags and hung them on the handles of the pushchairs. The babies waved their arms and legs like puffy starfish and threw all their gloves out again. Then, in a scurry of drifting leaves, the mothers began to walk off, little kids walking beside the pushchairs, as if the wind was blowing them away. Looking down at the little kid walking beside her, the last mother didn't notice her baby throwing his hat out of the pushchair for one final time as they walked off.

In the classroom behind Zoë a group of girls clustered together, discussing plans for the holidays and scribbling dates for parties in notebooks and on scraps of paper. At the other end of the classroom four boys were waving rulers like swords and duelling up and down the rows of desks. In the window Zoë's reflection watched them; an invisible observer superimposed on the group. After half a term here she didn't have the glamour of novelty or the acceptance of familiarity. Instead she was in a state she knew all too well: friendship limbo.

It didn't normally last this long. After eight different schools in six years Zoë was a past master in the art of

making friends. You couldn't count on keeping friends after you moved, pen-palling never lasted; you had to make the time you spent somewhere matter. She was used to fitting in, to working out the complex network of friendships and cliques, and slotting herself into it. The trick was to blend in. Dress like everyone else and act like everyone else until you ended up accepted by default. But here things had been different. The trouble was that Weybridge was a small town; almost everyone else had come up from the junior school together, and in two months Zoë still hadn't found any way of fitting into the group. She'd ended up in the position she hated the most: sitting with the rejects and misfits and isolated from the normal community of social interaction.

A desk banged suddenly and Zoë half turned in her seat to see Morgan Michaels dumping the last of her books into a battered black haversack. Zoë looked away again quickly. She knew better than to try and make friends with someone like Morgan. She'd learnt to steer clear of the loners and the weird kids and Morgan, with her pitch-black hair and thick black mascara, definitely qualified as both. Being friends with Morgan would tar her with the same brush of social untouchability and Zoë didn't want to be an outsider. Instead her eyes automatically shifted away to Laura Harrell's desk right at the front of the room where Laura, a neat brown satchel at her feet, was bent over a book.

Zoë studied Laura sideways. While she had everyone else classified: rich kids, poor kids, social climbers and hopeless losers, sporty kids and brains, Laura was still an enigma. No one seemed to like her or hate her or feel strongly about her at all but Zoë had seen Laura talking to almost everyone at some point. The kids who smoked round the back of school at lunch, the popular group, the shy kids and the smart kids, the sixth formers who

drove to school: everyone knew Laura. Without friends or enemies she seemed to drift through school; a solitary figure even when in the middle of a group.

A bell rang and the class fell back into a frenzy of last minute activity to finish clearing their desks by the end of registration. At the front of the room Laura tucked the flap into her book and put it into her satchel. Then she suddenly turned round in her chair and Zoë quickly looked away so that Laura would not catch her staring. To her right Morgan was fastening the buckles on her haversack, her long black hair falling over her face as she hunched down like a witch over a cauldron.

'Settle down now,' a voice called suddenly from the front and Zoë looked up to see that a teacher she didn't recognize had come in to take final registration. She read off the register quickly after dumping three piles of coloured leaflets on the front row of desks. The class surged towards the front of the room as they answered to their name, some of them taking the leaflets but most just heading out of the door when their names were called. Already Zoë could see streams of other classes coming out of the building and filling the playground and street.

Picking up her bag, Zoë stood up, letting the rest of the crush press past her in a flurry, while she waited at the side of the room. The teacher left as soon as she was finished, leaving Zoë one of the last in the classroom and, slinging her bag over one shoulder, she left the room. Outside the corridor was filled with kids packing up their lockers and crowding towards the double doors of the main entrance. Zoë ducked through the mass of people, heading left instead of right down the corridor. There was a side entrance this way which came out near the bike sheds and she had to thread her way past more kids unlocking their bikes as she came out into the grey

playground. Then, just as she was about to turn the corner of the school building, raised voices stopped her.

‘You’re lying, Laura,’ a voice said fiercely. Zoë froze and the voice continued, ‘I thought you said you weren’t going to interfere.’

‘You’re not listening to me, Morgan. You don’t know the situation. I’m just trying to give you an idea of what’s involved.’

Zoë recognized Laura’s clear voice, speaking with the same calm tones as when she answered a question in class. Zoë hugged the side of the building, embarrassed to be overhearing the argument and not sure whether she had the nerve to just walk past them.

‘I don’t believe you.’ A shadow moved and Morgan Michaels stepped out away from the side of the building. Zoë stared as her flying black figure ran off across the playground and then jumped as there was a jingle of bikes behind her. If she delayed any longer she would be seen hiding and, nerving herself, she walked quickly round the side of the building.

Laura was standing there. Her light green eyes were fixed on Morgan’s back as the other girl disappeared into the crush of people at the school gates. Zoë uncomfortably edged past and set off across the grey playground, but with every step she felt Laura’s green gaze boring into her back. It was with relief that she realized she had to run when she saw her bus was already standing at the front gates.

Throughout the long bus journey to the edge of Weybridge the light continued to fade and it was nearly dark by the time Zoë had got off the bus outside Weybridge Garrison: the army base. The guard on the gate looked at her pass without interest when she managed to find it at the bottom

of her school bag, and waved her on down the gravel path that led to the rows of small white houses of 'Family Accommodation'.

Residence 4G was at the end of a row and Zoë let herself into the small house. Like all the others it was painted a neutral beige and carpeted in drab brown: no better and not much worse than most of the places she and her father had lived in. Weybridge Garrison maintained these houses for officers with families because of the lack of accommodation in the town itself. Yet another thing that set Zoë apart from her classmates but not something she was going to complain about. When her mother died her dad had offered her the choice of boarding school, living with her aunt's family in Yorkshire, or staying with him. Although moving schools all the time had its problems Zoë hadn't wanted to leave her dad.

Hanging her duffle coat neatly on a hook in the hall, Zoë carried her bag to her room. The house was silent; her dad was in Germany until the weekend, and Zoë turned on the stereo in her bedroom automatically as she dumped her rucksack on the floor. Like the rest of the house her room was plainly decorated except for an Omani throw on her bed and the small black and silver trunk in which she kept a few mementoes of the places she'd been. Dumping the school books out of her bag and on to her desk, Zoë turned to look at herself in the mirror.

Weybridge Grammar School didn't have a uniform but like most schools there was an unofficial uniform that kids tended to keep to. Dressed in dark blue jeans and a grey hooded top Zoë looked like most of the kids in her class. Her thick woolly auburn hair was scrunchied into a ponytail, leaving her face small and pale without its surrounding cloud. Zoë looked at herself and sighed. All term she'd dressed like this, doing nothing to stand out, and yet here she was at the beginning of the half-term

holidays and without a single friend to phone and make plans with.

Automatically she thought of Laura Harrell. Laura didn't need to look like everyone else to fit in: she wore what she wanted. Zoë had secretly coveted her individual style. Laura made unusual clothes look cool and interesting. She dressed in swishing mirror-work and lace skirts, floppy-sleeved tops that buttoned or tied and a plum-coloured velvety jacket. Laura had coloured braids of embroidery thread woven into her long light-brown hair and a collection of bracelets that jingled from her wrists. If she was Laura's friend she could dress like that too, Zoë thought to herself, lying on her back on her bed. She and Laura would go shopping together in vintage clothes shops and maybe sometimes lend each other clothes. Everyone would be able to tell just looking at them that they were best friends.

Thinking of being friends with Laura reminded Zoë of how she had almost run into her around the back of the school. She wouldn't have expected that Laura and Morgan had two words to say to each other, let alone be having an argument in secret that had sounded pretty intense. Zoë couldn't help wondering what was going on there. It hadn't really sounded like the normal sort of friendship quarrel and she privately admitted to herself that she was glad. It would be too unfair if Morgan, with her weird black clothes and spooky eye make-up had been able to make friends with Laura.

'It's not as if it's hard to be weird,' Zoë said out loud. She'd met Goth kids before in other schools, especially the one in the States, and quietly despised them. They never seemed to care about having friends or being liked. They were just odd all the time; even when they were with other Goths they didn't so much seem to have friends as a kind of hive-mind of weirdness. When she was secure in a

clique of friends Zoë had openly sneered at them, saying with the others 'get a life' when they acted strangely. Zoë had been deliberately avoiding Morgan all term because she wanted other people to see her as normal.

It hadn't worked though. Sitting up on the bed Zoë admitted that to herself. She'd been nice and normal all term, not making any waves, being friendly but not too cloying, hanging back at the edge of the playground waiting to be noticed or invited to join in. Now that the holidays were here she needed a different strategy. There weren't many kids her age on the base and she hadn't really bothered with them. But if she didn't want to spend the entire holidays watching TV or playing card games with her dad she'd have to find some way of impressing them.

Yanking open the door of her wardrobe, Zoë studied her clothes. Somewhere near the back was a patchwork wrap-around skirt and, stepping out of her jeans, Zoë changed into it. The weather was too cold to wear a skirt on its own and she put a pair of leggings on underneath and thick grey socks. Flipping rapidly through the hangers she tried to find an interesting top, finally settling on a striped one in different shades of purple that matched her skirt. Pulling the scrunchie out of her hair she brushed it out vigorously so that it fell back into its natural mass of thick curls. Looking at herself in the mirror she grinned fiercely: she looked almost like Laura Harrell.

The six neat rows of Family Accommodation were in the west corner of the base on the side furthest from the road. Residence 4G backed on to the fenced recreation ground that the kids were supposed to use. Normally the grassy rectangle was deserted, the base kids preferring to take the bus into Weybridge rather than make use of the set of swings or the lonely basketball hoop. But today when Zoë let herself out of the house she saw a few kids

standing near the railings, clustered around the open bonnet of a beaten-up blue Volvo, and she headed towards them.

'Hey, Zoë,' one of them called, and Zoë recognized Dan Siefer. He was in Zoë's year but not her class or school and they sometimes sat together on the bus into town.

'Hi,' she said casually, joining Dan at the fence. 'Didn't see you after school.'

'My brother gave me a lift back,' Dan said, nodding his head towards the ancient Volvo. 'But then his car broke down.' He gestured at the three boys leaning over the bonnet, they were sixth formers Zoë vaguely recognized who also had parents who lived on-base. 'They're trying to fix it now.'

Zoë murmured something non-committal and leant back against the fence, watching while Dan's brother and his friends attempted to start the car.

'So are you doing anything tonight?' she asked eventually and Dan shrugged.

'There's a party on the edge of town,' he said. 'If Chris can get the car started we'll probably go to that.' He gave Zoë a brief sidelong look and then added a little awkwardly, 'Do you want to come with?'

'That would be great!' Zoë said quickly and then blushed a little at her own enthusiasm. 'I haven't really made many friends at school yet,' she admitted and Dan nodded.

'I get that,' he said. 'It's tough when you move around a lot.'

'Yeah,' Zoë agreed. 'Are you sure you don't mind me coming with you guys?'

'Sure,' Dan said casually and then called over to his brother, 'It's OK if Zoë comes tonight, isn't it?'

One of the boys looked up and waved at Zoë.

'Sure,' he said and Zoë smiled.

'I'll get my coat,' she said. She turned back to the house and Dan's brother grinned at her as she passed him.

'No hurry,' he advised. 'We'll be a while here yet.' He illustrated the thought by taking a battered packet of cigarettes out of his jeans pocket and passing them around as Zoë went back into the house.

It was evening by the time Dan's brother finally got his car fixed. There were five of them in the car including Zoë when they left the base and she had to budge up to fit in around a pile of paperback books that were lying on the back seat. Stacking them up on her lap she read a few of the titles and saw to her surprise that they were books about the army: basic training manuals, studies of guerrilla and terrorist warfare, and survival handbooks.

'What's this for?' she asked as Dan climbed into the back of the car beside her and his brother turned round in the driving seat to answer her.

'It's just stuff for Alex,' he said. 'The guy that's giving this party, you know? He wanted to borrow them.'

'What for?' Dan asked curiously as they pulled up by the exit barrier and he waved his pass at the guard.

His brother shrugged.

'How should I know?' he said. 'Maybe he wants to join the army.'

'Alex Harrell?' one of his friends laughed suddenly. 'Run it, more like. He's in my Politics class. He's got some kind of dictator complex.'

'Come on, Alex's all right,' Dan's brother protested but Zoë ignored him and turned to look at Dan.

'Is Alex Harrell giving the party?' she asked quietly.

'Yeah,' he said. 'Do you know him?' He looked surprised.

Zoë shook her head. 'No,' she said. 'But his sister's in my form. Laura.'

'Oh, right,' Dan said, losing interest. 'Yeah, I know Laura. She'll probably be there tonight.'

The barrier went up and the car swung out of the base and on to the road that ran round the edge of Weybridge. Staring out of the car windows Zoë saw the same triple layers of images as she had in the classroom that afternoon: the interior of the car, her own face, and the countryside slowly flowing past.

Zoë vaguely knew where Laura lived. She'd heard someone mention it at school. Bicken Hill was the smart area at the edge of Weybridge where all the really old houses were. It was right up against the woods that skirted the town: the Weywode Forest. As the car headed north Zoë wondered how many people in her class knew about this party; if Laura had invited them. Thinking about it she began to worry what they'd think if they saw her there. She didn't want to annoy Laura by gatecrashing a private party in her house. But when the Volvo turned into an unpaved side-road at the very top of Bicken Hill Zoë realized she hadn't needed to worry. The houses here were set apart from each other by some distance and Laura's was the very last on the edge of town. All down both sides of the road cars were parked and as Dan's brother found a space for the Volvo Zoë could hear the thumping beat of dancey-trance music coming from the garden of the house.

'Sounds like a good party,' Dan said, getting out of the car and unloading cases of beer from the back.

'Yeah,' Zoë agreed. Glancing at the pile of books she had been holding she added: 'Shall I carry these?'

'Cheers, Zoë,' Dan's brother said and she hefted them in her arms as they all went up the driveway together.

It was a massive party. Lights were strung on the trees

in the garden and people were dancing on the lawn or clustered in groups around a huge bonfire. Leaping shadows were thrown up against the trees and grey-white clouds gusted across the sky. As Zoë came round the side of the house she caught her breath; for a second the whole garden seemed magical and the people enchanted. Then Dan nudged her arm and she turned to look at him.

‘Some party, huh?’ he said grinning and his brother added, ‘Let’s find Alex so that Zoë can dump those books.’

They threaded their way through the partyers and Zoë looked around her thoughtfully. Most of the kids here were older than her, fifth and sixth formers and some even older still. Some of them looked as if they might be gatecrashers and she thought to herself that this was kind of a wild party for Laura’s brother to be having and wondered what he was like. From what Dan’s brother’s friend had said Alex had some kind of dictator complex and she already knew that he was a school prefect and member of the inter-schools debating team. She’d seen him sometimes with Laura, noticeable for his height and long flapping trench-coat, and wondered about him.

Now, as she was thinking about him, she recognized him among the figures sitting by the bonfire and called out loud, ‘Look, isn’t that him?’

Dan’s brother craned his neck to hear her over the music and, juggling the books awkwardly in her arms, she nodded her head in Alex’s direction. As they made their way towards him Alex looked up and then waved with vague recognition as they joined him.

‘Cool party,’ Dan’s brother said, dumping the case of beers he was carrying, and sitting down. ‘Got those books you wanted, Alex.’

‘Where do you want them?’ Zoë asked, with a friendly smile, and Alex looked up at her in surprise. He had

darker hair than Laura and it was curlier, falling to his shoulders in a mop not unlike Zoë's own, but his enigmatic smile was the same as his sister's.

'This is Zoë,' Dan's brother said. 'She lives out on the base with us.' He broke open the beers and handed one up to Zoë. 'Just drop them on him, if he's not going to take them, Zoë.'

'No need for that!' Alex said quickly and reached out to take the books. 'Cheers, Zoë,' he added affably and moved up on the tree trunk he was sitting on. 'Have a seat.'

'Thanks,' Zoë said and sat down, taking the beer as she did so.

Dan's brother and Alex fell easily into conversation and Zoë half-listened as she opened the beer can and stared into the glowing heart of the bonfire. They were talking about the military and Zoë was puzzled as to why Alex should sound so fascinated by the mundane details of military life. Maybe Dan's brother had been right when he suggested Alex might be intending to join the army; sometimes she'd met people like that who thought the military was like a great adventure. Zoë's dad was senior enough for her to know better. Being an army officer was a really tough job and being posted all over the world wasn't exciting as much as it was unnerving.

Zoë was feeling a bit uncomfortable about being at this party. Not only had she not really been invited but she wasn't sure her father would approve. Before she'd left the house she'd written a note for him. Even though he wasn't due back until the end of the weekend one of his early rules had been that even when he was away Zoë should leave a note on their message board if she was going somewhere. The one time she hadn't he had got back to find her gone and raised hell when she came home. But despite the note Zoë worried he wouldn't like this. She'd met lots of kids while she was moving around who

smoked and drank and sometimes she'd joined them but she knew her dad wouldn't like it. He wasn't exactly strict but he'd explained to her that her behaviour reflected on him as a single parent and that if she started causing problems he'd have no option but to send her to live with her aunt.

Shaking her head, Zoë tried to dispel her doubts. This was the first party she'd been to since coming to Weybridge and her first real chance to meet people. Her dad had worried about how long it was taking her to make friends; he'd understand her reasons for coming. Relaxing she took a swig of her beer and looked around for someone to talk to. And saw Laura sitting only a couple of feet away and watching her from the shadows of the fire.

Zoë jumped and then covered her reaction with a quick smile and a wave.

'Hi, Laura,' she said, trying to seem natural. 'I didn't see you there.'

Laura looked at her gravely. She was wearing a light green dress that brought out her eyes and her long brown hair hung loose and wavy.

'Hello, Zoë,' she said. 'You look different.'

'I am different,' Zoë said recklessly. Her heart was beating faster and her hands were sweaty holding the beer can. It was uncanny how she'd come here by accident and found herself all of a sudden in the place she'd wanted to be all term: having a private conversation with Laura Harrell. She took another drink, feeling half-drunk already and suddenly liberated under the cover of the darkness and the relentless beat of the music.

'What do you mean?' Laura asked, leaning closer, and Zoë shrugged emphatically.

'Term's half over,' she said. 'And I'm tired of trying to fit in all the time.' She looked at Laura directly and added, 'I'm not as boring as you think I am.'

'I don't think anyone's boring,' Laura told her seriously. Then she smiled suddenly, the same enigmatic curve of the lips as Alex, as if sharing a secret with Zoë. 'But some people are more interesting than others.'

'Like Morgan Michaels?' Zoë asked and then blushed, wondering what she was thinking. But Laura had become suddenly still and was staring at her with something like amazement.

'What do you mean?' she asked quickly and Zoë looked away at the fire to cover her embarrassment.

'I heard you arguing today,' she said. 'I didn't realize you guys were friends.'

'If you listened for long you'd know we're not friends,' Laura replied, relaxing a little. But she was still focused directly on Zoë and she reached out a hand for the beer. 'Can I have some of that?' she asked and Zoë passed it over, watching curiously as Laura took a deep pull from the can and then wrinkled her nose.

'Ughh,' she said and smiled again at Zoë. 'I don't like beer much,' she confessed. 'But hardly anyone brought wine.' She stood up suddenly and reached down a hand to Zoë. 'I think there's some in the house though; do you want to go and look?'

'Sure!' Zoë said instantly, letting Laura pull her up and grinning at her spontaneously. 'This is a great party,' she added. 'I'm glad I gatecrashed!'

Laura blinked at her and then started laughing just as Zoë did, the two of them giggling together, even though Zoë wasn't sure exactly what the real joke was.

Heads turned around the fire and Alex stared at them with a strange expression on his face.

'Laura, what are you doing?' he asked.

'Getting something better to drink,' Laura told him casually and linked her arm with Zoë's. 'We'll see you in a bit, OK.'

'OK,' Alex said and added something else. But Laura had already swung Zoë around in the direction of the house and he had to repeat himself, raising his voice to call after them. 'Be careful!'

'What an odd thing to say,' Laura said and Zoë looked at the other girl, still not believing that they were walking together arm in arm.

'Is he over-protective, or something?'

'Not exactly,' Laura replied and shot her a sideways look that Zoë couldn't interpret. 'But he's strange.'

'So are you,' Zoë said boldly and Laura smiled.

'And so are you,' she returned. 'I'm only just realizing . . . ' She led Zoë into a darkened conservatory room at the back of the house and gestured towards a cane sofa while she rummaged among bottles on the table for wine. 'Who are you really, Zoë?' she asked seriously, coming back with the wine glasses to look down at her curiously. 'What are you like?'

It was like a dream, Zoë thought, as she sat with Laura in the conservatory, looking out into the darkened garden sloping up to the woods at the top of the hill. Feeling happy, if a little self-conscious, she answered Laura's questions readily. She'd never let herself boast about the places she'd been, knowing that there was nothing like vanity to lose you friends, but it was hard to resist Laura's obvious interest as she explained how she'd travelled with her father around the world.

'I changed schools a lot, you see,' she explained. 'And sometimes I had tutors when we weren't staying somewhere for long.'

'What's the most interesting place you've been?' Laura asked.

'Probably Saudi,' Zoë told her. 'We were there for nearly a year. Or America, but that wasn't as fun. Dad was there on secondment and there weren't many English

people there. The kids made fun of my accent at first.' She remembered how mean they'd been until she'd managed to fit in, learning to talk with the same twangy drawl.

'Do you like moving around so much?' Laura asked and Zoë thought about it.

'Mostly,' she said truthfully. 'Everything except making friends. And losing them.' She looked away, wondering if she'd said too much, and then asked nonchalantly, 'But what about you, Laura? You haven't told me anything about you.'

'About me,' Laura repeated, her green eyes distant as she stared out through the windows and into the dark. Zoë followed her gaze and saw, with a feeling of *déjà vu*, the image she had been captivated by twice that day. Her face and Laura's were reflected in the long windows of the conservatory as phantoms overlaid on the mingled images of inside and outside. Their eyes met in the glass and Zoë saw Laura's expression change. 'Come on,' the other girl said, standing.

'What?' Zoë got up automatically, feeling puzzled.

'Come on,' Laura said again. 'There's something . . . ' She hesitated. 'Just come with me, Zoë, if you really want to know about me. It's easier to show you than to tell you.'

Zoë put down her wine glass and followed Laura into the night. The other girl led the way purposefully through the half-wild garden and up to the end of the long lawn where it bordered the edge of the forest. In the dim light Zoë saw a small iron gate and watched silently as Laura unbolted it and pushed it open, beckoning the way on to a pathway through the trees.

'Where are we going?' Zoë asked and Laura hushed her.

'Shhh,' she whispered, despite the pounding back-beat

of the stereo system. 'It's a secret.' Then she smiled and Zoë followed her example, grinning back with uneasy complicity as Laura closed the gate behind them.

The path led into the Weywode Forest proper and after only a few minutes the obscuring bulk of the trees had shut out most of the light and the sounds of the party behind them. Zoë had a brief qualm of anxiety but reminded herself that they were following a clear path and she could easily find her way back, just as Laura stepped right off the trail by a massive oak tree and turned back to mouth, 'This way.'

'Coming,' Zoë said softly and followed her.

She stepped carefully through the undergrowth, Laura's insistence on silence making her careful not to crunch too loudly through the fallen leaves. Laura was following some remembered path through the forest, not pausing at all as she led Zoë onwards and upwards. It was a surprise when she finally came to a halt in a small clearing and turned with a triumphant smile.

'This is it,' she said.

'What is?' Zoë looked around, puzzled.

'This place,' Laura said patiently. 'This is our secret. Only three of us know about it. Four now that you're here.'

'Know about what?' Zoë asked again and Laura stepped aside to show her what she hadn't seen before.

'This,' she said. 'The Door.'

Zoë looked and blinked. At first glance there was nothing exceptional about the pair of entwined trees. It was a common enough phenomenon. The lack of space among the clustered foliage had caused the branches of two trees to become entangled, forming a kind of archway at the edge of the clearing. Zoë glanced at Laura, wondering if she should suspect a practical joke, and then back at the trees. And saw it. A space where no

space should be. In the natural archway the darkness was absolute. Nothing showed through, no leaves or undergrowth beyond it, no glimmer of light even though the rest of the clearing was just about visible. The archway was black in a way no natural thing should be and Zoë stared in fascination as Laura's voice spoke softly behind her.

'You see it?' she said. 'It's a Door. Can you guess what's on the other side?'

Zoë didn't hesitate. The space was so completely strange, so absolutely alien, that it could only be one thing.

'Another world,' she whispered and Laura smiled.