

Outland

Rhiannon Lassiter

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For Tony Short
who helped discover the
physics of my universe.

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Prelude

The Hall of Echoes is a shadowy room where candlelight cannot penetrate the darkness of the great domed ceiling. Around its walls are thousands of small recesses, each large enough for a tight scroll of paper, in a honeycomb arrangement stretching high up the walls. Many of the compartments are empty, others hold their curls of paper cocooned in dusty spider's webs but on the lower levels the scrolls are fresh and new: tied with coloured ribbons or sealed with wax stamps.

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.

But in the vast stacks of the Library the Hall of Echoes has its own reputation. Collegiate members are world-travellers, using the magical Doors of the Library to move from world to world before returning with journals of their travels to add to the vast catalogue of books. In their randomly weaving journeys across miles of uncharted land or between worlds in the blink of an eye these world-travellers sometimes meet. The Hall of Echoes is filled with their messages to each other. Friends, lovers, and deadly enemies come here to write their messages on the screws of paper, sealing them with their symbols and tying them with identifying ribbons or rags of fabric to await collection. Notices of rendezvous, challenges to duels, journeys end in lovers' meetings are entrusted to the honeycomb of alcoves.

Given the great height of the dome the echoes are literal as well as figurative and visitors generally walk softly and speak in lowered tones, the rustling of paper whispering quietly across the room.

'Futility.' Caravaggion's baritone voice carried easily up into the heights of the dome and floated back down to him, causing the few inhabitants of the room to look up with momentary irritation from composing their messages.

'Hush,' his companion chided gently, linking her right arm with his and drawing him towards the arched entrance of the room. 'You're disturbing people, my dear.'

'And what's wrong with disturbing people?' Caravaggion grumbled, although he permitted himself to be led out of the Hall of Echoes and along the well-lit corridor beyond the entrance. 'You grow entirely too complacent, Lisle. The air here is stale.'

Lisle Weft's lips twitched at that. The air in this corridor, as in all of the Great Library, was still and close; lightly dusted with the smell of books and ink.

'Let's go to my study,' she said, reaching down to pat the rough head of the russet-coloured dog that walked patiently at her heel. 'You can tell me whatever's on your mind there.'

'On my mind?' Caravaggion repeated with a hint of irritation. 'Lisle, this is more than some personal dissatisfaction, this is serious, this is . . .'

'A matter of life and death?' Lisle's mouth twisted wryly. 'Yes, I know. You said as much in your message.'

'I never thanked you for coming,' Caravaggion remembered belatedly. 'Forgive me, I am grateful, I didn't expect you so soon.'

'As it happens it was no trouble. I've been spending some time in this section myself recently,' Lisle said slowly. 'In fact I'm now a member of the Jurist faction.'

'You are?' Caravaggion glanced at her in sudden surprise. 'I mean I knew you could often be found here but I didn't realize your ties with the Jurists were that close. Did you say you had a study here?'

'Yes I have.' Lisle quirked a smile at him. 'And I have wine and food there and even a censer to sweeten the stale air.'

'Very well,' Caravaggion said with a reluctant smile, his dark mood beginning to subside in the face of her relentless patience. 'Which way?'

As they walked down the curving corridor Lisle's dog kept pace with them, ears pricking to attention whenever another world-traveller passed by. The Jurist section was always busy and other Collegiate members stopped to exchange a word or nod of greeting with Lisle or spare Caravaggion a curious glance as they passed by.

Caravaggion himself watched Lisle. Her iron-grey hair

was waist-length, instead of the bushy mop he remembered from his last visit to Jurist territory, and plaited neatly down her back. Her face was a little more lined and her walk just a little slower as well but other than that she was the same Lisle Weft she had always been. Her comfortable uniform of trousers and a woollen tunic was as familiar to him as the presence of a dog following behind her. She had had a whole pack of them once, he remembered, drawing her carriage across a green valley on her home world when she came to meet him at the Door. Her attitude to them, as always, had been one of uncompromising affection. Now it struck him that she was the same way with men.

They'd been friends once, long ago and far away from here. They'd been antagonists as well, sometimes disagreeing so violently that they'd refused to speak for months or even years. But none of that was as important to Caravaggion as the fact that Lisle was someone who understood; she might disagree with many of his opinions but she never dismissed them and he had always tried to accord her the same respect.

It wasn't until they were established in comfortable leather chairs in Lisle's study that they resumed their earlier conversation. Caravaggion stretched out his hands to the warmth of the cheerful fire burning in a low brazier set at one side of the room at a safe distance away from the heaps of books and paper; Lisle placed a dish of water on the floor for her dog and poured out two glasses of a rich ruby wine.

'You seem to live well here at least,' Caravaggion said, striving for lightness in his tone.

'It's not as luxurious as some sections I've seen but it serves,' Lisle said dismissively. 'But I'm not here all the time. I still have family on Fenrisnacht.'

'Yes, I remember.' Caravaggion raised his glass to her

slightly before taking a sip of his wine. 'How are your children?'

'Grandchildren now too,' Lisle told him. 'Meaga is holding the fort and having a baby every other year; Lechto's moved out to the marchings with his wife and she's had her first already; and Siffany's still in the army and away at court most of the time.'

'It all sounds very comfortable and domestic,' Caravaggion said and Lisle glared at him.

'You know well it isn't,' she said. 'Just as you know at what cost we've gained the peace we have.' The russet-brindled dog raised its head at the snap of annoyance in Lisle's voice and emitted a low whine which drew its owner to look at it. 'It's all right, Pepper,' she said in a gentler voice and then, with a tone of command: 'Down, red dog. There now.'

'He's new, isn't he?' Caravaggion said, noticing the dog properly for the first time. 'Wasn't the last one more yellowish?'

'Mustard,' his companion agreed. 'She got too tired to keep up, poor old girl. This young fellow's only been with me for a few months. I think he misses the fresh air.'

'Mmm,' said Caravaggion noncommittally.

He watched as Lisle scratched behind the dog's pointed ears and tried to think of something conciliatory to say. But it was Lisle who was the first to speak again.

'Come now,' she said, with a wry look. 'Let's not rehash old arguments. Tell me why you've come to visit me here and what it is that troubles you.'

'It's a long story,' Caravaggion began and at Lisle's twitch of a smile he laughed ruefully and added: 'I know it always is . . . but this goes back many years to the beginning of my search.'

'This quest for the Founders of the Library.' Lisle shook her head in a gesture of weariness. 'You've been looking

for them all your life and are still no further on than when you began . . . ’

‘No one knows it better than I,’ Caravaggion admitted. ‘But my wanderings have led me to some interesting places even if I haven’t found the answers I’ve looked for.’ He paused. ‘Besides, I wouldn’t say I’m no further on. There are things I’ve learnt about the Library itself that have led to some interesting conclusions, especially tracing back the evolution of the current factions. I’m currently following up a lead on one of the ancient Legends. Have you heard of the worlds of light?’

‘It’s an ancient magic myth, isn’t it? A race of magicians who left artefacts of power out in the worlds.’

‘It’s more than that. I’ve seen some of the items supposedly made by them in Artificer territory and they are far beyond magic. The Artificers have been collecting them for a while now and they’ve had to evolve an entirely new glyphographical system for explaining how they function. It goes to the root of why magic differs so dramatically across different worlds.’

‘Indeed.’ Lisle took another sip from her wine and Caravaggion raised his eyebrows at her.

‘You might not see the importance yourself, Lisle. But trust me, this could be crucial. However, this is by the by. The point is that I’ve been spending time with the Artificers recently and making short travels in and around the Mandela.’

‘You’re now based on your home world then?’ Lisle asked and Caravaggion raised his glass to her.

‘As you are,’ he said drily. ‘Such old adventurers we are. We travelled so far in our day and yet we both have come home in the end.’

‘After so long an absence you never really go home,’ Lisle said slowly, reaching down to stroke the silky head of the red dog. ‘But go on . . . the Mandela.’

‘The Mandela was, of course, where my quest began. If I hadn’t grown up in Mandarel I would probably have lived my whole life on the same world.’

Lisle almost choked on her wine as she started laughing and Caravaggion’s face went through several expressions of affront, concern, impatience, and finally reluctant amusement as she laughed herself out of breath and eventually subsided.

‘You live on one world?’ she said when she’d finally recovered herself. ‘You’re a wanderer by nature, Caravaggion. If you ever do find the Founders I expect you’ll discover they made the Doors and the Library to satisfy your unquenchable appetite for new discoveries.’

‘Point taken,’ Caravaggion admitted, and Lisle gestured towards the wine bottle with a more conciliatory air.

‘Have some more,’ she said. ‘There are ginger wafers in the box on the table if you’d like some.’ She waited while he inspected the contents of a green jade box before going on. ‘I take your point though that the Mandela is unique.’

‘Well, it’s an ancient city in itself and its own records rival any Library section.’ Caravaggion nodded, picking up the train of his argument. ‘And it’s got one of the best-mapped networks of Doors because so many people start from there or reach it eventually. But because of its location in Library terms it’s a working city rather than a scholarly one so it takes a while for certain pieces of more esoteric information to filter back.’

‘Now we come to it.’ Lisle’s eyes narrowed, displaying more curiosity than she had up until this point. ‘You know,’ she added with affected lightness in her tone, ‘Lachesis once said that you were the best spymaster she ever had. I suppose that’s one part of your quest for knowledge you’d not be so willing to admit to.’

‘Oh, I’d willingly admit it,’ Caravaggion said quickly.

‘Why, are you planning to hold me on trial in your Converse Court?’

‘Not I.’ Lisle shook her head. ‘Though not all the Jurists are disposed to love you, Caravaggion.’

‘Their minds are as stale as the air in this section,’ Caravaggion said sharply. ‘I’m surprised to find you working for them, Lisle.’

‘I have my reasons,’ she said with dignity and he frowned.

‘Or you think you do,’ he said. ‘Seriously, do you think the Jurists are doing much good for the Library?’

‘They bring people together in this section of the Library,’ Lisle said. ‘They . . . I mean we . . .’ She paused. ‘Look, I’ll be honest with you. They’re the most influential group in this area of the Library and completely law abiding. I was able to arrange a study here and once you’re based in any area you tend to get affiliated with it sooner or later. It’s not the first faction I’ve belonged to and it won’t be the last.’

Caravaggion took a draught of his wine, arranging his thoughts, and Lisle waited patiently for him to go on.

‘I wouldn’t be too sure about that,’ he said. ‘I’ve heard rumours . . . you know how difficult it is to work out connections in the Library, but as far as I can tell the rumours tend in this direction.’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about,’ Lisle said frankly. ‘But do go on.’

‘Forgive me.’ Caravaggion was betrayed into a laugh. ‘Well, the truth of it is that I’ve heard rumours of undue influence, of worlds being brought under the control of some power-broker faction in a very subtle and insidious way.’

‘Indeed?’ Lisle looked thoughtful for a moment and then she narrowed her eyes at him. ‘And this is supposed to be happening somewhere near to the Jurist section?’

‘No,’ Caravaggion said definitely. ‘They come from distant worlds and obscure connections. They suggest that a powerful faction is expanding through a series of worlds, influencing the governments and controlling the access through all their Doors.’

‘Ridiculous,’ Lisle said. ‘The Library is large but I’ve heard nothing of any such thing for decades. Not since the atrocities of the Gleaners has any such control been attempted by any faction. If something like that was going on, we’d have heard of it.’

‘Not necessarily.’ Caravaggion shook his head. ‘And in any case the rumours suggest this faction has powerful forces on its side, soldiers and probably strong mages as well. They sweep everything before them. Quite literally.’

‘Well, if it’s so what has it got to do with us?’ Lisle asked.

‘Little is known about the leaders of this faction,’ Caravaggion said. ‘I have only been able to piece together its existence from scattered rumours and suggestions. But they or their agents use a faction device. A disc symbol with red and black markings.’ Lisle frowned and Caravaggion leant forward. ‘And,’ he concluded, ‘there’s a faction called the Wheel with a territory near the edge of Jurist influence that uses a symbol very like what I’ve described.’

Lisle lay back in her chair thinking for a moment, before suddenly reaching for a small notebook on a nearby table. Flicking through it quickly she paused a couple of times to read something before dropping the book in her lap.

‘There is a faction called the Wheel,’ she said. ‘I remember them now. A group of their members have come through here twice. Once travelling somewhere at speed, once trading for books and listening to the lectures in the Converse Court. They were very formal and very polite.’

They did wear a device in those colours though.’ Her brows knit together as she thought again. ‘How convinced are you that this Wheel is involved in illegal influence?’

‘If they are the faction I believe them to be it goes beyond influence,’ Caravaggion said grimly. ‘Oh, they show the velvet glove approach in general. They prefer subtlety and conspiracy over overt control, but when someone opposes their aims they are ruthless. They’ll stoop to murder or torture if it suits their ends.’

‘If this is true they must be challenged,’ Lisle exclaimed and her companion gave her a long look.

‘If this is true they are more powerful than the Jurists,’ he said patiently. ‘This goes beyond your Court’s kind of arbitration and they’ll not submit to your decisions.’

‘What then?’ Lisle asked sharply. ‘Why come with these suspicions if you don’t want them acted upon?’

‘If the Jurists were better able to defend their position I’d argue otherwise,’ he told her. ‘But they’re bogged down between cultists and collectors and cranks. No one here’s really equipped to handle a serious threat. We’re a long way away from the Lightbringers now.’

‘A long way and a long time.’ Lisle stared into the glow of the brazier, through the flickering flames. ‘I’m old now. Too old for drama.’

‘The Library is old,’ Caravaggion said distractedly. ‘Don’t be maudlin, Lisle, it’s not that long since those days of adventure of yours. You said you were old when you fought beside the Lightbringers but you won just the same.’

‘Well, if I was old then I’m older still now,’ Lisle said but her eyes sparkled in the fire’s leaping light. ‘I’m not about to pick up a sword again, my hands have held a pen for too long. If violence erupts in the Library I’ll be off to Fenrisnacht.’

‘Fair enough.’ Caravaggion looked down at his own

hands, calloused and ink stained, each finger banded with several metal rings. 'All I want is for you to watch and be wary. Danger tends to come suddenly and from the direction you least expect it.'

'And what about the other Jurists?' Lisle asked. 'Have you talked to anyone else about these premonitions of yours?'

'Those who will listen,' he said drily. 'But your faction has grown too certain of itself and flagrant breaches of its own code go unnoticed amidst a host of petty details. Those I know from old engagements have let themselves stultify here for too long. Persiflage Demosthene thinks only of barter and bargains, Dalandran the Itinerant dreams and does nothing, Sibilant Askew agrees with me but with her support I'm more hampered than helped. Visitors to this section are caught up in their own affairs. They will not heed my warnings.'

Lisle was silent, sipping slowly at her glass of wine. This time she did not protest at his judgement of her faction as grown stale. Compared to Caravaggion's own enthusiasm it was true. In all his life he had seemingly never grown tired of searching for an explanation of the Library's existence or the source of the magic that had created the Doors.

'You've been right before, I know,' she said. 'Great events have come about from no more than your sense of restlessness. You've always been my barometer when the weather changes.'

'Thank you.' Caravaggion bowed his head. 'Then, in that case, I will take my leave of you.'

'What will you do?' she asked. 'While I'm watching and being wary?'

'I'll speak one last time in the Converse Court,' Caravaggion said with a sigh. 'Although I doubt that many will listen. Then I return to Mandarel to follow up my

own quest. But if I come across anything more concrete about these rumours or the Wheel I'll try to send word.'

'Very well.'

Lisle pushed herself to her feet and went with him to the entrance of her study, the red dog padding across to her side as she watched Caravaggion walk away down the corridor. She patted Pepper absent-mindedly. Old friends or old antagonists, it was always strange to watch them leave for a trip across worlds not knowing how many years or worlds distant your next encounter would be.

'Still walking the long road,' she said quietly to the dog. 'Perhaps you'd like to be out there with him.' The dog whined and she ruffled its ears gently. 'Or maybe you'd just like to go home.'

1

The evening sky glowed crimson and gold behind her as Morgan sat on the edge of the garden fountain. A light breeze ruffled the water, wavering her reflection as she stared down into the small round pool, and sparkled the rippling water with sunlight. It was a warm summer evening and the garden was quiet with the lazy hum of insects and scattered chirruping bird calls. A little while ago two servant girls had come out of the inn behind her but when they'd seen Morgan sitting by the fountain they had stopped talking and gone quietly through an arch to the herb garden.

Watching her reflection re-form on the surface of the water, Morgan could guess why they'd left her alone and she saw the smile spread slowly across her face like the Cheshire Cat's grin. Dressed in scruffy black clothes with her hair matted into a long untidy black plait and her face grimy with three days of road dust, she didn't feel as if she looked at all remarkable. But this was a different world.

Once Morgan had been an ordinary schoolgirl, lonely and miserable. That had ended when she'd found a Door Between Worlds and begun a second secret life in the desert city of Shattershard. Now Shattershard was destroyed and she had turned her back on the Door back to Earth to come through the mountains to this peaceful green valley.

Wetting her hands in the water, Morgan wiped them across her face, trying to rub the grit away from her eyes. Somewhere inside the inn her companions would be arranging rooms and board but she'd felt the need to be on her own for a little while. It wasn't all that long ago that she'd been alone most of the time and she was surprised to find that she almost missed it. Not enough to want to go back to the way she was before but enough to make her realize that she felt uneasy with herself. In all the stories she'd read about magical worlds, the characters had ended up coming back to Earth. Morgan wondered what it said about you not to go back when your adventure was over.

Looking back down at her reflection captured in the bowl of the fountain Morgan tried to see herself the way she was in this world. Here she was a mage and Collegiate member, part of the secret organization of world-travellers. She had powerful friends and a prince as her lover, whom she'd rescued from the collapse of Shattershard. She was a powerful and dangerous person, someone to be reckoned with. Morgan tried another smile and saw it still on her face as she stared through the flat water at the grey stone floor of the pool below. Brushing her hands through the water she erased the overlapping images in a flurry of ripples and bent her head.

People had died in Shattershard. People that Kal, her prince, had felt responsible for and people he'd known all his life had died in that final battle. Morgan had left her old life behind because she'd wanted to. Kal hadn't had

that choice. Everything he used to be had been left behind in Shattershard, buried under thousands of tonnes of broken rock, except the crown he'd still been wearing when the city fell in.

Crouched on the side of the fountain, Morgan looked down at her hands, still wet with the water from the fountain, and wiped them on her tunic. They were her own hands, pale-skinned with ragged fingernails and blisters from the reins of the pony. But she'd seen a blast of black fire come from these same hands, called up by her rage and fury, to envelope her enemy in a cloud of darkness. She'd never intended to use magic to hurt someone, never considered the possibility, caught up in the wonder that magic even existed in this world. But she'd used her power against Laura and she didn't even know if she regretted it.

Laura and Alex Harrell had engineered the collapse of Shattershard. Alex had done it for glory, caught up in his own fantasy of leading a desert army to victory. Morgan still didn't understand why Laura had done it. She'd never understood Laura back in Weybridge when the other girl had been a star student who breezed confidently through life. But in Shattershard Laura had become a spy and a manipulator, careless of the consequences as she pulled strings to gain power. Laura and Alex were probably dead by now and with them the desert nomads they'd used in their plan. And also with them had been Zoë but that wasn't something Morgan wanted to think about at all.

A shadow crossed over her shoulder, darkening the water and abruptly reflecting the reddened light of sunset in the pool. Morgan sat up as a familiar figure sat down beside her and she saw Kal's reflection join hers in the fountain.

'Did you want to be alone?' Kal asked as she turned to look at him and Morgan shook her head slightly, reaching

out instinctively as he took her hand. 'The twins have bespoken two rooms and ordered a meal,' Kal said, lacing his fingers with hers. 'They said we should talk later if you weren't too tired.'

'I'm not too tired,' Morgan said. 'How are you feeling?'

Kal smiled with half his mouth and lifted his free hand in an empty gesture. They'd been asking each other variations of that question during the passage through the mountains and it didn't get any easier to answer. She'd felt grateful for the tough schedule the twins had set which left them too tired by the time they set up camp to do much more than eat and sleep. It wasn't surprising that now they had time they would have to talk properly for once.

Looking at Kal, his golden hair meshed with the silvery circuit of the Archon's crown and his grey eyes bruised by shadows, Morgan thought to herself that he still seemed like a prince. It was impossible to imagine him as anything else, as a sixth-former at school back on Earth or even as a normal young man on this world. There was something about Kal that made it impossible to forget that he had been brought up to rule from the moment he was born. But instead of being a barrier between them Morgan found it made it easier for her to be with him. With Kal she felt more like the person she wanted to be.

'What will you do now?' she asked softly and Kal tilted his head at her.

'Me? I'd rather know what you're intending to do,' he told her and Morgan frowned. 'I still hardly know anything about you,' Kal reminded her. 'Or about where you come from.'

'Where I come from.' Morgan shook her head. 'It isn't important . . . because I'm never going back. But where we go next . . .'

Her voice trailed off. 'I suppose the twins might have some ideas about that.'

‘I’m certain they do,’ Kal said levelly. ‘But I know them even less well than I know you and I don’t feel as inclined for their company.’

Morgan glanced up at that and caught Kal regarding her thoughtfully. Dropping her hand he reached out and brushed his thumb across her cheek gently.

‘You saved my life,’ he said. ‘And I’m trying to learn to be grateful for that. But you and the twins obviously have your own plans. So I have to wonder if I’m a part of them.’

Morgan bit her lips, wondering what Kal was trying to say and what the right reply would be. The twins had told her that Collegiate members weren’t supposed to tell anyone about the existence of Doors Between Worlds and so she’d kept silent on the subject. But the destruction of Shattershard had come about because of world-travellers trying to take over the city and maybe if she hadn’t been silent then she could have stopped it. The Collegiate’s rules could wait, Morgan decided; she couldn’t have a relationship with someone and not tell him the truth.

‘I’ve never had a plan,’ she said slowly, looking at the pale evening sky reflected in the water. ‘All I ever wanted was to be special.’

‘You are special,’ Kal said, getting the smile right this time, and Morgan met his eyes at last.

‘Perhaps,’ she said eventually. ‘But this is a different world.’

Laura was surrounded by darkness. As she walked down the corridor the floor was jagged beneath her feet but she stepped forward with a smooth stride, allowing herself to be guided by the hand that supported her arm. Although she was blind she had hardly been injured by the destruction of Shattershard and she walked confidently into the blackness ahead.

On her right Zoë's footsteps trod a carefully measured stride. She hadn't spoken for hours, except to warn Laura of obstructions or turnings, and her hand had dampened the sleeve of Laura's dress with sweat. They had been wandering for three days and Zoë had led the way all that time, supporting Laura for every step, making the decisions about which path they would take ever since they'd been trapped underneath the collapsing mountain.

It had been Zoë who, against all the odds, had found the Door beneath the city. Laura hadn't believed it was possible but Zoë had insisted the Door existed and that it was their only hope of survival.

'Either we try and find this Door or we can curl up and die here,' she'd said, demanding for the first time that the others follow her lead. 'Which choice do *you* prefer?'

Jhezra and Alex had agreed to follow Zoë and now they brought up the rear of the group, their feet ringing out in an uncertain rhythm as they made their way along together. They'd both been injured but how badly Laura didn't know and she couldn't tell if it was Alex supporting Jhezra or the other way around.

When Zoë had stumbled into the Door beneath the mountain she'd thought they were saved. Dropping Laura's arm in her excitement she'd exclaimed suddenly, rushing forward and scrambling down what sounded like a shifting slide of scattered rock. Ominous rumblings from the cavern ceiling boomed above them as Zoë's scrambles sent a lighter scatter of pebbles bouncing and cracking across the floor.

'Thanks be to all the gods,' Jhezra had exclaimed as Zoë's voice called back the news of her discovery. 'We must hurry. I fear this area is becoming unstable.'

She and Alex had set off down the rock scree leaving Laura to wait until Zoë came back for her and helped her down the shifting mass of fallen stone.

‘This is it,’ Zoë had told her when they reached the Door. ‘I haven’t been through yet. We still don’t know what’s on the other side.’

‘Whatever it is has got to be better than this,’ Alex had said and Laura felt Zoë’s hand clench on her arm.

‘Let’s go then,’ Zoë had said curtly, pulling Laura onwards, and in a single step the rumblings of the mountain and the damp air of the caves had been replaced by a sudden warmth and the musty smell of dust and books. The others had gasped with relief but later they’d come to admit what Laura had realized from the first: finding the Door hadn’t helped.

Admittedly they were no longer in danger of being crushed to death. But without water or food their situation wasn’t much improved. The book-filled room on the other side of the Door had led into a book-lined corridor and from there into a maze of more rooms and corridors, through which Zoë had led them with slowly diminishing confidence.

‘Morgan said something about a Library,’ she’d told them. ‘I think this must be it.’

They’d stopped more than once to take down books from the shelves. Jhezra hadn’t been able to read them but Alex and Zoë both wore magical charms for translation and had scanned through them quickly.

‘It’s impossible,’ Alex had said when they finally abandoned the books. ‘I can’t work out half of what these are about and when I can . . .’ his voice died away.

‘There’s nothing useful to us,’ Zoë confirmed. ‘I can’t even work out if they’re fact or fiction. They’re about places and things I’ve never heard of. Nothing about where we are or anything that explains what this is a Library for.’

‘There are signs though,’ Jhezra told them. ‘Marks on

the shelves or on the floor. Like trail marks.’ But neither Alex or Zoë had been able to understand what the signs meant.

‘We’ll have to go on,’ Zoë decided. ‘Sooner or later we’re bound to find someone who we can ask for help.’

They hadn’t. In over two days of wandering they’d found endless rooms and corridors of books but not a single other person. What they had found were Doors. Zoë had noticed the first but before they could discuss whether to go through it Jhezra had spotted another. Making a rough camp of their belongings they’d left Laura standing beside it as they explored a couple of nearby corridors and came back with the news that there were Doors everywhere dotted up and down the branching corridors of the Library.

‘This is really strange,’ Alex said. ‘How can there be so many?’

‘Are many more strange than one?’ Jhezra asked and Laura heard an odd note in her voice.

‘It is strange though,’ Zoë had replied. ‘It’s . . . it’s so far away from normal I don’t even know what to think of it.’

‘Then maybe we should try one of the Doors,’ Laura had suggested patiently and for a moment silence answered her before Zoë said suddenly:

‘No.’

‘There might be food or water on the other side,’ Jhezra had said, pointing out the obvious, but Zoë remained intransigent.

‘There might be anything on the other side,’ she said. ‘I don’t think it’s safe to look. Or even right for us to try. We should keep exploring this place.’

‘As you wish.’ Jhezra had accepted Zoë’s decision without argument, the same way she’d accepted Zoë’s lead from the beginning. Alex had tried several more times to

persuade her but without any support had given up. Laura had stayed silent. She was still making up her mind what she thought about Zoë.

Back on Earth Zoë hadn't been anyone important. She'd changed schools half a dozen times before her father's army job had brought her to Weybridge and she had kept a low profile in the hope of fitting in. It wasn't until half term that Laura had noticed anything interesting about Zoë but when she did she had decided to take the other girl with her through the Door into Shattershard.

'She could be useful,' Laura had insisted when Alex objected to bringing Zoë in on their secret world, not giving her reasons for why she thought so.

Alex had caved in as he always did: more interested in playing Alexander the Conqueror in battle than in the fine details of society politics. If she was honest with herself Laura hadn't had any idea what Zoë might be useful for except that it would have been a waste to leave behind someone so obviously impressed by her. She'd thought of the red-headed girl as a follower and her instincts had served her well given that now she was blind and required Zoë's help even to walk. But unfortunately Zoë seemed to think that *she* was the leader now and that didn't suit Laura at all.

But blind and weaponless, owning only the clothes she wore and a few valuable items she'd saved from Shattershard, without even the merest of clues to where they were, there was no point in Laura attempting to assert herself. Instead she listened to the sound of weary footsteps and the scattered phrases that passed between the others. Earth and the world of the Tetrarchate were behind her now and Laura's pale green eyes looked down the corridor ahead towards a future she couldn't see.

* * *

From an upstairs window of the tavern Charm looked down at the two figures sitting together at the edge of the fountain. A gentle smile curved her lips as she watched them for a moment longer before turning away.

‘Why were you smiling?’ her twin asked from across the room. And Charm looked over at him, her expression becoming grave again.

‘Morgan intends to tell Kal about the Collegiate,’ she said. ‘She believes that her love for him requires it.’

‘Did you expect anything else?’ Ciren asked and Charm frowned.

‘We told her not to,’ she reminded him. ‘And Kal is a complication.’

Ciren was silent for a while as he thought and Charm reached out to finish closing the shutters and drew a thin muslin curtain across the window. Ciren watched her and wondered what she was thinking. It wasn’t a thing he’d ever had cause to wonder about before. The twins had lived their lives as one single unit so much that he’d come to believe that they thought and felt as one person as well. But this last mission to Shattershard had changed something. Kal’s crown, which made him immune to Charm’s mind-reading ability, had set him thinking properly about his twin’s unusual power. Now, having seen her casually reading Morgan’s mind with no thought to her privacy, he felt suddenly uncomfortable with his other half.

‘It’s the most broken of all the Collegiate rules,’ he said, after a while. ‘Across all the factions. Everyone does it sooner or later for whatever reason. And she loves him.’

‘The Wheel might not be pleased,’ she said. ‘Morgan could make a good agent if she comes back to the Great Library with us. But if she wants to bring Kal with her there might be problems.’

‘Perhaps not too many,’ Ciren pointed out. ‘He has

nothing tying him here. His city tried to be independent of the Tetrarchate; now that it's gone he has no place in this world. And if Morgan brings him through to the Great Library he will be a world-traveller and there's no reason why the Wheel shouldn't consider him as great an asset as Morgan.'

'How can we know that?' Charm asked. 'I can't read him. We still don't know what he's like.'

Ciren frowned, wondering what to say first. He would have liked to point out that Kal had survived the destruction of Shattershard better than he had expected. The boy Archon who'd been powerless to prevent the disaster had settled into a grim-eyed refugee who held himself together through strength of will alone. But more than that he wanted to explain to Charm that there were more ways to assess people than riffling through their minds.

'Why do you look like that?' Charm asked suddenly. She wasn't smiling and her violet eyes were hard and black. 'I don't know what it means when you look at me like that.'

Ciren hesitated and then shook his head.

'It's the crown,' he said. 'It's throwing us off. I keep wondering about what it means that you can't read him. It's started me thinking about possibilities . . .' he shook his head. 'I'm still not certain what they mean.'

'It makes me wonder as well,' Charm told him, her stance relaxing at his explanation. 'No one's been able to block me before. I didn't think it was possible.'

Ciren nodded, relieved that the discussion had moved away from uncomfortable thoughts about how his twin read people.

'It's also not typical of other magics we've encountered in this world,' he said. 'The enchantments on that crown are unusually complex. I wonder what its history is.'

‘Perhaps we can persuade Kal to tell us,’ Charm suggested.

‘Perhaps,’ Ciren agreed, without trying to analyse what she meant by persuade. ‘But it’s possible he doesn’t even know its properties or provenance. And if he doesn’t know that it can block you . . .’

‘There’s no need to make him a present of the information,’ Charm agreed, finishing his thought and putting them in sync with each other again.

Laura’s cough sounded drily in the long corridor for a third time and Jhezra tensed at the noise. Beside her Alex kept walking onwards drearily; once more in a daze of depression at their situation. He didn’t even seem to notice when Jhezra tried to talk to him and showed no more interest in the dry hacking noise of Laura’s coughing fit.

Up ahead Zoë had come to a halt, keeping her arm around Laura as she asked if she was all right. Jhezra stopped walking and tapped her companion lightly on the arm.

‘Alexander,’ she said. ‘Stop for a moment.’

His feet shuffled on for another few paces before her message penetrated and then he stood still and blinked for a moment.

‘What . . .’ he began and Jhezra moistened her lips while she remembered that impatience solves nothing.

‘Laura is unwell,’ she said levelly. ‘We should stop while Zoë attends to her.’

Alex nodded, slumping down on the floor obediently and rubbing at the improvised bandage around his right arm. Jhezra didn’t sit beside him though. It annoyed her that Alex hadn’t realized that she was no longer using the version of his name he had first given her. Back in the desert outside Shattershard he’d told her his name was

Iskander. It wasn't a complete lie but a pronunciation of his name which had also been used for his hero: Alexander of Macedon. All the same Jhezra was no longer comfortable calling him by it and she wondered why he hadn't noticed the change.

Laura's hacking coughs eventually came to an end and Jhezra glanced up at Zoë, who was frowning at Laura. Early on in their travels she'd torn a strip of cloth from her shirt to tie over Laura's blind and staring eyes but Jhezra felt as if she could still see that blank gaze through the folded bandage.

'All right,' Zoë said softly, although no one had spoken to her. 'I suppose we're going to have to try one of the Doors.'

'We need water,' Jhezra agreed, trying not to let it sound like a criticism. She looked over at Laura standing silently beside them and then at the slumped figure of Alex on the floor of the corridor. 'Food is less important but we cannot manage much longer without water.'

'I've been saying that for ages,' Alex said petulantly, lifting his head. 'This place is deserted. We have to use a Door.'

'I know.' Zoë stared at the floor. 'I was hoping it wouldn't come to this though.' She looked up again and directly at Jhezra, meeting her eyes seriously. 'We have no idea what kind of world might be on the other side of any of these Doors,' she said. 'It could be dangerous for us there. Also . . . we could be dangerous for it.'

'Dangerous?' Laura's laugh sounded much more lightly than her cough had. 'A band of cripples with one weapon between us? What danger could we possibly be?'

'Well, seeing as the last time you went through a Door you ended up destroying a city and killing God only knows how many people in the process, I don't think you have a leg to stand on, Laura.' Zoë's eyes flashed at her

erstwhile friend for an instant before she shook her head suddenly as if shaking away her anger. 'But I admit we have no choice.'

Jhezra said nothing, feeling bad for Zoë but not knowing how to help. She wanted to be able to talk to the red-headed girl better, to speak her language without the aid of the translation charm, to explain that she didn't blame Zoë for what had happened. She didn't even blame Alex and Laura as much as herself. Without Jhezra's suggestion the Hajhim would never have listened to Alex's ideas for taking over Shattershard and the destruction of the fortress city would never have taken place. But Zoë, with much less reason, also felt responsible. Jhezra knew that as certainly as if Zoë had shouted it in her ear but she wouldn't speak of these things in front of Laura and Alex. Instead she started looking for a suitable Door.

When Morgan had finished her story, Kal sat for a while in silence still holding her hand in a firm grip. His head was bent as he tried to assimilate everything she had told him and Morgan watched him with concern in her eyes.

'So this Laura and Alex are responsible for the Hajhim attacking Shattershard,' he said finally in a low voice.

'They were trading with the Hajhim for ages,' Morgan admitted. 'I warned Laura over and over again that she didn't have any right to interfere. And Alex had a lover among the Hajhim. I knew they were planning something but I didn't know what.' She shivered a little in the night air as she fixed Kal with a pleading look. 'I'm sorry I didn't tell you this before. I feel so guilty . . .'

'I'm sorry too,' Kal said, meeting her eyes. 'If I'd known.' His eyes were hard for a moment then he shook his head. 'No, we can talk about that later. What I want to

know now is about Ciren and Charm. You said they belonged to an organization of world-travellers?’

‘I wasn’t supposed to tell you,’ Morgan said, tightening her hold on Kal’s hand. ‘But I had to. I couldn’t keep something like this from you . . . I never will again, I promise. Please, you have to believe that!’ Her voice shook a bit on the words and she stopped speaking, trying to get control of her voice.

‘I understand,’ Kal said and he put an arm around her. ‘I do appreciate your honesty. But I need to know more. If the twins are world-travellers why didn’t they stop these other people, Laura and Alex, why didn’t they stop them from destroying my city?’

Morgan huddled closer to Kal in the circle of his arm. The sun had set over the garden and the stone rim of the fountain was cold and uncomfortable but Kal seemed not to notice, half in a daze with what she was saying.

‘They wanted to stop it,’ Morgan explained. ‘The Collegiate has rules about not interfering with other worlds or bringing through weapons to dominate them. We were going to find Laura and Alex and talk to them but . . . I left it too late. It took me a while to believe the twins and by the time I did . . . the battle had already begun.’ Her eyes felt wet and she hid her head against Kal’s shoulder and whispered: ‘I’m sorry.’

‘I know.’ Kal stroked a hand down Morgan’s hair and she felt him sigh. Then he spoke with a sudden bitterness that made her wince. ‘I hope I killed him,’ he said. ‘It was Alex I fought at the palace gate, wasn’t it? But even if I didn’t the city did. I don’t see how he could have made it out alive.’

‘No, I don’t see how,’ Morgan agreed.

Her mind shifted away from the thought of Zoë. She’d barely mentioned Zoë in her story, still unsure of her feelings about the red-headed girl she hardly knew, but it

was Zoë she'd tried to save. If Zoë had found her way to the Door beneath the city it was possible that she might have escaped. But in her heart Morgan felt certain that Zoë was dead, and Laura and Alex with her, entombed beneath the broken city of Shattershard.

'So he's dead,' Kal said again with a curiously unsatisfied note in his voice and Morgan glanced up at him.

'And Laura too,' she added. 'I cast a spell . . . I'm still not sure what I did . . . But I think it might have killed her. It looked . . . ' She shook her head, not wanting to remember the black cloud that had enveloped Laura, but Kal looked suddenly less cold.

'You took our side,' he said softly. 'I still remember you joining us on the battlements. You and Edren and Athen.' He stroked Morgan's hair again. 'I still miss them,' he said quietly. 'But at least I have you even if everything else is gone.'

'There's you,' Morgan said, groping for words. 'You're still alive. You're still the Archon . . . ' She stopped when she saw him wince.

'No, all that is gone now,' Kal said with an air of finality and he shifted a bit on the stone seat. 'Come on,' he said, drawing Morgan to her feet. 'Let's go inside. You must be freezing.'

'I'm all right,' Morgan said automatically, but she leant into Kal's arms as he rubbed her shoulders to warm her up.

'We've both left our old lives behind now,' Kal said thoughtfully as they walked back towards the inn. 'This world has nothing left for me. Lead on, wherever you wish, Morgan, I have nowhere else to be but with you.'

As they reached the kitchen door Kal let Morgan through first and hung back for one last moment to shut the door behind him. The inn was golden with warmth

and the smell of freshly baked bread as he followed Morgan across the room to join the twins by the side of a fiercely crackling fire.