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On the other side of the Door it was dark. Her eyes widening instinctively, Zoë put out her hands, feeling for something, and barked her knuckles painfully on rock. For a second she had panicked that something had gone wrong with the Door, trapping her between worlds, before she looked up and saw beyond the shadowing shapes of the rocks around her to the stars brightening the sky above.

Feeling her way round the side of the rock scree Zoë climbed down the ragged rocks towards the sandy floor of the desert. Ahead down the road she could see the vast bulk of the city of Shattershard and even make out lights burning on the topmost towers of the mountain, but all around the sandy plain was dark and featureless. She shivered a bit in the cold air. Her clothes were warm enough for the end of English autumn but in the middle of the desert night she felt gooseflesh on her arms and the rocks were cold as ice.

Harness jingled suddenly, ringing out across the stillness of the desert and Zoë hunkered down quickly next to the nearest rocks. Coming along the road towards the city was a troop of soldiers: at least twenty of them, riding horses and armed with swords. Their eyes searched the darkness on either side of them as they rode along. Hiding in the rocks at the side of the road, Zoë realized she had made a mistake. She should never have come through the Door so unprepared. But while the troop of soldiers was going down the road she didn't dare move.

Wiggling further back into the shadows she caught the heel of her foot and a scatter of pebbles bounced down to the road. One of the soldiers reined in his horse a little and turned to look over his shoulder, staring directly at the place where Zoë was hidden. She held her breath, trying not to move a muscle, but he continued to stare, his hand going to the sword at his belt. Beside him another rider slowed and asked a question but, although Zoë was wearing the translation amulet Laura had bought her, she couldn't make out the words. Her whole body was tense, the sand rough on her arms and legs and her muscles cramping in her awkward crouch. Then the first soldier shrugged and turned away, the two trotting their horses to move back into line with the rest of the troop.

Zoë watched them depart, her heart still in her mouth, only shifting enough to get rid of the worst of her cramp as the jingle of harness faded up the winding road ahead. When they were finally out of sight she stood up slowly and took a shuddering deep breath.

'Who are you?' a voice demanded from behind her.

Whirling, Zoë turned to see a tall girl dressed in a sand-coloured tunic and trousers. For a second Zoë thought it was Jhezra but this girl's black hair was chopped roughly short to her head and her eyes were narrow and hostile. She carried a curved sword at her belt and in her

right hand held a similarly curved dagger and as Zoë stared at her she gestured with it impatiently.

'Who are you?' she said again. 'And what are you doing here?'

'I'm . . . I'm a traveller,' Zoë stammered and the girl curled her lip contemptuously.

'No one is fool enough to travel alone in the desert at night,' she said. 'You were hiding from the soldiers. Why?'

'You were hiding from them too!' Zoë said hotly. 'Or else you wouldn't have seen me.'

'If I was it's none of your concern,' the girl told her. 'And it wasn't me who they heard. You're obviously not one of us, so what are you doing here?'

'I . . . ' Zoë hesitated and the girl's hand strayed to the hilt of her scimitar warningly. 'I was looking for friends of mine,' Zoë said quickly.

'What sort of friends of yours would be wandering the desert?'

Zoë thought quickly. Being caught by this girl wasn't as frightening as the thought of being seen by the blue and silver soldiers had been. Although she was obviously a Hajhi warrior this girl didn't seem much older than Zoë herself and she was on her own. But even so, Zoë didn't want to annoy her, so she said the only thing she could.

'They have friends from your people,' she said. 'They're called Alex and Laura. You might know them yourself.'

The girl shook her head.

'I don't know those names,' she said. 'You'll have to try harder than that if you want to convince me.'

'They're friends of Jhezra's,' Zoë tried again. 'Do you know Jhezra?'

She didn't have to ask. The first time she'd said the name the girl's expression had changed and now she lowered the point of her dagger.

‘I know Jhezra,’ she admitted. ‘Tell me the names of these others again.’

‘Laura and Alexander,’ Zoë said. ‘Alex is Jhezra’s friend.’

The girl cocked her head on one side suddenly and said, ‘Iskander? Is that who you mean?’

‘Tall, curly dark hair, wears a long brown coat?’ Zoë said, relaxing now. ‘He’s Laura’s brother. I’m Laura’s friend.’

‘I’m Vaysha.’ The girl slung her dagger back on her belt and put her hands together in the same gesture Jhezra had used when they first met. Zoë mirrored the movement, bowing a little over her hands before smiling at Vaysha.

‘Pleased to meet you,’ she said carefully, letting her relief show. ‘I guess it was pretty stupid of me to come here at night.’

While Zoë was receiving a first-hand lesson in the dangers of the desert, the Tetrarchic troop she had seen on the road was circling to the west of the city. They were not the only patrol out that night and twice they stopped on the road to exchange words with other troops similarly engaged. Zoë would have been disturbed to know that the soldier who had almost spotted her had mentioned thinking he saw something in the rocks to a friend from another patrol heading off in that direction. Tetrarchic soldiers were trained to be paranoid.

From the guard and gate towers of the mountain city the Shattershard militia shared an uneasy watch with their Tetrarchate counterparts. Normally guard duty was a relaxed affair, despite the recent losses of the caravans; from the high towers you could see for miles across the desert during the day and hear for miles at night. The guards usually whiled away the long watches of the night

in idle conversation and with a few warming draughts of beer or flasks of wine. But tonight they stood at attention, their eyes shifting only briefly from the desert to meet those of their friends, while the Tetrarchic soldiers stood on watch with bows ready strung, some using spyglasses to watch the desert. Shattershard was a city under martial law and the local guards didn't much like the experience.

They weren't alone in that feeling. The court that night at the palace was just as uneasy, nerves highly strung and voices highly pitched as they discussed recent events in the city. While Zoë had spent a mundane weekend in Weybridge, Shattershard had not stayed unchanged. It had been three days since General Shirishath's troops had joined the city guard at the gate, refusing entry to any of the Hajhim who attempted to pass them. Two days ago the Archon had stood up in front of the court to tell them that the Tetrarch had ordered the pacification of the Hajhim and that Shattershard had no choice but to co-operate. Just the day before, the largest caravan of merchants for months had passed through the city gates. With the merchants had gone the last of the people who feared the coming battle: the ill, the cowardly, the pacifists, and the superstitious.

The courtiers were as elegantly dressed as always but there were fewer of them now. Some black-clad magicians had remained and talked in huddled groupings around the edges of the stairways and balconies. The older priests travelled with an entourage of acolytes, armed with ceremonial weapons, and were strung with so many charms and icons that they clattered as they walked. In contrast the noblemen and women, those that had not gone on convenient visits to distant relations, wore less jewellery than usual. Most of their assets were locked in safe places and strongboxes in their mansions or had gone to pay their own bodyguards. Throughout the crowd the

remaining merchants did brisk business, bartering and bargaining to get high prices for the few supplies left in the city.

In the Audience Hall Shattershard's Archon watched his subjects quietly. Beside him on the dais the ranks of his own advisers had diminished, although Jagannath still sat by his side.

'Trade has slowed to a trickle,' Kal said softly. 'Over half the city's residences are unoccupied.' His voice dropped even further as he added: 'People are afraid.'

'General Shirishath reports that for the last two days no Hajhim have attempted to enter the gate and his patrols have caught no sight of them in the immediate vicinity of the city,' Jagannath reminded him. 'Perhaps the nomads have decided to abandon the conflict?'

'Perhaps,' Kal said. But looking around the virtually empty hall he doubted it. Shattershard had the feel of tension building before a storm. The Hajhim had forced this confrontation; they weren't likely to back off without a fight. 'Do you believe that, Jagannath?' he asked. 'Truly?'

The cardinal met his eyes with a small shake of his head.

'In truth I don't know what I believe, my Archon,' he said. 'But I fear.' He leant closer, despite the fact that they were already speaking too quietly to be overheard by any of the distant courtiers. 'Shirishath is confident but he doesn't know as well as we do how cunning the Hajhim have grown.' He paused. 'Many of the aristocracy have left the city, Lord Archon. Perhaps for the sake of your health . . .'

'No.' Kal shook his head abruptly. 'While the city stands and there is any one of the people left inside . . .'

He shook his head again. 'You told me before I had enemies, Jagannath. Not the Hajhim. But whoever has

brought this conflict to this point. This is what they've been working for. Even if I can't defeat them, I want to look them in the face.'

The cardinal studied his expression, looking as if he would have liked to protest against Kal's decision, but he said nothing and at last he nodded. Since the declaration of martial law Kal's authority over the city was next to nothing but the boy Archon had been trained since the moment of his birth to believe in his duty and they both knew that if he left the city now he would never be accepted back.

Standing, Kal stepped down from the Archon's throne, nodding in response to the bows of the courtiers as he left the hall. From the doorway Athen and Edren stepped to follow him as he made his way through the public rooms. As he walked, people stopped to bow to him but Kal didn't stop for more than a moment to exchange greetings or sample any of the lavish dishes and drinks being offered by the remaining servants. Instead he followed the curves of a staircase back into the interior of the palace, away from the public areas and towards the secluded garden where he was spending more and more of his time. At the arched doorway he paused.

'If you would wait here for me,' he said, glancing at his bodyguards.

'As you wish, Lord Archon,' Athen said, bowing, and Edren mimicked the motion.

'And . . . ' Kal hesitated and then said more slowly, 'I'd appreciate it if you could prevent me from being disturbed . . . ' The slightest suggestion of a smile crossed Athen's face and Kal smiled back. 'Unless it's urgent,' he added and Edren smiled as well.

'Of course, my lord, Kal. You can depend on us,' he said, taking up his post at the door.

Thanking them both again, Kal left them at the door

and went out into the night-time garden. He knew why they had forgotten decorum so far as to smile but he didn't blame them. With the current state of the city it was a wonder that any of them had anything to smile at. Now, with pale light illuminating the roof garden, he crossed to the figure sitting waiting by the central fountain and touched her shoulder gently, smiling when she turned with a sudden blush.

'Hello again,' she said smiling and blushing at once as he bent to put his arms around her.

'Hello, Morgan,' he said and kissed her.

In the public areas of the palace Kal's early disappearance from the festivities hadn't gone unnoticed. Since gossip was the only distraction from the imminent threat of war, Trebbern the merchant was especially eager to speculate on the reasons for Kal's absence.

'There's a rumour the young Archon has a secret lover,' he said, trying to interest the person next to him in the scandal. 'Unfortunately, his bodyguards are notoriously discreet.'

'Really?' the young woman next to him said politely, but her light-green eyes were faintly bored. 'Perhaps he's consoling himself since there's nothing he can do about the war.'

'Honestly, Laura,' Trebbern said, affronted. 'You are a *ghoul* sometimes. Can't you think about anything except war?'

'Was that an insult, Trebbern?' Laura's brother said, appearing suddenly from behind them, and the plump merchant jumped a bit in surprise.

'Oh no,' he said hastily. 'Certainly not. The lady Laura knows how much I admire her.' Seeing Laura's empty wine glass he seized on it and added quickly, 'Allow me to

express my apologies by fetching you another, my dear.' Then, before she could answer, he twinkled off.

Once the merchant was safely out of sight Alex leant down so Laura could take his arm and escorted her to an alcove out of the way where they could watch the crowd without being noticed.

'Did that idiot Trebbem know anything worthwhile?' he asked and Laura shrugged.

'He's an incurable gossip but he doesn't really know anything. Cardinal Jagannath and General Shirishath apparently argue every time they meet but that's unsurprising. And the boy-king has given up trying to govern and has found himself a girlfriend instead.'

'A girlfriend?' Alex was surprised into laughing. 'I didn't know he had it in him. Who is she?'

'Only the bodyguards know and they're not saying,' Laura said casually. 'What about you? What have you heard?'

'Nothing useful,' Alex told her and his face shifted into a frown. 'I'm not really very good at this.'

Despite himself he was worried. Even though he still had free passage in and out of the city gates, he and Jhezra had decided that he should visit the desert only when it was strictly necessary. The Tetrarchic troops weren't stupid and now that the Hajhim weren't allowed into the city they would be on the lookout for spies. Faced with the alternatives of sitting at home in the residence and brooding over their plans or coming with Laura to court, he'd chosen the second option. But he didn't have Laura's knack for drawing other people out and he'd become too used to the casual camaraderie among the Hajhi warriors to enjoy the luxurious frivolity of the Archon's court.

Now he stood as Laura's escort and watched as she spoke to the passing courtiers, admiring the way she managed to flatter information out of some of them and

steal it from others by pretending to know more than she did. It was a method that had worked well for them ever since they first arrived in Shattershard and although the other merchants had never guessed it, it was thanks to Laura that the Hajhim had such uncanny knowledge of when the caravans were travelling and what they carried. But tonight there wasn't much information to be gained and he was relieved when Laura finally suggested they go home.

Home meant their mansion residence at the moment. Ever since the martial law edict, they'd been spending half their time in Shattershard, only coming back to Weybridge in Earth's evening for long enough for their parents not to register them as missing. The Hajhi plan depended too much on them for Alex to want to go back at all but it couldn't be helped. If all went well they might stay in Shattershard for good but they couldn't risk the kind of complications that would come from the Weybridge police listing them as runaways.

It wasn't until they had reached the mansion, letting themselves in through its imposing double doors, that they could speak freely. While Laura brought a mirror from somewhere and set it up in front of her, taking off her make-up carefully, Alex made them coffee from their carefully hoarded stock.

'How was Jhezra today?' Laura asked and Alex shook his head.

'Worried,' he admitted. 'The plan was prepared with only Shattershard's militia in mind. The Hajhim can't help but be concerned now there are five hundred Tetrarchic troopers to contend with.'

'But they still intend to go ahead?' Laura asked quickly and Alex glanced at her.

They'd both been promised all sorts of rewards when the Hajhim took over the city but that had never concerned

Alex. The reward he was after was leading an army to victory. But Laura felt differently. The mansion they lived in and the Hajhi servants they pretended to employ had been her idea and he suspected she had just as many inspirations about what she'd do when Shattershard was being run by the Hajhim. Even though he knew she was on his side Alex sometimes wished she had a more poetic attitude towards their war instead of the mercenary interest of the merchant she pretended to be.

'They haven't changed their minds,' Alex said. 'It would be impossible to convince them to stop now even if we wanted to. The warriors are furious at the way the Tetrarchate troops have prevented them from going where they want in their desert. With the weapons we've helped them make, they're confident they can bring their part of the plan off.'

'And what about your part?' Laura asked. 'Originally you were supposed to have people to help you. How can you work it now the Hajhim aren't being allowed inside Shattershard?'

'Jhezra has an idea for that,' Alex told her. 'It's you I'm worried about. If the worst comes to the worst I can defend myself. I've got pretty good with a scimitar. But what are you going to do when we cut to the chase?'

'I'll go to the palace,' Laura said easily. 'It'll be the best guarded place in the city and by the time the Hajhim get around to taking it over, you can come and find me there.' She put down the cotton wool she was using to clean her make-up off and turned to give Alex a smile. 'It's ironic,' she said. 'The Tetrarchate troops themselves will be protecting me, until we're in control.'

Alex blinked at that but he couldn't think of any good reason to object to the plan so he went on to the next question.

'The Archon will be in the palace too,' he said. 'It

seems clear that he intends to stay until the bitter end. Remember to steer clear of him. If he realizes you're a spy . . . '

'I'll be careful,' Laura promised and Alex thought of something else.

'If he survives the battle I don't want to have him executed,' he said uncomfortably. 'Once we've taken over the city we should send him off to the Tetrarchate, don't you think?'

'Yes, why not?' Laura agreed. 'It'll make the Hajhim look good to let him go.' She paused. 'It's not Prince Kal I'm worried about. It's Morgan.'

'Morgan?' Alex said. 'Isn't she still playing with her magic somewhere in the guild-house?'

'So I've figured,' Laura agreed. 'But I told you about the threats she made at the palace. She's turned into a real bitch ever since she guessed what we were up to.'

'She doesn't know the details though,' Alex said. 'And she promised not to tell about us.' He hesitated. 'You're right though, it is a problem. And I don't think this was the best time to bring that other girl in either.'

'Zoë?' Laura smiled at him. 'Zoë's not a problem.' She smiled suddenly up at Alex. 'She practically worships me and she has no idea what we're doing here.' She made a dismissive gesture, brushing a last speck of make-up from her face. 'Besides, she might come in useful at some point,' she added. 'Anything's possible.'

Riding across the desert on the back of a golden horse with a band of Hajhi warriors, Zoë felt like someone out of the Arabian Nights. Even though she didn't know the route, she was close enough to the middle of the group that she could be guided if necessary and she was a good enough

rider that the canter across the sand dunes didn't bother her.

Once Vaysha had accepted her identity, she had taken her back to join the rest of the Hajhi scouting party. Despite the patrol of the blue and silver soldiers the scouts were concealed on either side of the roadway and behind the rolling desert sand dunes. Their horses were crouched down behind a larger dune further back, as quiet as their masters as they too crouched down to the sand, their golden coats blending into the landscape.

With Vaysha to vouch for her, Zoë had been given the use of one of their spare horses when the scouts returned to camp. Although she knew that she could be safe just by finding the Door again she didn't like to mention it in front of Vaysha, doubting that Alex and Laura had let her in on their secret. But with the wind at her back Zoë didn't feel much like going home anyway and she grinned at Vaysha riding nearby when the other girl caught her eye.

The horses thundered across the desert as the sky lightened a little and, looking back, the massive bulk of Shattershard dwindled further and further into the distance. They were deep in the desert now. No roads or even tracks marked their way, the featureless dunes rolling up and down like waves around them, the echo of their hoof-beats the only sound. When the rhythm of the hooves finally slowed Zoë blinked and craned her neck to see past the lead riders to what lay ahead.

It was an army. Zoë knew that at first glance and, as the scouting party trotted closer, everything she saw only strengthened her conviction. The Hajhi tents might not have been laid out with military precision and the stockade of goats and shaggy cow creatures might not be much like the provisions of the British army, but the people standing around or sitting in front of the tents were armed for battle. When the scout group drew up and

Vaysha dismounted, Zoë imitated her and jumped down to the sandy ground, smiling when another scout took the reins of her horse for her and murmuring a thankyou.

‘This way,’ Vaysha said, taking Zoë’s sleeve firmly. ‘We go now to find Jhezra.’

Zoë nodded, although she realized that she wasn’t exactly being offered a choice, and hoped that Jhezra remembered her. Now that she’d seen the Hajhi army she was feeling nervous about what the nomads might think of her being there.

Vaysha took her through the camp towards the embers of what had been a large fire, where a group of people not much older than Zoë were clustered together. The Hajhim gave Zoë curious glances as Vaysha led her past them and she smiled nervously in return, feeling out of place in her jeans and hooded top.

‘Jhezra!’ Vaysha called out suddenly, startling her. ‘We were looking for you.’

‘Here I am, then,’ Jhezra said, turning away from the group she’d been talking to with a smile which froze on her face when she saw Zoë.

‘You see why,’ Vaysha said drily. ‘I found this one outside the city, hiding from a Tetrarchate patrol.’

Jhezra looked at Zoë and then said slowly, ‘You’re lucky to be alive.’

‘I know,’ Zoë said, although she hadn’t really and Jhezra’s words sent a chill down her spine. This world was dangerous and she was only just beginning to realize how much.

‘When I challenged her she said her name was Zoë and that she had friends who knew our people,’ Vaysha continued to explain. ‘She named Laura, which name I didn’t recognize but now I recollect is Iskander’s sister. Then Iskander, although she pronounced the name strangely. Then finally you, Jhezra, so I brought her to you.’

Jhezra looked at Zoë thoughtfully. Although they'd only met once before Zoë was beginning to get an idea of the Hajhi girl's personality. Jhezra was the kind of person who made quick decisions about people, either she accepted you or she didn't, and now she was considering what to do with Zoë.

'We must talk privately,' she said eventually and Vaysha laughed.

'I'll leave you to talk then,' she said. 'I have some reading to catch up on anyway.'

Zoë blinked at that but as Vaysha turned to leave she remembered to say, 'Thank you . . . um . . . for believing me.'

'Don't thank me yet,' Vaysha advised with a grimace of a smile. 'But good luck.' She nodded to Jhezra and left with a long easy stride to join the group that Jhezra had been talking to, leaving Jhezra and Zoë standing alone in the shadows at the edge of the camp.

They looked at each other. In this obvious war-camp with what must be hundreds of Hajhi warriors around and seeing Jhezra's scimitar and sickle-shaped dagger worn openly instead of hidden behind flapping robes, Zoë couldn't see Jhezra as the friendly nomad girl Laura had introduced her to and she suddenly remembered Morgan telling her 'Laura *lies*'. Wetting her lips she said out loud, 'The Hajhim are preparing to attack Shattershard and Alex and Laura are helping you.'

'That's true,' Jhezra said quietly. 'They have been helping us for a long time.'

'They let your people use their house and they . . . ' Zoë thought for a moment. 'They sell you things, things from—' She stopped abruptly.

'From Earth.'

Zoë stared. But at the same time she wasn't really all that surprised to hear Jhezra mention Earth. If Alex and

Laura were that deeply connected to the Hajhim it wasn't so strange that they'd have told their closest friend about themselves. Then she rethought that: Jhezra wasn't their *friend*, she was their contact.

'So you know about Earth,' Zoë said slowly, playing for time, and Jhezra smiled.

'Not much. Iskander brings us books sometimes. Vaysha buys texts on martial arts from him. But to the others he pretends to come from a far away country of our world. Only I know about his secret Door and not even where it is.' She paused and Zoë thought that with Vaysha's information about where Zoë had been found she could probably find it if she wanted.

'And you knew I come from the same place too,' she said.

'And Morgan. The magician girl who used to be a friend of Laura's and now lives in the city.' Jhezra nodded.

Zoë's mind caught on the way Jhezra had said that and, for the first time since Laura had explained about magicians to her, she wondered if Morgan really did have magic. Jhezra certainly seemed to assume it.

'I guess now I know you're preparing to attack the city I'm dangerous to you,' Zoë said, thinking quickly, but to her surprise Jhezra laughed.

'Everyone in Shattershard knows the Hajhim will attack,' she said. 'They have declared martial law within its walls and forbidden us to enter. The citizens have fled, leaving only the foolhardy, the city guard, and the Tetrarchate soldiers.' Her dark brown eyes were liquidly thoughtful as she gave Zoë a long look. 'What makes you dangerous is that you know Iskander and Laura are helping us.'

Zoë hesitated and then realized that even a moment's hesitation was too long.

‘But Laura’s my friend,’ she said and it came out hollow. Jhezra’s eyes darkened and Zoë shook her head quickly. ‘No,’ she said. ‘That’s not right. I don’t know if she’s my friend. But I won’t tell on her. I mean . . . I don’t know anything about this . . . I’ve only just seen your world. What’s happening here isn’t any of my business.’

‘You mean that?’ Jhezra said and Zoë nodded.

‘I really do,’ she said and it was true. ‘I mean, in my own world I can’t even tell my father about this. It’s too incredible. In your world . . .’ She shook her head again. ‘I don’t even begin to understand what’s happening and . . .’ she shrugged, ‘and if Laura and Alex are on your side I guess I am too. It’s not as if I even know anyone else here.’

‘You know Morgan,’ Jhezra said, but Zoë could tell it was just a reflex answer, the Hajhi girl was already convinced.

‘I don’t even speak to her at school,’ she said and wondered how that would translate through her amulet until Jhezra laughed.

‘Fair enough, then,’ she said. ‘You’re on our side.’

And then to Zoë’s surprise she reached out and clasped Zoë’s hands. ‘Welcome, friend,’ she said.

‘Thank you.’ Zoë squeezed her hands back, feeling suddenly moved at Jhezra’s whole-hearted acceptance of her, and tried to think of the best thing to say. ‘Friends, then,’ she said and meant it.