

# THE SPACETIME POOL

by Catherine Asaro

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*Illustration by George Krauter*

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History is a deep and complicated puzzle—especially when it involved more dimensions than time.

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I

## Appalachia

The hiker vanished.

Janelle peered at the distant hill. She could have sworn a person had appeared there—and disappeared just as fast. Perhaps it was a trick of the wind. The rhododendron bushes on the hillside where she sat undulated in the breezes like a dark ocean frothed with purple flowers, and a hum of cicadas filled the air. The Great Smoky Mountains rose in the distance, green and gray against a late afternoon sky as blue as a cerulean glaze.

She shifted her weight uneasily, wondering if she should have come out here alone. Her hair blew across her face in a swirl that reminded her of yellow corn in the fields back home. The breeze whispered against her arms and rippled the summer dress she had worn instead of sensible hiking clothes. Right now she probably resembled some forest creature more than a new college graduate. She smiled at the image that conjured up: Janelle the wild-woman stalking into math class, strewing leaves and equations. Then her disquiet returned, like a hawk gliding in the sky, circling a rabbit, ready to plunge.

“Oh, stop,” she muttered, annoyed at herself. She pulled her hair out of her face. Birds wheeled above the figure on the next ridge—

Someone *was* there. She strained to see better. A man was standing on that hill with his back to her. As she rose to her feet, he turned in her

direction.

Then he compressed into a line and vanished.

Whoa. Janelle squinted at the hill. She must have mistaken whatever she had seen. She had no wish to share her solitude, but curiosity tugged at her. She hiked up the hill, headed back to the trail, uncertain whether to investigate the vanished fellow or return to her car. Although it would take thirty minutes to reach the parking lot, she should probably go back; the afternoon had cooled as it aged, and her flimsy dress couldn't stave off the chill. Seeking an escape from her hectic life, she had left her cell phone and purse in the car, taking nothing more than her keys.

The leafy canopy of an old growth forest arched above her. Wood chips crackled under her feet, and a red squirrel skittered up the trunk of a basswood. Stretching out her arms, she turned in a circle, her eyes closed. Sweet blazes, she loved these mountains. Laughing, she opened her eyes. Life was good. She had finished her math degree at MIT just a few days ago, and it felt great.

Like a shift in a sea current, her mood changed. She had no one to share her happiness. It had been two years since her father's assassination in Spain. Her mother and brother had unexpectedly joined him for lunch that day, and the explosion that destroyed his car had taken them as well, her entire family. Even now, the pain felt raw.

Janelle inhaled deeply. She would survive this moment, as she had all the others, until the grief became bearable.

"Janelle?" a voice asked.

*What the...?* She whirled around.

A man stood several paces away. He resembled the figure from the hill, though she hadn't seen him well enough to be sure this was the same person. She stepped back. He had only said her name, but given that they had never met, that was plenty to make her nervous.

His presence did nothing to allay her unease. He was too tall, maybe six foot six, with a muscular physique that reminded her of her vulnerability. His clothing was strange. She had nothing against unconventional self-expression, but in some subtle way, this went beyond that. The blue of his shirt vibrated in the shadowed forest, as vivid as an ocean where sunlight slanted through the water. His black pants were tucked into black

boots. Silver links set with abalone gleamed on his shirt cuffs and in the silver chain around his neck. Well-trimmed hair brushed his shoulders, glossy and black. It wasn't the length that surprised her, but the gray at the temples. Although obviously hale and fit, he seemed rather old to adopt such styles. Then again, just because she knew no one his age who made such fashion statements, that didn't mean it never happened.

What compelled her the most, though, was his face. His high cheekbones and strong nose, and the dark brows arching above his gray eyes, made her think of a senator in the Roman Empire. He projected a sense of contained force.

Then she saw what hung from his belt. Ah, hell. *Dagger* was too tame a word. The sheath for the knife stretched as long as her forearm.

"I didn't mean to startle you." His gravelly voice had an unfamiliar accent, harsh and throaty. "You are Janelle Aulair, aren't you?"

She stood poised to run. "Why do you want to know?"

"I was sent to look for you."

With relief, she realized what must have happened. Ben, the grocer in town, had sent him to check on her. Ben always worried when she came up here alone. The last time he had sent his sister and brother-in-law, and they had startled her the same way.

"Have we met?" she asked. "At Ben's?" She thought she would remember someone so striking, but maybe not.

"Never," he said. Then he added, "Destiny requires your presence," as if that explained something.

Destiny indeed. She should get back to her car. He hadn't threatened her, but if that changed, she could surely outrun someone his age. She stepped to the side—

"No, wait!" he said, lunging forward.

Startled, she jumped away—

Darkness enveloped Janelle, muffled and cold. Muted voices echoed, calling, fading. Then the light brightened. She stumbled on the sand and barely caught her balance.

*Sand?*

She looked up—and froze.

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## **The Riemann Gate**

A white beach stretched around her, dazzling in the bright day. Waves crashed a few yards away, and their swells glinted in the slanting rays from the Sun, which was low in the sky. The ocean stretched to the horizon, wide, blue, and endless.

“What the blazes?” Janelle spun around—in time to see the man appear out of thin air.

He came out of nothing, taking a long, slow step. His progress was slowed to a surreal speed, and his body flickered as if he were a projection of light. It *couldn't* be real. He had to be doing this with mirrors. Either that, or she had overworked herself in school more than she realized, and her mind was lodging a protest by wiggling out.

The man solidified. For a moment he just stood, focusing on her. He seemed as disoriented as she felt. The large tendons in his neck corded under the chain he wore, and the Sun caught gleams from the abalone. The metal looked like real silver. The contrast of his powerful build and the jewelry unsettled her; no one she knew wore such items, let alone a man this daunting. It wasn't right or wrong, just eerily different.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

What a question. Her heart rate had ratcheted up and her head was swimming. “Is this a movie set?” If he had equipment to create this illusion, she should have seen it, but she grasped at the possibility like a swimmer clutching at driftwood in the ocean.

“A moving set? No.” He rested his hand on the hilt of his knife and scanned the area. “Did anyone see you?”

She glanced at the knife, then at his face. “I don't want trouble.”

“Nor do I.” He stepped toward her. “We shouldn’t stay here.”

She stepped back. “Why? Where is this? What happened to the mountains?”

He spoke carefully, as if she were breakable and his words were hammers. “They are elsewhere.” He indicated a line of straggly trees up the beach, where the sand met a sparse forest. “We must go. We will be safer if we aren’t in plain view.”

“Safer from what?” She wasn’t going anywhere with him.

“Raiders.” He scanned the beach, poised as if he were ready to fight. Wind blew his hair back from his face, accenting his prominent nose and strong chin. His profile looked like it belonged on a coin. “We must leave before they come.”

“I’ll just go home,” she said.

He turned toward her and she was acutely aware of his height. Large men rattled her. They lived in another dimension, one where you could use the top of bookcases and see over the heads of a crowd. They loomed, and he was doing it much too well.

“I’m not sure you can,” he said. “This last time, I barely made it through before the gate closed.”

“What gate?” Sweat was gathering on her palms. “Who *are* you?”

“You may call me Dominick.”

“What do you want with me, Dominick?”

“You are part of a prophecy,” he said, as if that were a perfectly reasonable statement. “Before my brother or I was born, it was foretold that whichever of us married you would kill the other.”

Marriage and murder. Right. She should have listened to Ben and not gone hiking alone. “Don’t play with me.” Her voice cracked on the last word.

His strong features softened unexpectedly. “I am sorry. I didn’t really expect the gate to open.”

“My friends are waiting for me.” She was talking too fast. “If I don’t

show up, they'll phone the police." In truth, no one expected her for days. But he didn't know that. She hoped.

"I don't know what is phone," he said. "But we *must* go." He strode forward.

As Janelle whirled to run, the sand shifted under her feet and she tripped. Dominick easily caught her. Twisting in his grip, she raked his arm with her fingernails, and the two of them nearly fell into the sand. He ended up swinging her in a circle with one arm around her waist. He wrapped the other arm around her torso, pinning her while he bent over to hold her in place. He felt as if he were built from iron. She struggled, and he tightened his hold.

"Janelle, listen." He spoke urgently. "I won't hurt you. But if we stay here, we could be killed. Outlaws have been raiding homesteads in this area. You're a beautiful woman. If they find you with no defense except me, you would be in far worse trouble than you think I might cause you. And I would be dead."

She didn't want to listen. But she had to do something. What if he was telling the truth? What if he *wasn't*? If she made the wrong choice, could one or both of them end up dead?

"Janelle?" he asked.

She took a deep breath. "All right." For now.

He released her, then grasped her upper arm and set off for the trees. She had to run to keep up with his long-legged stride. So much for her assumption that age would slow him down; he could easily outrun her. His large hand engulfed her arm. His grip could have bruised, but he didn't let it. The contrast between the contained violence of his personality and his careful touch confused her.

The fine-grained sand showed little trace of their progress. They soon reached the forest and strode under its sparse cover. He kept up the grueling pace as they plunged into the deepening woods, until a stitch burned in her side.

Dominick angled through a tangle of bushes into a denser knot of trees. As they pushed through the bushes, he used his knife to cut away branches. The thicker foliage screened them from view, but it wasn't until they reached the center of the glade that he slowed down. He motioned her

toward a boulder that jutted up to about waist height. Sitting on another, he planted his boots on the ground, braced his palms on his knees, and heaved in large breaths. Janelle stayed on her feet, too nervous to sit as she struggled to catch her wind.

“We can rest here,” he said as his breathing settled.

She rubbed her arms, feeling cold despite the heat. It was much warmer than in the Smoky Mountains, and she didn’t want to dwell on the implications of that fact. “I don’t understand how you know me.”

“Only through the prophecy.” He watched her as if she were the apparition rather than this entire place. “I didn’t really expect to find you.”

“How do you know I’m the right person?”

“You look like the vision in the Jade Pool. It’s near a mountain lodge where my father took his seeress.” Sarcasm edged his voice. “Apparently she made better predictions when she was alone with him in secluded retreats.”

From his tone, she suspected he had been painfully aware in his childhood of his father’s involvement with his “seeress.” Choosing tact, she said only, “What did she predict?”

“Just days before my mother gave birth for the first time, she showed my father a vision of you. She said Maximillian and I would be his oldest sons, that whichever of us married you would kill the other, and that if either of us tried to kill you, that brother would die.”

“That’s horrible.”

Dryly he said, “My parents weren’t delighted with it.” He studied her face. “The scribes copied your image from the pool. But you are much younger than the woman in those portraits.”

“I doubt they were pictures of me.”

“It’s more than appearance,” he said. “The gate was supposed to bring me to you. It took me three tries to get it right, but it did work. And the seeress knew your name. Janelle Aulair.”

“You could have looked me up on the Internet.”

“What is the Internet?”

Like he didn't know. Maybe next he would try to sell her swampland in Florida. “It's not important. Just tell me how to get back home.”

He dropped his hand to his belt and set his palm over a disk. It differed from the abalone circles; this one had a metallic sheen. He stared at the ground, his gaze unfocused.

“Dominick?” she asked.

He looked up at her. “The gate doesn't open.”

She pushed back her growing fear. “That's convenient.”

“It's true.” He ran his fingers over the disk. “Do you feel anything?”

“Nothing.”

“I'm trying to create the gate where you're standing.”

She didn't know what to think. “How did you learn to use it?”

“One of the monks told me.”

Right. Monks, too. “How did he find out?”

“I don't know.”

“A description has to be somewhere. Books, files, storage.”

He seemed oddly bewildered. “You mean a library?”

“Yes!” If they had web service there, she could email someone for help.

“I have one at my home,” he said.

The last place she wanted to go was his house. “A public library would be better.”

“I don't know what that is.”

She couldn't believe him. That he sounded sane made none of this



more plausible. “And you have no idea how this gate works?” she challenged.

His gaze flashed. “Of course I do. It’s a branch. From here to your mountains.”

“A tree, you mean?”

“No. A branch cut to another page. Your universe is one sheet, mine is another.”

She gaped at him. “Do you mean a *Riemann sheet*? A branch cut from one Riemann sheet to another?”

“That’s right.” He hesitated. “You know these words?”

She laughed unsteadily. “It’s nonsense. Not the sheets, I mean, but they’re just mathematical constructs! They don’t actually exist. You can’t physically go *through* a branch cut any more than you could step into a square root sign.”

He was watching her with an expression that mirrored how she had felt when he told her about his prophecy. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Complex variable analysis.” She felt as if she were in a play where she only knew part of the script. “A branch cut is like a slit in a sheet of paper. It opens onto another sheet. I suppose you could say the sheets are alternate universes. But they aren’t real.”

“They seem quite real,” he said. “When you went through the gate, it threw off my calibration. I had set it to come out at my camp.” More to himself than to her, he added, “I hadn’t actually expected to *leave* the camp.”

“Tell you what,” Janelle said. “How about you and your brother find wives here? I’ll just drop out of the picture.” She thought of what he had said about his father. “Unless you’re already married. Because if you’re pulling this bit looking for some fun on the side, forget it.”

“Neither Maximillian nor I is wed. I have had concubines, though not in some years.”

“Concubines!”

He grinned. "You don't like that?"

Just like a guy, to be pleased because he thought she was jealous. "Oh, cut the sexist crap."

He had the audacity to look intrigued. "What does 'sexist' mean? Is it to do with love-making?"

"No. It means I should go back to Tennessee."

His voice softened. "This world would be much poorer, to lose such beauty as yours."

"Don't." For some reason, it angered her that he actually sounded sincere with that line. Or maybe the anger masked her fear. Right now, he could do whatever he wanted with her.

"Max wouldn't give you a choice." He was no longer smiling. "If not for the prophecy that we would die if we killed you, he would probably execute you on sight."

An unwelcome memory jumped into her mind: she had learned about the deaths of her family from the media. Someone with too much ambition or too little compassion had leaked the story, sensationalizing it as an "execution." Janelle had been visiting a girlfriend in Virginia during a school break, and the news had gone public even as government officials scrambled to find her.

Dominick spoke quietly. "Your face looks like a dark cloud passed over it."

She shook her head, unable to answer.

"I do regret all this." He stood up and lifted his hand, inviting her to leave the glade. "Are you rested enough to go on? Let me at least bring you to my home, as my honored guest."

Janelle didn't want to be his guest. But she was beginning to absorb that this might be real, and she doubted staying in the glade would help her escape.

The Sun was setting when they emerged from the screen of bushes. The world had darkened and blurred, as if they saw it through old glass on

the seashore, brown and rounded by tumbling waves.

Dominick set off along a faint path scattered with leaves. They had only gone a few yards, though, when he turned to her and paused, listening. Then he spoke in an urgent whisper. “*Run.*”

She took one look at his face—and broke into a sprint.

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### III

## The Transform Palace

Janelle raced through the woods, and Dominick’s boots thudded behind her. Then she tripped on a jutting rock, and he plowed into her. Holding onto her, he lurched past a tangle of wild berry bushes and fell behind a large boulder and the bushes. He twisted in mid-air and landed on his back, cushioning their fall so she came down on top of him. Her breath went out in a rush. It happened so fast, she had no time even to tense up.

For one second, he held her in a vise-like embrace. Then he sat up fast, rolling her off his body and onto her stomach. She pushed up on her hands, but when he laid his palm on her back, she stopped with her head raised. He crouched next to her, his knife drawn, his head tilted as if he were listening to the distant waves. Her surge of adrenalin sharpened her hearing, and she caught the shushing of hooves on sand. Dominick raised his dagger in a single sure motion, the blade glinting in the last rays of the Sun.

Hooves stamped nearby. Janelle stayed silent, though surely they could hear the thud of her heart. Voices spoke in a patois of heavily accented English sprinkled with unfamiliar words. Straining to understand, she recognized they were talking about the “two on the beach,” that they would finish off the man and take the girl. When she heard what they wanted to do with her, bile rose in her throat.

The voices moved away, until she heard only waves on the beach. Dominick spoke under his breath, no words she recognized, what sounded like an oath. She breathed out, aware of her rigid posture.

“I think we can go,” he said in a low voice.

A reaction was setting in as Janelle comprehended she might truly be

stranded in this violent place with no anchor except this stranger. "I can't," she whispered.

"It will work out." Despite his rough voice, he had a kind tone. "Come with me, Janelle. I will do well by you."

*Get a grip*, she told herself, and climbed to her feet. "I'm all right."

Standing with her, he inclined his head. He lifted his hand as if to touch her face, but when she tensed, he lowered his arm.

They set off again, and the ocean's mumble receded as they went deeper among the trees. The woods thickened into a heavy forest, and tufts of wild grass stuck up in the soil. Dusk came like a great beast, one barely noticed until it spread its wings, darkening every copse and glade. Luminescent bottle flies hummed among the trees.

Dominick drew her to a stop. Holding his fingers to his mouth, he gave a whistle that rose and fell in an eerie tune. A bird answered his call.

"Hai," a low voice said.

Janelle started. A man had appeared under a nearby tree. He wore leather armor and a dagger similar to Dominick's, but without the silver or abalone. He also had an "extra" that made her mouth go dry, a monstrous broadsword strapped across his back with its hilt sticking above his shoulders.

Dominick spoke in the same dialect used by the men who wanted to kill him. It sounded like "Hava moon strake camp," but she thought he meant, "Have the men strike camp." Although she didn't understand the other man's response, she saw the deference in his bow. The man glanced at her with curiosity, then withdrew into the trees and vanished as silently as he had come.

She and Dominick continued on, and although she saw no one else, she didn't think they were alone anymore. They soon entered a clearing of trampled grass. Several tents stood on the far side, and men moved in the trees beyond, soldiers it looked like, in leather armor. Most were tending animals. Their mounts resembled horses, but with tufts for tails. Each had two horns, one on either side of its head, with the tips pointing inward. Some of the men wore helmets with similar horns. The scene had a dreamlike quality, all in the dusk, with mist curling around the animals. But the cooling air on her arms and legs and the pungent smell of wet grass

were all too real.

The men greeted Dominick with respect. Although Janelle had trouble deciphering their words, she understood their intent. They were preparing to leave.

And she was going with them.

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Fog muffled the night. Janelle sat in front of Dominick on one of the two-horned animals, which he called a biaquine. Starlight, his mount, had a silver coat with stiff hair. He changed the animal's saddle to a tasseled blanket woven in heavy red and white yarn so Janelle could more easily sit with him. A few scouts went on ahead, but the rest of the men stayed together, with extra biaquines to carry the tents and other supplies.

Fear and curiosity warred within Janelle. She had agreed to go with Dominick because she saw no other viable choices, at least not where she stayed alive and healthy. But she didn't trust him.

They passed through veils of mist, climbing into the mountains. Her muscles ached from the unfamiliar ride. Moonlight lightened the fog, and she strove to keep track of landmarks that loomed out of the night: a gnarled tree with two trunks or a weathered statue of an elderly man in a niche of rock. Her ties to home were growing tenuous, unable to compete with the reality of this impossible place.

Dominick put his arms around her waist, so she didn't fall off the biaquine. At first she sat ramrod straight. Gradually, though, Starlight's rocking gait lulled her. Nor did Dominick act in any way to make her uncomfortable. She had forgotten how comforting it felt just to be held. Her mother had always been effusive with affection, and although her father had been less demonstrative, he had never let them doubt his love. She had grown up secure in those close-knit ties. One instant of violence had shattered everything. Drowning in grief, she had withdrawn from human contact; in the past two years she had barely touched another person.

Dominick had a strange request. He wanted a curl of her hair. When she agreed, he pulled out his dagger. She stiffened, her gaze riveted on the long blade as it glittered in the moonlight, but he only cut off a small tendril. He gave it to one of his riders, who carefully placed the strands in a packet of cloth. Then the man took off up the trail, galloping ahead of their party.

“What’ll he do with it?” Janelle asked.

“My monks will examine it,” Dominick said. “To see if you are who I think.”

“How can they know from a lock of hair?”

“They have ... spells.”

“Spells?”

“Well,” he amended, “so they say.”

From his tone, she suspected he didn’t believe it any more than she did. She just hoped his monks didn’t decide her hair had demonic properties.

Exhaustion was catching up to her, but she feared to rest, dreading what she might find when she awoke. She had rarely slept enough during school, often studying late into the night. It paid off; she earned high marks, even the top grade in Mathematical Methods of Physics. Now her simple pleasure in a job well done seemed forlorn.

An owl hooted, its call muted by the fog. Janelle shuddered.

“Are you cold?” Dominick asked.

“I was thinking of home.”

Regret softened the hard edges of his voice. “I am sorry about this.” After a pause, he added, “But I would be lying if I denied I am glad you are here. I never really believed this would happen.”

“Prophecies aren’t real.” She watched the biquines plodding ahead of them on the trail. “A rational explanation has to exist.”

“Truthfully?” he said. “I don’t think the seeress made that prediction. It was Gregor, a monk from the monastery. He is the one who can read the Jade Pool.” His voice tightened. “Father’s soothsayer had never even been there before. She stayed at the palace.”

“Palace?”

“Where my brother is.”

“Does he work there?”

He gave a bitter laugh. “You could say that.”

“What does he do?”

“He is the Emperor of Othman.”

Good Lord. What had she landed in? “You’re the brother of an emperor?”

“Yes.” He said it simply, just verifying a fact. “He was born first.”

If neither he nor his brother had married, that suggested neither had legitimate offspring. “Does that mean you’re his heir?”

“For now. Until he sires one.”

“Sweet blazes,” she murmured. “I’ve never heard of Othman.”

He swept out his hand as if to show her all of the land. “The provinces stretch from the snow fields in the far north to the great gulf in the south. Maximillian rules it, and I govern the Atlantic Province under him.”

“The entire continent?” It sounded like Canada and North America.

“Only the eastern half. Britain has the rest.” In a voice that sounded deceptively soft, he added, “For now.”

A chill went through her. “And later?”

“That depends on what happens with Max.”

From his tone, she suspected that if he ever became emperor, he would kick out the British and absorb their territories. What a strange history for the colonial revolution.

“Your brother is afraid you’re after his throne,” she said.

“Supposedly, whichever of us marries you will rule Othman.”

“This is crazy. I have nothing to do with either of you.”

“Not according to the seer.”

Or the politicians, more likely. “Dominick, surely you see this so-called prophecy is a trick, one guaranteed to set you and your brother against each other. It’s bunk.”

“Bunk?”

“Lies. Moonshine.”

“Moonshine.” Wryly he added, “An apt image.”

Janelle had used the word on instinct, and now she regretted it. It evoked sweetly faded memories of her southern childhood: grits, biscuits and gravy, and bluegrass music. Her family had later moved to Washington, D.C. and then Europe, but the girl who loved country ham and the unique twang of a steel guitar was still inside of her. Her memories glimmered of the golden hills she had wandered during late summer days, spinning the enchanted dreams of youth. She couldn’t let herself think she might never again see them.

“I would agree it is ‘moonshine,’” Dominick was saying, “except everything else in the prophecy has come true. It foretold the birth of eight children to my parents. Max and I have six siblings, and they fit every detail predicted.” His breath condensed in the air, spuming past her. “Gregor gave my father a sealed letter, to be opened after father’s death. Father died of pneumonia ten years ago, three days after his sixtieth birthday. After the funeral, Maximillian opened the letter.”

“What did it say?”

He answered quietly. “That my father would die of pneumonia three days after his sixtieth birthday.”

She shivered. “That’s eerie.”

“Indeed.”

“You and Maximillian can never trust each other.”

“True. Not that I would trust him anyway.”

“Why not?”



“He craves power.”

She suspected that applied to Dominick as well. “Why are you so certain it’s me in that prophecy? You’ve only seen drawings of an older woman.”

“We will verify your signature.”

“You’ve never seen me write, I’m sure.”

“Not writing. It’s hard to explain.”

“Try.”

He paused for a moment. “Your signature is inside your body. It has forty-six characters, half each from your father and mother. You can’t see it, I think because it is too small.” He nuzzled the top of her head. “It determines everything about you, from the color of your eyes to whether you are a man or a woman.”

The touch of his lips on her hair startled Janelle. It was a simple gesture, but that just made it more intimate, as if they took such affections for granted. Attractive he might be, but he was too threatening. She started to tell him to stop, then froze as she realized what else he had said. The “signature” sounded like DNA. Based on what she had seen, she wouldn’t have expected his people to know genetics at the molecular level needed to identify a person. Then she gave a frayed laugh. She didn’t believe they understood DNA, but she accepted gates to other universes?

He lifted his head and spoke stiffly. “What is funny?”

Belatedly, she realized how her reaction must have sounded. “Dominick, I wasn’t laughing at—” She floundered at the word “kiss,” which felt much too awkward, and wasn’t exactly what he had done, anyway. So she told another truth. “I’m tired. Nervous.” Softly, she added, “Don’t push.”

He let out a breath. “It is my fault you were ill prepared. I wasn’t ready, either. I had never before used the gate.”

“You must have studied it.” How else could he have found her?

He shook his head, or at least his hair rustled; seated in front of him, she couldn’t see his face.

“I just use the tools Gregor gave me,” he said.

“The disk on your belt.”

“Yes. Except it no longer does anything.”

“Maybe I can get it to work.”

She expected him to refuse. Instead, he took his arm away from her waist, and she heard a click. Then he pressed a metal plate into her hand. It had a diameter the size of her palm and felt cool on her skin. No marks embellished its polished surface.

“How does it operate?” she asked.

“I rub it. Supposedly my finger ridges activate the spells.”

Spells indeed. If his fingerprints operated the mechanism, it wouldn't work for her. When she rubbed the disk, nothing happened. “Should I touch it in any pattern?”

“Not that I know of.”

“You said before that you calibrated it.”

“Actually, Gregor did. He's secretive. He tells me nothing.” Wryly he added, “I don't think he understands it, either.” He guided Starlight around an outcropping, and the biaquine snorted as if to protest the inconvenience.

“What you said about ‘sheets’ earlier,” Dominick said. “What did you mean?”

Janelle handed him back the disk. “It's kind of abstruse.”

“Does that mean you don't know?”

“No,” she growled. It was a fair question, though. “Imagine one Riemann sheet as my universe. It has a phase.”

“Like the Moon.”

“Not that.” She paused, thinking. “Do you have clocks here?”

“Well, yes. Certainly.”

“Twenty-four hours a day? Twelve and twelve again?”

“Of course.”

It relieved her to have that much in common with him. “Think of the phase as time. Say it goes from midnight to noon in my universe.” She almost said “like hands on an old-fashioned clock,” but then realized analog timepieces might be the norm here.

“And my world is the second clock?” Dominick asked. “Time goes from noon to midnight here?”

“Yes!” It gratified her that he understood so fast.

“The time here and where I found you was the same.”

“I know. I don’t mean my world and yours are literally related by a twelve-hour difference. Just that they’re in some way out of phase with each other, like three in the morning is different than three in the afternoon, even though they’re called the same thing.”

He was quiet for a while. Then he said, “So the branch cut to your universe is located at a certain phase. It’s like saying the gate opens only at a certain time.”

“That would be my guess.”

“To go around this metaphorical clock and return to the branch cut must take longer than twelve hours. The disk never worked before.”

“How long have you been trying?”

“About forty years. Since I was very small.”

Forty! That wasn’t what she wanted to hear. “Every *day*?”

“Well, no.” He sounded embarrassed. “I should. Max does more than I do, and we’ve both tried more as we’ve grown older, with the pressure to settle this matter and produce heirs.” He hesitated. “It just all seems so fanciful.” Then he added, “Seemed.”

She agreed. At least if he didn’t always check, he could have missed

the gate. She hoped that was why he hadn't found her before this. Or she could be wrong about the whole thing. "I need to read about the theory."

"Such studies are for monks." He sounded surprised.

Janelle had no objection to being considered monkish if it would get her home. What she lacked in savvy about this world she could make up for in her ability to solve problems. "Do you have books about the gates?"

"In my library."

"Maybe I can learn to make one." Or find a more logical explanation for all this.

"If it pleases you to look, you may."

She wondered if reading would be a problem. "But Dominick."

He bent his head, bringing his lips next to her ear. His breath tickled the sensitive skin there. "Hmmm?"

"Oh." She forgot what she had been about to say. His scent surrounded her, a combination of saffron, thyme, and sweat. She was suddenly conscious of how close they were sitting on the biquine.

He spoke against her ear. "I like your hair. You look like a forest sprite." He brushed his lips across her cheek.

"Stop." She was almost stuttering.

He exhaled. But he lifted his head and straightened up. The night air cooled her cheek.

"What did you want to ask me?" he asked, more formally.

"Your speech." She wasn't certain what unsettled her more, his kiss or that she had liked it. But he was going too fast. "When you speak to your men, you don't use English."

"Yes, I do."

"What do you call what we're speaking?"

"Erst. No one uses it anymore." His voice lightened. "As a youth I

complained greatly about having to learn a dead language. I'm glad now I did."

"It's not dead to me." She hoped.

"Then I'm gratified I know it."

"Tell me something," she said. "Why didn't you expect to find me?"

"I guess I assumed that if you existed, it would lead naturally to your coming here. I didn't think it would happen by mistake, *only* because I looked for you."

She rubbed her eyes. "Talk about a self-fulfilling prophecy."

"Apparently so. We will have to marry as soon as possible."

"*What?*" He had just taken "too fast" to "light speed."

"My brother." Dominick paused as Starlight picked his way across a gully that cut across the trail. "If he finds out what happened, he will come to get you."

Janelle's head ached. "Let me see if I have this straight. If you and I marry, you become emperor and he dies. If I marry him, he stays emperor and *you* die. If either of you kills me, he dies."

"Unfortunately, yes."

"If no one marries me, do things stay as they are now?"

"I think so."

"The answer is simple, then. I go home."

"And after that?" he asked. "My men know about you. So will the monks who check your hair. If you are who I believe, how long before Max finds out? If you go home, he might find you someday. I did." Then he added, "That assumes you can go back."

"I have to believe it's possible."

"I understand. But as long you are here, I will risk neither my life nor yours."

Janelle wondered why she couldn't have normal problems, like fixing the plumbing or finding a job. "If we marry, won't your brother die?"

"I don't want his death."

"But you want his title."

"I would be a better emperor."

"Why?"

"Maximillian is brutal man."

"What makes you any different?"

He gave a terse laugh. "I can think of no one else who would dare ask me such a thing."

Well, tough. "It's a fair question. You two are brothers."

"Your questions are too personal."

She let out an exasperated breath. "You say we have to marry so you stay alive and I don't get brutalized. That's pretty personal."

Silence.

Janelle bit back her impatience. She knew too little about Dominick to judge when to push and when to bide her time. But push she would, if that was what it took to find her way home.

They rode for a while with only the thud of hooves on the trail to break the silence. But eventually he did answer. "My father raised my brother. He ignored me because I wasn't his heir. I spent my childhood with my mother. I had her love. Maximillian had whippings." Tension corded his muscles, and his hold tightened, though she didn't think he realized it. "Father intended to 'shape' Max into a man like himself. He succeeded. Max is exactly like him." Anger honed his voice. "My mother is dead. I couldn't protect her. But I won't let my brother do the same to you."

His words had so many painful implications, she hardly knew what to say. She spoke softly. "I'm sorry."

He clenched the reins so hard, his knuckles whitened. "Max and I were close as boys. He has hardened over the years. I mourn the loss of the brother I loved, but I hate what he has become."

"It must be difficult for you both."

"You are generous, to offer sympathy to those who put you in this situation."

She had no answer for that.

"Janelle." He spoke thoughtfully. "Make a bargain with me."

"How do you mean?" she asked, wary.

"Marry me, and I will do what I can to help you return home. If you get back, who is to say the marriage exists in that universe? You can resume your life without me."

Given her lack of options, he could have demanded she do what he wanted. It mattered that he asked her consent and offered his help. But she knew too little about him. So far he had acted with honor, and a kindness incongruous with his obvious capacity for violence, but she had no guarantee that would continue. Nor did she doubt his offer came with strings; he wasn't talking about a marriage in name only. Her face heated. Yes, she found him attractive. But that wasn't enough. She needed to know him better. To trust him.

"I'm not ready," she said.

"We don't have the luxury of time. This is the best way I know to protect us both."

What to do? Given how little she knew about life here, going it alone didn't seem particularly bright. After a moment, she said, "All right. I accept your bargain."

It wasn't until his rigid hold eased that she realized how much he had stiffened. He said only, "Good," which relieved her. She wasn't ready for any heart-to-heart talks with the fiancé she had just acquired.

They rode higher into the mountains, and the fog thinned until they were traveling under a sky brilliant with stars, far more than she saw in the city of Cambridge where she lived. The day's warmth had fled. When

Janelle shivered, Dominick reached to the bags he had slung over the flanks of his biaoquine. He folded a sheepskin around her shoulders, with the fleecy side against her skin.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

As they rode, Janelle mulled over his words. She couldn’t fathom why she would figure in anyone’s “prophecy.” Her only talents were writing proofs and solving equations. She smiled wryly. Maybe she could subdue the nefarious Maximillian with Bessel functions.

Up ahead, peaks rose out of the fog, dark against the sky. Then she realized it was a cascade of onion-bulb towers, each topped by a spire. Dominick’s party approached a cliff that stood about ten feet high—no, not a cliff, a great wall that curved away in either direction, topped by crenellations.

Eerie whistles broke the night’s quiet as the biaoquines gathered before the wall, stamping and snorting. A gate swung outward, huge and dark, groaning. Torchlight flickered beyond, where men were cranking giant wheels wound with rope as thick their burly arms. Past the gate lay courtyards, and past them, a huge building surrounded by smaller structures. The layout resembled a European castle, but the architecture evoked the palaces of Moorish Andalusia that Janelle had visited when her family lived in Spain. Icy moonlight edged it all, turning the spires, domes, and delicate arches into frozen lace.

As much as the scene enthralled Janelle, it also bewildered her. Who had settled this land? Dominick’s men spoke a dialect of English, but their names sounded Mediterranean, Arabic, or Near Eastern, with English more rarely in the mix. That described their appearance, too. Maybe the Ottoman Empire had spread farther across Europe in this universe. If East and West had blended more, the mix of colonists who settled the New World here could have been different than in her world.

They rode to a courtyard in front of the palace. An immense horseshoe arch framed the entrance of the building like the keyhole for a giant antique key. Its sides rose in pillars, and at the top, an onion-shaped arch curved out and back around to a point. Mosaics tiled the pillars and glistened like silver in the moonlight.

As their party dismounted, stable-hands swirled around them. The biaoquines were taller than most horses, but Dominick swung off with little effort. He reached up, offering his arms to Janelle. She hesitated, staring at



his harsh features, which were blurred by moonlight and the hint of mist in the air. Then she pulled her leg over and slid down. She ached everywhere. He eased her to the ground, his hold solid after the swaying gait of the biaoquine.

The sheepskin had fallen off, and she shivered. Dominick pulled her close, under a jacket he had donned earlier. It was fur lined, not as warm as the skin, but soft and thick against her arms. For just a moment, she gave in to her fatigue and buried her face against his shirt as if that would hide her from his world.

When she looked up again, Dominick brushed her hair back from her face, and calluses on his palm scraped her cheek. She wondered how he had developed them—and then remembered the swords his men wore.

“Welcome to my home,” he murmured. Then he bent his head.

Janelle knew what he intended, but she froze, unable to believe he would go through with it. When he kissed her, his lips felt as full as they looked, a sensual contrast to his harsh power. She tensed, but before she could respond, someone behind them coughed.

Dominick raised his head, letting go of her, and she turned around, relieved by the interruption. A lanky man was coming down the steps of the palace, his attempt not to stare at her all the more obvious for its lack of success. He stopped next to them and spoke with Dominick. Although Janelle couldn't catch all of their words, it sounded as if the man was reporting another raid. Dominick and his men had been out searching for the outlaws, intent on stopping the harassment of his people.

Dominick turned to Janelle. “I will see you later.” He took off his jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders. His smile was crooked, almost boyish. “It looks much better on you than on me.”

“Thank you,” she said, uncertain how to act with him.

He climbed the steps with the other man, leaving her with two guards. She noted how easily Dominick assumed authority. He listened carefully and asked questions. When he gave orders, he did it with confidence and tact. She had seen those same qualities in the strongest leaders she had met while her father was the American Ambassador to Spain.

Bracketed by guards, she went up the steps, through a foyer, and into a hall gleaming in the light of torches carried by Dominick's men. Janelle's

breath caught. Soaring arches filled the immense hall, row after row of them, a forest of pillars in perfect lines. Tessellated mosaics in gold, blue, and green curved around columns and patterned the vaulted ceiling. In each V-shape where the arches met, a stained-glass window glowed with gem colors, showing scenes similar to those of Catholic churches in Spain. It was like an exquisite blending of Moorish art with the styles of a European cathedral.

A group of men met Dominick just inside the entrance. Janelle's guards drew her to a stop. She just waited, too tired to deal with her confusion over what had happened with him in the courtyard. It had to be past two in the morning.

People came and went. It wasn't long before three women appeared, walking through the arches from deeper within the palace. Silk wrapped them from neck to ankle, glistening in the smoky torchlight, crimson and saffron, shot through with gold threads. Their shimmering dark hair fell to their waists.

The trio stopped in front of Janelle. The oldest woman, a matron with silver hair, spoke in melodic phrases that almost sounded like English, but that went by too fast to catch.

"I'm sorry." Janelle's voice rasped with fatigue. "I don't understand."

The woman tried more slowly. "Come with us." She didn't smile. "To someplace you can wash. And sleep."

Relief washed over Janelle. "Thank you."

The woman just barely inclined her head, stiff and cool.

As Janelle set off with them, accompanied by her guards, she glanced back at Dominick. He remained deep in conversation with his men, and she wasn't certain he knew she had left.

The older woman spoke curtly. "His Highness has important matters to attend."

Janelle nodded, not wanting to interrupt his conference. They went down a "corridor" of arches, one of many in the hall, walkways delineated by columns instead of walls. It was dizzying, all that geometrical beauty gleaming in the torchlight.

The older woman was watching her face. "This hall is why Prince Dominick-Michael's home is called the Palaces of Arches."

"It's glorious," Janelle said. "Is this the Hall of Arches?"

"No. The Fourier Hall."

"Fourier?" She blinked. "Like the mathematician?"

The woman gave a sharp wave of her hand. "It has always been called this. That is all I know."

Janelle didn't push. Having lived as the child of a diplomat for so many years had taught her a great deal about dealing with cultures other than her own, and she could tell her interactions here were on shaky ground. She had discovered early on that if she wasn't certain how her words would be received, it was often better to say nothing.

She couldn't stop staring at the arches, though. What an exquisite challenge, to portray those graceful repeating patterns as a periodic function. Their Fourier transform would be a work of art. An unsteady urge to laugh hit her, followed by the desire to sit down and put her head in her hands. Such a strange thought, that she could capture in mathematics the essence of a dream palace that couldn't exist.

The women's slippared feet padded on the tiled floor, and Janelle's tennis shoes squeaked. At the back of the hall, they passed under a huge arch built from gold-veined marble rather than the wood used in the Fourier Hall. A true corridor lay beyond, with stone walls tiled in star mosaics. Its size dwarfed their party, and other halls intersected it at oddly sharp angles. The pillars at corners where the halls met were carved to portray men with great broadswords or women in elegantly draped robes holding long-stemmed flowers. It spoke to the European influence here that the designs included human statues, which weren't seen in Moorish architecture.

Janelle tried to keep track of their route through the maze of halls, but exhaustion dulled her mind. She was lost by the time they stopped at an oaken door. The guards stayed outside while the women took her into a small room. Plush rugs covered the floor, and mosaics with pink tulips and swirling green stems graced the lower half of the walls. Something odd about the stems tugged at her mind, but she was too tired to puzzle it out. In one corner, a white table supported a blue vase with real flowers. Blue velvet bedcovers lay in another corner, on a thicker pile of rugs, with pillows

heaped there like a tumble of rose and jade clouds.

“It’s beautiful,” Janelle said. “Thank you.”

No one answered. They led her across the room and under an archway. In the chamber beyond, a small, sunken pool steamed, and a lamp glowed dimly in a seashell claw on the wall.

The older woman finally spoke. “We can help you bathe.”

Janelle’s face heated. “It’s kind of you to offer. But I can manage.”

“Then we will leave you to rest.” She was so aloof, she could have been a hundred miles away. The trio bowed and gracefully exited the chamber. A moment later, the outer door creaked on its hinges.

Janelle hoped she hadn’t just committed some social blunder. Unsure what she would find, she returned to the bedroom. An oil lamp hung on a scrolled hook by the entrance. It gave less light than the torches, which was probably why the women hadn’t carried it, but Janelle preferred the lamp, which neither smoked nor sputtered. To her relief, the door had a lock on this side and opened when she tried it. One of her guards stood a short distance down the hall, severe in his leather armor. Light from a wall sconce glinted on the hilt of the broadsword strapped across on his back.

“Hello,” Janelle said.

He turned with a start. Then he said what sounded like, “My greetings, Lady.”

“Isn’t that sword heavy?” she asked.

He seemed bemused by her attention. “Not for me.”

“Oh. Good.” She wasn’t sure why she asked, but she felt the need to connect to people, to make this less strange. “Goodnight.”

His craggy face softened. “Goodnight.”

Janelle closed the door and sagged against the wall. She could think of many reasons Dominick might post a guard: to keep her in, as a courtesy, or because she wasn’t safe even in his home. For all its extraordinary beauty, his world had a starkness that kept her off balance.

Ill at ease, she explored her suite. In the bathing room, an elegantly carved bench stood against one wall, with a jade-green towel, a silver brush inlaid with mother-of-pearl from abalone, two soaps carved like tulips, and a crimson silk robe. It was all gorgeous, everything handmade. The suite, however, had only the one exit. They had closed her in well.

*No one said you couldn't leave*, she reminded herself. More than anything, she wanted to clean up. She carried the soaps to the pool, an oval filled with scented water, but then she hesitated. The idea of undressing made her feel vulnerable. The grimy scrapes on her arms and legs decided her; she quickly peeled off her clothes, shivering as the cold air chilled her bare skin. Then she slid into the heated pool.

Warmth seeped blissfully into her body as she lay back. Silence filled the room, a contrast to the muted city roar she had lived with these last years, at MIT. No sirens or engines interrupted the quiet, none of the constant hum that rumbled even in the deepest hours of an urban night. She was immersed in a great ocean of quietude.

Her thoughts drifted to Dominick's gate. A branch cut? They came from complex numbers. She could write such a number as  $z = e(iF)$ , where  $F$  was called the phase angle. Varying the phase from  $F = 0$  to  $F = 2\pi$  was like going around an analog clock from 12 to 12. Just as 12 was the same at the start and finish, so 0 and  $2\pi$  were the same. However, if she divided  $F$  by 2, then  $z = e(iF/2)$ . Now the phase was  $F/2$ . As  $F$  went from 0 to  $2\pi$  the phase only changed to  $\pi$ . The angle  $F$  had to go around a second time before  $F/2$  returned to its starting value of  $2\pi$ . But the same  $F$  couldn't have two different values of  $z$ . To avoid that contradiction,  $z$  slipped through a branch cut to a second sheet for the second cycle  $F$ . Just as 3 am and 3 pm were different times, so  $F$  on each sheet was considered different. Her world was one "clock" and Dominick's was another.

That suggested some sort of phase here had to go through a full cycle before Dominick's gate reopened. Her twelve-hour model was an only analogy; she had no idea how long would she have to wait before the actual gate reopened. Days? Months? *Years?*

Nor was that her only problem. Suppose she divided  $F$  by 3. The phase would be  $F/3$ . It meant she would need three "clocks." Three universes. Divide  $F$  by 4, and she needed four. Many sheets could exist. If she went through a gate, she could end up on yet some other "clock"—some other universe—instead of her own.

Janelle groaned. Her head hurt, and the water had cooled. Putting

away her thoughts, she soaped her body and washed her hair. Then she climbed out and dried off with the luxuriant towel. She reached for her wrinkled sundress, but then paused. The robe was far nicer and scented with perfume, certainly more pleasant than her gritty clothes. She slipped on the robe, and the sensuous glide of silk against her bare skin stirred her thoughts of Dominick. She tried to smile at her reflection in the pool. "Hey, Aulair, you look hot." But her voice shook like the ripples flowing over the water.

She padded barefoot into the other room. She was so tired she could barely stand, but she felt too exposed to sleep. The bed consisted of no more than layers of rugs covered by velvet. She sat on it in the corner, with the wall at her back, facing the door as she drew pillows around her. It wasn't until they crumpled in her grip that she realized how tightly she had clenched them.

Her eyelids drooped, and she forced them up. She wouldn't sleep. The lamp swung on its hook, moving shadows on the walls, back and forth, back and forth...

The scrape of wood against stone roused Janelle. She lifted her head, disoriented. She had slid down and was lying amid the pillows. The lamp had burned low, leaving the room swathed in velvety shadows.

The scrape came again. She thought she said, *Who is it?* but no words came out.

The door swung inward, moving slowly. Dominick stood in the archway, filling it with his height and his presence. The dim light turned his shirt a darker blue and glinted on the hilt of his sheathed dagger. The way he loomed, his face harsh and starkly intense, evoked the specter of conquerors who swept across continents, laying waste to their enemies.

"Hello." Janelle barely managed the word. Such a quiet greeting for so dramatic a man.

"May I come in?" he asked.

She appreciated that he asked, given that he could have done whatever he wanted. "Yes," she said.

He entered, and the room seemed to shrink. He closed the door, then came over and knelt on the other side of the bed. His shirt was open at the neck, revealing a tuft of chest hair, black and curly.

“Have you slept?” he asked.

“A little.” She wondered how the rest of his chest looked.

He watched her watching him, and his lips curved upward. The shadows eased the hard edges of his face. Sitting on the bed, he tugged off one of his boots.

Janelle froze. Now he was taking off the other boot. He set it next to the first and started to undo his shirt.

“Wait.” Her cheeks flamed. If she hadn’t been so groggy, she would have realized sooner what she might be agreeing to when she invited him into her room.

Dominick paused. “No?”

“I can’t. I mean—that is—”

He waited. Then he asked, “Do you want me to leave?”

“I don’t want to be alone. But I don’t—” She stuttered to a halt, feeling like an idiot.

“It’s all right.” He slid across the rugs and stretched out on his side facing her, with his head propped up on one hand. He took up the entire length of the bed. She could see why he might like sleeping on the floor; his legs were too long for a mattress.

“My monks checked your hair,” he said. “You are Janelle Aulair.”

She flushed, unsettled to have him so near. “Well, I knew that.”

He trailed his finger along her hip, sliding up the robe, which suddenly seemed too short. “This is pretty.”

She put his hand back on the bedspread. Maybe she should ask him to leave. But she dreaded being alone. He continued to watch her, his head tilted to the side as if she were a puzzle.

“You must have more names than Dominick,” she said, flustered.

“Indeed I do. Dominick-Michael Alexander Constantine.”

Now *that* was a moniker. “Those names are famous in my universe.” She was talking too fast again. “Like Alexander the Great.”

“The Great.” His gaze turned sleepy, as if he were a satisfied cat. “Tell me more.”

“He conquered Persia—” She stopped as he tugged the sash of her robe. His knuckles brushed her inner thigh.

“Don’t,” Janelle said.

He traced his finger along her cheek. “Do I offend you so much?”

“Sweet heaven, no.”

“Good.” His voice was like whiskey, dark and potent. “Otherwise, this would be a rather uneventful wedding night.”

Whoa. “You have the wedding night before the wedding?”

“If the bride and groom agree, yes.”

“What if they don’t agree?”

“I thought you did.”

There was that. “If you stay tonight, are we, uh, married?”

He watched her face. “If agreement is reached, and the bride receives rings from the groom, then yes. But public ceremonies are traditional and expected, especially for the royal family.”

“Oh.” She hesitated. “Does that happen tomorrow?”

“In the morning. Is that all right?”

After a moment, she said, “Yes. It’s just so strange.”

“For me, also.” He stroked his knuckles along her thigh. “But not unwelcome.”

“Dominick...”



He rubbed the hem of her robe between his thumb and finger. "This cloth is beautiful on you." Putting his finger under her chin, he tilted up her face. He kissed her deeply, and she tensed, wanting him both to stop and to keep going. Her only experience with seduction was on the level of sending out for pizza and Cokes; she was so far out of her depth here, she was drowning.

When she didn't protest, he pulled her closer and eased the robe off her shoulders. When he slid his palm over her breast, his calluses scraped her nipple, and she tingled in places he wasn't touching her. Then he drew back, his face unexpectedly tender.

"Women are so small," he said. "Look at this." He put the heel of his hand at the bottom of her rib cage. His palm stretched up her torso and his fingers closed around her breast. "I can hold so much of you, but you couldn't even cover my ribs."

His ribs. Clever, sexy man. Of course she looked at his chest where he had unfastened his shirt. A mat of hair curled over his muscles. She laid her palm against his abdomen, feeling the springy hair, the hard muscles. Very nice. But very intimidating, too.

"You smell like flowers," he said. Laying her on her back, he stretched out on top of her, easing his hips between her thighs. Then he reached for the waistband of his trousers.

"Wait!" Janelle said. He didn't seem to have any speed between *pause* and *fast forward*.

He lifted his head, his eyes glossy with arousal. "Wait?"

"No more." She felt like a fool, but she had just discovered she couldn't go this far with someone she barely knew, even if he would be her husband tomorrow.

He brushed his lips across hers. "I won't hurt you."

"Dominick, I—no. No more."

Frustration crept into his voice. "You tease me."

"I don't mean to. I just—I can't."

He lifted his head to look at her. "First your behavior says yes. Then

no. Then yes. Then no. Which is it?"

"I'm not ready."

He lay there, propped up on his hands, and she knew they both realized the truth. He could do whatever he wanted and she couldn't stop him. She lay still, meeting his gaze.

Dominick groaned and rolled off her, onto his back. Then he threw his arm over his eyes and inhaled deeply. He stayed there, silent and still, except for the rise and fall of his chest.

Gradually his breathing slowed. Finally he lowered his arm and turned his head to her. "You are an unusual woman."

That was tactful. Better than *Make up your damn mind*. She wanted to hold him, to feel safe, but she wasn't safe with him. Although she didn't think he meant to force her, he would get angry if he thought she was deliberately leading him on, and she could end up with more than she bargained for. She could also, she realized, end up pregnant.

Dominick studied her with that close focus of his. "I don't mean to pressure you." He smiled ruefully. "But you're so lovely, Janelle. Difficult to resist."

Her face heated. "You do sweet-talk a girl." The southern drawl she had lost after her family moved to Washington often slipped back into her voice when she was nervous.

"It may be 'sweet-talk.' But I mean what I say." He took off only his shirt, nothing more. Then he slid down the velvet cover and drew it over them both. Settling on his back, he pulled her into his arms. She closed her eyes, relieved, letting her head rest in the hollow where his arm met his shoulder.

"Dream well," he murmured.

"You too."

Dominick soon fell asleep, his eyes twitching under his lids. As she drifted into slumber, she wondered if he dreamed of the towns and countryside that would someday fall to his army. He could be gentle with her, but she had no doubt he was capable of conquering a continent.

Would he wrack his world with the ambition that led men to create empires—at immense human cost?

\* \* \* \*

## IV

### The Shattered Hall

Birdsong awoke Janelle. She lay in a pleasant haze, listening to the dawn.

Then she remembered.

Her eyes snapped open. It was real. She was still in the palace. Early morning light filtered through high window slits she hadn't seen last night. The room otherwise looked as she remembered, beautiful and spare. And empty. Dominick had gone.

She rubbed her eyes. Yesterday she had been a new graduate with good prospects; today she had nothing but the unknown. She thought of Rupert Quarterstaff, the lawyer who dealt with her inheritance. Two years ago, when she had been paralyzed by grief, Rupert had stepped her through the estate settlement with a solicitude that went beyond his professional duties. He expected to see her in a few days. What would he do when she didn't show? It would be a mess.

Janelle sat up, rubbing her eyes. She couldn't stay here as the plaything of a warlord who wanted to conquer half of North America. She needed a library. *Someone* had invented Dominick's gate. Pushing off the covers, she shivered in the cold air. She went into the other room and bathed, then dried off with a towel someone had left while she slept. Her clothes from yesterday were gone.

As Janelle searched for something to wear, she kept noticing the walls. Something strange...? Stepping closer, she peered at the mosaics. Wavelike curves intertwined in the tulip designs. She hadn't seen them clearly last night because they were the same color as the swirling stems. The curves weren't just wavelike, they *were* sinusoids: diffraction patterns, harmonics, or quantum wave functions, beautiful and elegant. They were too accurate for coincidence; someone had understood them well enough to reproduce the curves. It was another piece of the puzzle, along with the Fourier Hall and Riemann gate.

Deep in thought, she returned to the bedroom. Someone had come in while she bathed; her robe were gone, and the bed had been remade, with fresh rugs and a jade-green bedspread. As she toweled her hair, she surveyed the empty room. She couldn't dress without clothes.

When the doorknob turned, she jumped. She barely had time to wrap herself in the towel before the door opened. The three women from last night stood there, each holding a large box decorated with abalone and opals.

"Uh ... good morning," Janelle said, clutching the towel around her body.

Her greeting seemed to be the signal they expected. They bowed and entered the room. The older woman took an ornate key off a hook under the lamp and handed it to a soldier outside. He closed the door, and a loud click came from the lock.

Janelle watched them uneasily. "Why did he lock us in?"

"For privacy." The older woman spoke in the same slow voice she had used last night. "I am Farimah." She introduced the younger women as Silvia and Danae.

Janelle was becoming accustomed to the dialect and understood better this morning. It reminded her of times she had spent with the families of dignitaries who visited her father, how she had striven to learn their language. To her, such new words were gems strung together to create sparkling necklaces of meaning.

"What can I do for you?" she asked, awkward in her towel.

Danae offered her box. "It's for your wedding."

Janelle felt the tickling in her throat that came when she was nervous. "Oh. Yes."

"The ceremony will take place immediately," Farimah said. "His Highness has had word that the Emperor's army gathers in the south. Prince Dominick-Michael and his men must leave today to discover what Maximillian plans."

Well, that was romantic; her groom intended to spend his honeymoon spying on his brother. It would give her time to adjust, though, and to learn

about the gate.

“We can wait for the ceremony until he returns,” Janelle offered.

“He wishes otherwise.” Farimah’s voice had a definite edge.

“Here, Lady Janelle.” Danae opened her box and revealed a treasure, gold hoops and rings, all inset with mother-of-pearl.

“They’re stunning,” Janelle said. “But I don’t wear jewelry.”

Farimah stiffened. “Generations of Constantine brides have worn these with pride. You consider yourself above them?”

“No. No, I didn’t mean that.” Mortified, she tried to repair her faux pas. “I just don’t want to presume.”

Farimah gave her a look that said plainly, *You do*. But she only said, “His Highness wishes you to have them.”

“It’s kind of Dominick,” Janelle said.

Farimah jerked up her hand as if to strike her. Then she took a deep breath and lowered her arm. Her voice was ice. “You will refer to His Highness as Prince Dominick-Michael.”

Janelle wondered if she could say anything right. “I’m sorry. He told me to call him Dominick.”

“Ai,” Silvia murmured. She glanced at Farimah with sympathy. To Janelle, she said, “Farimah did not know.”

Before Janelle could further cram her foot down her throat and tickle her tonsils with her toes, Danae intervened by fastening a luminous torque around her neck.

“These jewels will help ensure your safety,” Danae said.

Janelle tensed. “My safety from what?”

Silvia clipped a bracelet around Janelle’s wrist. “The heirlooms indicate you are wife to the emperor’s brother. With so much unrest in the provinces, a woman needs more protection than in normal times.”

Janelle liked what she was hearing less and less. Running her fingers over the necklace, she realized it was a delicate version of the heavy chain Dominick wore. The bracelet had the same pattern as the abalone in his shirt cuffs.

While Farimah put a belled chain around each of Janelle's ankles, Silvia took out a blue velvet cloth with gold highlights. Then she waited. Janelle blinked at her.

Farimah sighed as she rose to her feet. "It would be easier to dress you without the towel."

"Oh." Embarrassed, Janelle let the cloth drop to the floor.

"Goodness," Silvia said, as if Janelle had achieved an impressive feat instead of just standing there naked and feeling like an idiot.

"No wonder he wants to marry you so fast," Farimah muttered. "Men see only one thing."

Silvia put the velvet cloth around Janelle's hips. The skirt fit low on her pelvis, showing too much of her abdomen. The hem almost reached her knees, but a slit went up the left side to her hip.

Janelle flushed. "I can't wear this."

"Why?" Farimah asked. "It appears to fit."

"It shows too much skin."

Danae laughed good-naturedly. "What is a wedding for, but to entice the groom?"

"Come now," Farimah said. She knelt by her box and withdrew a girdle designed from beaten coins, with a border of little gold bells. Janelle squinted while they fastened it around her hips. Heavy and snug, the girdle fit over the skirt and sparkled with sapphires and mother-of-pearl. It jangled when she moved. Then Silvia brought out a bra made from silver coins, with loops of abalone and opal beads.

*Enough is enough*, Janelle thought. "I *can't* wear that."

Silvia considered the halter and then Janelle. "You are right. It is too small."

“I didn’t mean my breasts,” Janelle muttered. No one listened. Silvia went to the door and knocked. As the guard outside opened it a sliver, Silvia blocked his view of the room. A child squeezed past her, a girl of about three with black curls and a sweet face.

Silvia glanced back at Janelle, her gaze malicious, then slipped outside and closed the door. Janelle stiffened, wondering what she had done to evoke Silvia’s hostility.

The child ran to Farimah. “Fami!”

The elderly woman laughed and reached for her. Then she froze, her gaze darting to Janelle. Panic surged over her face.

Puzzled, Janelle gave the child a friendly smile. “Hello.”

The girl hid her face in Farimah’s skirts.

Farimah lifted the child into her arms, her attention riveted on Janelle. “My apology.” She sounded terrified. “I didn’t realize she had followed me here.”

“It’s all right,” Janelle said. Both Farimah and Danae had gone deathly pale. *Why?* “She is welcome to stay.”

“Thank you.” Farimah spoke stiffly.

“She’s charming,” Janelle said. “What’s her name?”

“Selena. Like her mother.”

“You seem to know her well.”

“She is my granddaughter.” Farimah took a breath. “I also care for her siblings. Her mother died in childbirth.”

“I’m sorry,” Janelle murmured.

The girl was watching her with big, dark eyes that somehow looked familiar. “You mama now?” she asked.

Mama? *Mama?* Ah, hell. Janelle stared at Farimah. “She is Dominick’s child?”

Farimah answered tightly. "Yes."

Life grew messier by the moment. "How many does he have?"

"Five." Farimah was as taut as a coil. "The oldest is twelve."

Janelle wondered when he had planned to tell her. "Are they all your daughter's children?"

"Of course!" Anger flashed in her gaze. "After Selena came into his life, His Highness had no other women."

Janelle rubbed her neck, trying to ease her aching muscles. Selena hardly sounded like a concubine, if Dominick had lived monogamously with her for so many years, raising a family. Had some stupid prophecy kept them from marrying? No wonder Farimah resented her.

Farimah's fear also made sense now. Janelle spoke quietly. "Your grandchildren are welcome in my household."

Farimah just nodded, her posture rigid. But her frozen look thawed a bit. She took the girl to the door and gave her into the keeping of someone outside.

Silvia returned then, watching them with an avid gaze. Janelle wanted to sock her. Silvia could have kept the girl outside and protected Farimah from that heart-stopping moment when the grandmother realized *she* would have to tell Janelle about the children. What had Silvia hoped to achieve? It didn't take a genius to see women had little power here. It created a dynamic foreign to Janelle, an unstated enmity and maneuvering for sexual power. Silvia was a beauty, with glossy black hair and a voluptuous figure. Had she hoped for Dominick's favor? Maybe she believed discord between his new wife and the mother of his former favorite could work to her advantage.

Janelle had no interest in such machinations. Compared to this place, her world was so enlightened it glowed in the dark. She didn't think women here would be burning their bras any time soon. Given the halter Silvia was holding, they would have to *melt* the damn things.

At least this one fit better than the last, though "fit" was a generous description. It held her breasts in a scanty gold mesh with a few jewels in strategic places and more of those bells fringing the bottom. Her groom



would certainly have no trouble finding her, given all the noise she would make in this outfit.

“This is the most appallingly prehistoric contraption I have ever seen,” Janelle muttered.

Her companions regarded her politely. She didn’t think they had understood what she said. Frustrated, she added, “Why are guards outside of my door?”

Danae answered obliquely. “As far as we know, Emperor Maximillian has no idea you are here.”

“And if he did?” Janelle asked.

“I would never speak ill of the emperor,” Farimah said, “to suggest he might brutalize you out of spite for Prince Dominick-Michael.”

Janelle was starting to feel queasy. “Are all women here treated this way?”

“Those with value are protected,” Silvia told her.

“I’m afraid to ask what ‘value’ means.”

“I should think it is obvious,” Farimah said. “Beauty. Youth. Fertility. Good birth. Gentle nature. Intelligence. You obviously have the first two. Maybe a few of the others.” She shrugged. “So if you lack the last, it does not matter.”

Ouch. Janelle barely managed to hold back her retort.

They ignored her protests and inflicted make-up on her next. Silvia brushed her hair, working until she had dried and fluffed up the curls. Then they took her into the bathing chamber, where a long mirror hung on the wall. Her reflection stopped her cold. She glistened in gold and sea colors. Her eyes looked larger and greener than normal, and her hair floated around her shoulders like a gold cloud. Even her bangs curled in traitorous perfection. She had to admit, the effect was impressive—and in that it became seductive. They turned her into a woman of mystery and beauty, and it tempted her to believe it increased her worth. That wasn’t a path she wanted to go down, one where her intelligence and character had less value than her body or fleeting youth.

“That isn’t me,” Janelle said.

“It will please Prince Dominick-Michael,” Silvia answered with strained patience. “That is the purpose, is it not?”

“What about pleasing his bride?” Janelle asked.

Farimah threw up her hands. “You are *marrying* him.”

“Only because of a prophecy.”

“Yes.” Farimah’s voice quieted.

They left her then, so she could “prepare” for the ceremony. She had no clue what that entailed, but she suspected she was supposed to think of ways to entice the groom. She smiled wryly. Maybe she should entertain herself by deriving equations for the sinusoids on the walls. That ought to stir up Dominick’s libido.

She stepped up on the bench in the bathroom to look out the window—at a spectacular panorama. Mountains towered on both sides, east and west. In the south, before her, they dropped to a mesa several miles distant, where mounted riders moved in chess-like patterns. Dominick’s army? It had thousands of men. She hoped that qualified as a large military, one comparable to the emperor’s, if Dominick’s brother was as bad as everyone implied. Then again, maybe Maximillian was a saint and Dominick just coveted his throne, as disenfranchised brothers had since time immemorial.

Wood grated in the other room. Janelle returned to the bedroom and found a group of strangers waiting for her. Six older women stood in the front, their carriage and jewels surely marking them as noblewomen. Blue silk wraps covered them from neck to ankle, making Janelle even more self-conscious about her skimpy attire. Behind them, an array of servants carried platters of food.

They offered her the feast and waited while she ate. Everyone declined her invitation to join in, but no one seemed offended by the thought. The meal was delicious, though odd, with Janelle standing up, surrounded by silent people, sampling foods and wine. Strong wine. Well, good. Right now, a few shots of whiskey would have done nicely.

When she finished, they took her outside. Twelve warriors waited in the corridor, hulking in armor, with what looked like ceremonial broadswords

on their backs, the gilded hilts inlaid with jewels. While the servants took off with the platters, the noblewomen and soldiers escorted Janelle the other way. She went in a daze. She wanted to believe this was a delirium; maybe a car had hit her and she was lying in a hospital. But it felt all too real.

Up ahead, shouts echoed in the halls. It seemed out of place with the reserve of the people here. Apparently she wasn't the only one who thought so; her escorts were slowing down. Those broadswords weren't ceremonial after all, for the men drew the weapons, and the honed blades glittered.

Crashes sounded in the distance. More shouts came, and the halls vibrated with a great pounding. The guards split their group into two, half of the warriors taking the noblewomen one way and the others hurrying Janelle into a side corridor. They ran hard, with drilled precision, while all around them the rumble intensified.

A rangy soldier kept pace with Janelle. "We will go to tunnels under the palace," he said. "They exit into the mountains."

She nodded, rationing her breath.

The rumble surged into a roar—and raiders thundered out of a cross-hall, all astride biaoquines. The man in front brought his mount to an abrupt halt, and it reared, its hooves smashing the pillar of an arch that framed the corridor. Dominick's men skidded to a stop, but momentum carried the groups together. Biaoquine screams rent the air, and metal rang as swords flashed. Janelle had about as much military knowledge as a toadstool, but it took no expert to see Dominick's men were outnumbered and in trouble. She couldn't understand how outlaws had broken into such a well-defended fortress.

The rangy soldier pulled her into a side hall, and they ran hard down the corridor. The bells on her clothes chimed as if announcing their location. Only a few lamps lit the area. Despite the dim light, her guard took the turns with confidence, always choosing hallways too narrow for a biaoquine.

Until they hit a dead end.

"Ah, no!" Janelle stopped, heaving in air. They were *trapped*.

"Don't worry." Her guard stepped into a wall recess and pushed the tiles in what looked like a combination.

“What happened back there?” she asked.

“I cannot say. I saw no symbols I recognized on those men.” He leaned into the wall and it slid inward, revealing a tunnel. Taking a lamp off a hook in the recess, he motioned her forward.

She entered the passage. “Do you think they came to stop the wedding?”

“I doubt it.” He shut the door, closing out the distant clamor. As they headed along the path, he added, “Emperor Maximillian is the person with the most reason to stop it, and those weren’t his men. Nor would he raid his brother’s home. Even if he were willing to commit such an atrocity, too much chance exists that in the heat of the attack, you would be killed despite his orders. He wouldn’t risk it.”

Janelle blanched. His answer had an obvious corollary: whoever was raiding the palace had no qualms about killing her or anyone else.

They followed an ancient tunnel. Cracks cut through the walls, and lichen encrusted them in eerie patterns. It wouldn’t have surprised her to see a wraith coalesce in the recesses where shadows pooled. The damp air smelled musty, and the stone chilled her bare feet. She shivered, wishing she had more clothes.

Then it hit Janelle: not all those marks on the walls were cracks. Wave functions oscillated down here, too, engraved in the stone.

She indicated the patterns. “What are those designs?”

“Artwork,” her guard answered. “They’re all over the palace.” He looked apologetic. “These tunnels aren’t kept up well because so few people use them. The levels above are in better repair.”

“Ah. I see.” In truth, she didn’t see at all. The designs looked ancient, which didn’t make sense to her.

A murmur of flowing water came from ahead. The path widened into an open area, and a crude rail blocked the way, with walkways curving to either side. She went to the rail and looked down into a well about ten feet across. It plunged into darkness. She toed a pebble over the edge, and a good five seconds passed before she heard a faint splash.

“I’m glad that wasn’t one of us,” she said. “Pushed by an invader.”

The warrior spoke gruffly. “It is a cruel business, this life.” He motioned to the walkway on the right. “This should take us to another set of tunnels.”

They followed the path—and neither of them saw the break until almost too late. Janelle had already stepped forward when the lamplight revealed the ground had collapsed into the well. She jerked back and stumbled into the guard. Grasping her shoulder with a steadying hand, he held her until she caught her balance.

She stared bleakly at the fissure. It was too large to jump, and the rail that bordered the well was broken. Although two sheets of wood lay across the gap, neither looked solid. Whatever bridge they had once belonged to had fallen into neglect.

Her guard squinted at the boards. “Maybe we can go another way.”

They tried the left side, but the fissure extended through that path as well. The tunnel contained nothing they could use to repair the bridge, and the rail around the well consisted of sections too short to bridge the gap.

The chill seeped into Janelle, and the clink of her clothes seemed muted in the damp air. She pried off the bracelets and anklets and hid them in a crack to retrieve later—if she survived to tell anyone. She couldn’t remove the girdle because it held on her skirt, but at least she didn’t jangle as much.

The guard knelt to examine the boards. “I think they can hold you. Perhaps me, but I can’t be sure.” He looked up at her. “If we go back, you could be killed. Or captured, which could be worse.”

“What will happen to you?” she asked.

His gaze never wavered. “I serve Prince Dominick-Michael.”

Janelle understood what he didn’t say. “To get to me, they would have to kill you.”

His face gentled. “Do not look so dismayed. In battle, death is always possible.”

*Please, God, not today.* She knelt next to him. “Can we wait here?”

“I think it unwise. People know of these tunnels.” He indicated the shadows beyond the break. “The passages that way will let you escape the palace. You must not be caught. The rest is secondary.”

“Your life isn’t secondary to me.”

His face gentled. “I thank you. But it is my honor to serve Prince Dominick-Michael.” He handed her the lamp. “You try first, in case the bridge won’t hold me.”

“But if you can’t cross, you won’t have any light.”

His grin flashed. “That will make it harder for our enemies to find me, eh?”

It amazed her that he could joke at such a time. She managed a smile for him. “I hope so.” She took a deep breath, then turned and stepped onto the bridge. She walked forward, her hand clenched on the lamp, and the span bent under her weight.

Halfway over, one of the boards snapped.

Janelle flailed, dropping the lamp, and it plummeted into the well. As she fell to her knees on the remaining board, darkness closed around her. A splash took away the last hint of light.

“Lady Janelle?” Her guard’s voice was rough with concern.

“Here.” In a louder voice, she said, “I’m here.”

“Blessed Almighty! Are you all right?”

“Almost.” She inched forward on her hands and knees. “I’m not to the other side yet.”

“You can make it.” He sounded as if he was trying to convince himself as much as her.

*From your lips to God’s ear.* She moved another inch and her knuckles hit the jagged, broken edge of the path. Even as relief surged over her, the remaining board creaked. In the same instant that she threw herself forward, the board snapped and dropped out from under her. Her torso landed flat on the path, but her legs hung into the fissure. She

scrabbled at the ground, frantic as rocks fragmented under her and clattered away.

With a heave, Janelle hauled herself onto the path and sprawled on her stomach. She groaned as the girdle jabbed her skin.

“Lady!” the guard called.

“I’m here.” The pound of her heart felt like storm waves. “The boards fell. You’ll have to stay there.”

“Ah.” He sounded subdued. “You must go on alone, then.”

She stood up slowly and swayed, dizzy. When her head cleared, she said, “Will you tell me your name?” She didn’t want to leave without even knowing his identity.

“I am Kadar.” He paused. “If I do not see you again—I would like to say—” He stopped.

“Yes?” Janelle asked.

“We have heard how you were pulled into our land,” he said. “Given all that has happened, you could have hated us and denied our prince. Instead, you treat us with grace. I am just a soldier. I have no great knowledge of other places. But it seems to me that you are a gift to His Highness.”

Good Lord. Janelle had thought she mostly stepped on people’s toes. She could have done better if she hadn’t been so bewildered. But she hadn’t thought in terms of hostility. She valued the chance to learn other cultures. Her parents had left her with the treasured memory of how they honored the depth and range of the world’s peoples. It didn’t make her willing to tolerate mistreatment; she had a temper and had always reacted strongly against cruelty or injustice. But according to their ways, Dominick and his people had treated her well.

She spoke quietly. “Thank you, Kadar.”

He became all business then, describing the tunnels ahead. Then he said, “The prince has a hunting lodge in the forest. The last passage will let you out near there. I’ll meet you at the lodge.”

She rubbed the goose bumps on her arms. “Don’t you get killed.”

His voice lightened. "I shall endeavor not to. Farewell for now."

"Good-bye." Janelle set off, keeping her right palm on the wall for guidance. No light softened the darkness; she couldn't even see her other hand in front of her face. She went with care, probing each step with her foot before she put down her weight, lest she stumble into another chasm. But she didn't dare take too long; she had no idea who else knew about these tunnels or would discover them.

Her palm hit stone. A dead end. Alarm surged through her, but she pushed it down and searched the surface. She did indeed find tiles, as Kadar had described, and she pushed them in the sequence he had given her. When she leaned into the wall, it slid inward with a creaking protest and swung aside. She ventured into the suffocating darkness.

It felt as if she walked for hours. Then she noticed a change; the air had warmed. A scent of pine wafted around her, a welcome change from the stench of musty stone. Even more encouraging, she could see her hand. Up ahead, light sifted through a crevice shaded by fir trees. She was free!

Voices drifted to her from outside.

Janelle stopped and swore silently. The speakers were in front of the opening. She could decipher enough to determine they were sentries for the raiders. Demoralized, she quietly retreated back along the tunnel.

Boots clanked at the exit.

Damn! That had to be the sentries. It was all she could do to keep from running and start her wretched clothes jangling.

After an eon, she reached the place where she had opened the secret door. The sentries were closer. A man swore and another laughed. She slipped past the door, then grabbed its edges and pulled hard. It swung closed with a screech of stone on stone. She barely managed to snatch away her hands before it crashed into place.

A shout came from the other side, muffled by the stone. Then a heavy object slammed the door.

Janelle stumbled forward, raising her hands in the dark. If she retraced her steps, she would end up trapped at the fissure. Kadar had said



another path led off from this junction; a true dead end would make the secret entrance too obvious. And indeed, she found a passage that slanted sharply to the right. She followed it, wanting to run but afraid to take the risk. Darkness weighed on her, smothering and dank. She imagined specters at every step, terrors crouched low or clinging to the walls, waiting for her to dislodge them.

Wings brushed her face, and furry bodies. Janelle pressed her fist against her mouth to stop her scream. Then she sagged against the wall and folded her arms across her body while she shook.

*Bats. It's only bats.* She stretched out her arms and forced herself to go on. Distant crashes rumbled as the sentries beat at the door. No way back existed, only forward into the dark.

Suddenly her palms hit wood: another dead end. She searched the wall, sliding her hands frantically over the rough, splintered surface. Nothing. *Nothing.*

Then she found it, a latch up high. She had to stand on her toes to reach it. As her fingertips scraped several gears, a tiny window creaked open. She peered out—and gratitude flooded over her. The Fourier Hall lay beyond the door.

With light filtering in the window, she managed a better search and found the aged gears that locked the door. They crumbled under her touch, as did the lock. She inched the door open and slipped out into the hall of arches. Walking softly through the forest of pillars, she headed for the palace entry. The great double doors were open, revealing an overcast day outside. Freedom.

Hooves clattered behind her.

Janelle whirled around—and barely ducked in time to evade a bareheaded rider leaning down in his saddle to grab her. His biaoquine pounded past her under the tall arches.

Janelle sprinted for the entrance, and the rider came around in front of her. As he reined in his mount, it sidestepped toward her. She fled the other way, back through the arches, and tiles shattered behind her as the man pursued. When she swerved into another row of arches, a splintering crack sounded, followed by an oath. Glancing back, she saw an arch collapsing around the rider as his biaoquine tried to turn in too confined an area. She kept running.

More shouts rang through the air, and hooves pounded the floor. Riders were pouring into the hall from deeper within the palace and thundering down the columned aisles.

“No!” Janelle skidded to a stop as they came toward her. She reversed direction, but the outlaw chasing her blocked her escape. Desperate, she swung around—to face a second biaoquine. It snorted in the confined area, looming above her, its breath hot against her face. Stumbling back, she looked up—and up. She couldn’t see the eyes and nose of the man who sat astride the animal; a cougar helmet hid his upper face. But she saw his mouth. The bastard was *laughing*. He urged his mount closer, backing Janelle up against the biaoquine of the bareheaded raider behind her.

Chaos filled the hall. Someone screamed, a cry of terror that abruptly broke off. An outlaw goaded his biaoquine to rear and its forelegs pawed the air, smashing a pillar and raining broken tiles over the floor. Farther down the hall, another pillar fell in a cloud of dust, and the battle boiled over its remains. The raiders were deliberately ruining the hall, and Janelle could have wept for the destruction of such beauty.

The two outlaws caged her between their mounts. Laughing, the bareheaded man planted his boot between her shoulder blades and shoved her hard into the helmeted man’s animal.

“Asshole!” she yelled. The helmeted man grabbed for her, and she socked his arm. Behind her, the other outlaw grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled back her head until she was looking up at him. Exhilaration flushed his face. His yell rang through the clamor, and she thought either he was mad with battle lust or just plain crazy.

Janelle twisted free, but the effort sent her lurching into the other biaoquine. It danced to the side and reared, rising far, far too high. Its hooves smashed a column, showering debris. Gasping, shielding her head, she staggered back, too terrified by the enraged animal even to cry out. As it came down, it knocked her over, and she fell to the floor, landing hard on her hands and knees. When it reared again, a scream wrenched out of Janelle.

Scrambling to her feet, she dodged the frenzied animal. The bareheaded outlaw grabbed her, and this time she didn’t fight when he hefted her upward. Better to be caught up there than trampled down here. His saddle was narrow enough that he could throw her stomach-down in

front of it, her legs hanging down one side of his biaoquine and her torso on the other, with the edge of the saddle jutting into her side. He pulled up her skirt and slapped her behind, and she cursed loudly at him. He didn't try to hold her down, though, and she managed to struggle up until she was astride the animal. She nearly fell in the process, but she kept her seat by clinging to the biaoquine.

Calls rang through the mayhem, and dust clogged Janelle's nose. The raider kept one arm around her, clenching his reins while he snapped a whip against his mount's flank. She recognized Dominick's men among the warriors. The outlaws far outnumbered them, and most were no longer fighting, they were trashing the incomparable Fourier Hall.

Then she saw Dominick.

Towering in leather armor, he rode a massive dark animal. He held his sword high, his face harsh with rage. When he shouted, the marauders surged away from him, toward the palace entrance. The first wave reached the entry and flooded out, and Janelle's captor galloped after them.

In the courtyard outside, the clamor lessened, muted by the open space. Almost no one remained to oppose the invaders. Ahead of them, two men on biaoquines were forcing along a limping warrior. With a jolt, Janelle recognized the injured man as one of her guards from this morning. His sword arm hung useless at his side, and blood pumped from a wound in his shoulder.

One of the outlaws raised his sword above the bleeding man. In horrified disbelief, Janelle saw the blade descend, flashing in the chill sunlight. She jerked around so she couldn't see, but nothing could shut out the thud of impact or the hideous gurgle that followed.

"Oh, God," she whispered. She prayed it had happened fast enough to spare him pain. She thought of Kadar and her skin felt clammy. Nausea surged over her.

Her captor galloped with the other men across earthen courtyards toward the huge wall that should have protected the palace. Yells broke out behind them. Looking around, Janelle saw a party of ten men on biaoquines racing toward their group.

The outlaws reined in their mounts with sprays of dirt and wheeled to face the palace. The sight chilled her; several hundred raiders confronted the small party of defenders. They would massacre ten adversaries.

Then she saw Dominick—with the *outlaws*. He sat on his huge dark biaoquine at the front of the formation, his gaze intent on the ten men from the palace. The defenders slowed as they came closer, near enough for her to see who led them.

Dominick?

Janelle blinked, looking from Dominick with the raiders to Dominick with the defenders. The Dominick in the small party rode Starlight, the big silver biaoquine from yesterday. He wore only trousers and a shirt, with a sword on his back as if he had grabbed it when he was too rushed to don his armor.

His party stopped a short distance from the outlaws. Everyone remained silent, watching while Dominick on the dark biaoquine cantered out to meet Dominick on the silver biaoquine. Janelle understood then. Dominick and his brother were identical twins.

“It’s Emperor Maximillian,” she said.

“You’d best be silent,” her captor answered.

She couldn’t fathom how Maximillian could do this to his brother. No wonder the guards had opened the gate. They wouldn’t leave the emperor’s party milling about outside. They had probably welcomed him, never knowing they were inviting raiders into their midst.

Had Maximillian come to stop the wedding? Supposedly he didn’t know. That could mean he also didn’t know his men had caught her. Dominick was probably too far away to see her among several hundred riders, particularly since she wasn’t the only woman they had taken. But even from here, she could see the fury on his face.

The brothers met in the stretch of dirt between their groups. Their voices carried to Janelle.

“To what purpose?” Dominick was demanding. “Do you take joy in killing? Hurting innocent people? Destroying beauty?”

Maximillian lifted his hand, and one of his men rode forward with a rough leather bag that bulged. At the emperor’s signal, the man opened the bag and dumped its contents. Something large fell to the ground and rolled toward Dominick.

A bloody head.

“No,” Janelle whispered.

Frozen silence followed the gruesome offering. Then Maximillian said, “Think on this, brother. Next time you send a spy to my army, my response won’t be so gentle.” His voice hardened. “You were lucky today. We could have killed your servants and burnt your home to the ground.”

Dominick bit out his words. “You’ve spied on me for years.”

Maximillian lifted the reins. “If I ordered an attack now, who would stop me? The major portion of your army has been practicing maneuvers. Even riding hard, they won’t be here for fifteen minutes. Be wise, Dominick. Fight me and I will retaliate. Is that what you want? No! Leave this land. Go across the sea. Anywhere.” He regarded his brother steadily. “Because if you stay, someday I will have to take your life.”

Then the emperor turned and cantered toward his men.

Dominick reached over his shoulder for his sword. Janelle felt her captor go for his own weapon, and all around her, other raiders were doing the same. When Maximillian saw his men drawing steel, he reined in his biaquine. But he didn’t turn to Dominick. He sat in his saddle as if daring his brother to charge and kill him from behind.

Dominick let go of his sword and lowered his arm.

“No!” A woman cried out from within the raiding party. “Prince Dom—” Her voice cut off.

Dominick scanned the riders, his strained expression clear even at this distance. Janelle doubted he could tell who shouted; even from within the group, Janelle couldn’t locate her. The raiders had taken at least fifteen women, probably more. If she called to warn him that his bride was among the captives, she would also be warning his brother.

Then she thought of a way to let him know without revealing herself. She was apparently one of the few people he let use his single name. “Dominick!” she shouted. “Here—”

The raider clamped his hand over her mouth. “*Quiet.*”

Janelle clawed at his hand, and he pinned her arms to her sides. Although Dominick looked in their direction, she didn't think he saw her. She struggled to free herself.

"If you make trouble," her captor said, "it will anger the emperor. If he becomes angry, he will retaliate against his brother. And you. He knows this palace. He gave it to Prince Dominick-Michael. He could destroy everyone here. Is that what you want?"

She went still, then shook her head.

Dominick was watching his brother. "Max."

The emperor brought his biaoquine around to face him. "We will let the women go when we finish with them."

"This isn't done," Dominick said. "You went too far."

"You have my warning," Maximillian told him. "I give it for our mother's sake, in her memory. But it is the last I will give you."

With that, the emperor wheeled around and set off at a gallop. His men went with him, stirring up a great cloud of dust, pounding out the great gate and away from the palace of shattered arches.

\* \* \* \*

## V

### **Maximillian**

The raiders followed a trail that switch-backed across the face of a cliff. They rode on the edge of the world, a sheer wall of stone to their left and an abyss of astonishingly clear air to the right, with endless, verdant mountains far below. The line of biaoquines clung to the cliff like a fragile string that could snap any time.

Janelle saw why Dominick had avoided this route. The path was barely wide enough for one biaoquine, with nothing to catch anyone who stepped off the trail. It was also obvious why Maximillian used it; the trail offered a faster path to the flatlands, insurance against Dominick's pursuit when his army arrived to defend their liege.

She shivered as her reaction to the raid set in. She had never

witnessed anyone die before, let alone in such violence. Even with so little knowledge of Othman, she could tell Dominick wasn't ready to take on Maximillian. The ramifications went much further than a violent argument between brothers. Would the people here tolerate a challenge to their emperor? She didn't doubt Dominick would come for the women of his household, but she had no idea how far he would go to rescue them or what he would do when he discovered she was gone.

They kept a grueling pace, and around noon they reached a meadow at the foot of the mountain. The grasses and wildflowers had been trampled earlier, probably by the passage of this same party. Cliffs rose starkly behind them, and hilly fields stretched to the south, swirled by yellow and blue blossoms.

The emperor finally called a halt. With a sigh, Janelle's captor reined in his mount. He slid his arms around her waist and leaned against her. "Maybe we can get to know each other better now, little bride. You were wanting a man tonight, eh?"

She pulled away from him. "Don't touch me."

He yanked back her head and pressed his lips and teeth against her neck. But when she twisted away, he didn't wrestle her back. Instead he froze—and released her as if she had a plague. No one paid them any heed; the other men were dismounting, checking biaoquines, taking out trail rations. An older man with a gray beard rode through the group, stopping to confer with various people.

Still behind her on the biaoquine, Janelle's captor spoke sharply. "What is your name?"

"Salima." She even managed to keep the tremor out of her voice.

"You're lying."

She had no chance to answer, for the bearded man had reached them. "How goes it, Aker?" he asked her captor.

"Fair enough," Aker said, his voice cautious.

The other man indicated Janelle. "You can have a few minutes with her. But be ready to ride when the call comes. Maximillian wants to leave the women here, so they don't slow us down."

Aker answered in an oddly subdued voice. "I think His Highness will want to take this one."

*Ah, hell.* Janelle spoke fast, grabbing her thought from before, doing her best to use their dialect. "I'm sick. I'll give a killing fever to anyone who touches me."

The bearded man cocked an eyebrow. "You don't look sick to me." His gaze traveled slowly over her. "Far from it."

"I'm in the early stages. The most contagious time."

He snorted. "Which is why you were married today, eh?"

"She's fine," Aker said with a laugh. "You should have seen her in the palace. She can scream like a banshee."

*Screw you,* Janelle thought.

"I will tell the emperor of your offer," the bearded man told him. Then he continued on to a cluster of other riders.

Aker dismounted and helped Janelle down, but he otherwise went out of his way to avoid touching her. She didn't know whether to be relieved or even more afraid.

The bearded man soon reappeared on foot—accompanied by Maximillian. Janelle's pulse lurched. The emperor could have been Dominick; he had the same eyes, the same strong features, the same height. But unlike Dominick, who warmed with his gaze, Maximillian's stare was ice. He appraised her as if she were an object for sale.

The emperor glanced at the bearded man. "You didn't exaggerate. She's lovely. Exotic, with that yellow hair. Yes, we will keep the bride." He nodded to Aker. "I will remember your generosity."

"Your Highness." Aker sounded strained. "Look at her jewels."

Puzzlement creased Maximillian's face. He pushed Janelle's hair over her shoulder to see her necklace better. For a long moment he stared at it. When he spoke, his voice was too quiet, like the calm in the center of a storm. "Are you my brother's wife?"

Janelle met his gaze. "Yes." She prayed he didn't find out they had



never finished the ceremony.

“It *cannot* be. Dominick would never risk his own death to marry some pretty tidbit.” He took her chin and turned her face to the side. “My God, you do look like her. But you’re too young.” His voice hardened. “From where do you come?”

“Cambridge.” She had no idea if it existed here. “Near Boston.”

“Boston? Where is that?”

“Dominick called it ‘another sheet.’”

His posture went rigid. “And your name is Salima?”

She didn’t see any point in lying now. “No. It’s Janelle.”

“Hai,” Aker murmured.

Maximillian swore. “That’s impossible.”

The bearded man spoke. “If she is the one, Your Highness, you have her now instead of your brother.”

Maximillian answered with barely controlled fury. “One day earlier. *One day*, and I would have been in time.” He reached toward Janelle. When she backed away, Aker stepped behind her and grasped her upper arms, holding her in place.

The emperor grabbed strands of Janelle’s hair and yanked them out, making her gasp at the stab of pain. He thrust the tendrils at the bearded man. “Ride to the palace. *Fast*. Have her signature checked. And tell Major Artos to prepare the army. Dominick will soon realize she is gone, if he hasn’t already.”

Maximillian turned back to Janelle. “You,” he said grimly, “will come with me.”

\* \* \* \*

The emperor’s company rode hard during the day, with stops only to change and rest the biaoquines. They continued into the night, lighting their way with torches. Maximillian had Janelle sit in front of him on his biaoquine. At least he changed his saddle to an animal skin with fleece against her

legs. Smells saturated her senses: leather, sweat, musky animals. Maximillian's armor jabbed her back and his thighs pressed against her hips. Her chafed skin burned.

"You know Dominick has five children," Maximillian said when they slowed to rest the horses. "He loved their mother. He hasn't touched another woman since. If it wasn't for that godforsaken prophecy, he wouldn't touch you, either."

If he expected to get a rise out of her, he would be disappointed. When she didn't respond, he spoke tightly. "Dominick will be uncle to your children. Not father."

She made herself stop gritting her teeth. "How noble of you, to rape your brother's wife."

He leaned near her ear. "You will regret that."

It no longer surprised her that his men had inflicted such cruelty at the palace. A leader's personality was reflected in those who followed him. Yet she also saw Dominick in the emperor; they moved alike, gestured alike, spoke alike. Maximillian led his men with the same natural authority and intelligence, and he obviously had their respect. Both he and Dominick exuded an ingrained arrogance, though in Dominick it was softened by a sense of humor that suggested he took himself less seriously than his brother.

Some time after the Moon began its descent, an officer rode up alongside them, a husky man with well-kept armor. "A messenger has arrived, Your Highness, from the scouts you left to watch the palace."

Maximillian didn't look surprised. "Has Dominick come, then?"

"I cannot say. Shall I bring the messenger?"

"Immediately."

As the rider fell back, Janelle's mood lifted like a tentative bird uncertain whether or not to take flight. Although it seemed unlikely Dominick had already gathered sufficient forces to come after Maximillian, she could hope.

The officer soon reappeared, accompanied by a red-haired man on a biaoquine. Janelle could better tell the difference now between Maximillian's

soldiers and the outlaws he had hired to augment his company. This man had the scuffed armor worn by the raiders.

“What is your message?” Maximillian asked.

“It’s the bride.” The redheaded man nodded toward Janelle. “The wedding never took place.”

Janelle silently swore.

Behind her, Maximillian tensed. “She has his jewels.”

“They reversed the ceremonies,” the man said. “He gave her the jewels this morning.”

Maximillian took Janelle’s shoulders and turned her until she could look up at him. “Then you are not yet his.”

She met his gaze. “Dominick and I are married.”

“My messenger says otherwise.” He glanced at his officer. “Go get Brother Anthony.”

“But you must have a proper ceremony,” the officer protested. “One fit for an emperor. That takes time.”

“And give Dominick time to rescue her?” Maximillian said. “I think not. Get Anthony. *Now.*”

\* \* \* \*

Brother Anthony turned out to be another warrior. He rode with Maximillian, and the emperor’s aides surrounded them, all on biaoquines. The torches cast stark shadows, leaving the faces of the riders half in darkness and half lit by wavering orange light. Anthony wore an unadorned cross, but Janelle couldn’t tell if he was a monk, a priest, or a cleric that didn’t exist in her universe. She just wished she were somewhere else. Anywhere. Like on the Moon.

Fleeing the specter of Dominick’s pursuit, Maximillian didn’t even stop for his own wedding. He let them slow enough so Anthony could speak, and then they held the ceremony on the run, as the army rumbled across the plains.

“Each day the Sun rises,” Anthony droned. “Each night the Moon graces the sky in one of its myriad phases, during the ices of winter and the droughts of summer. In the joy of spring or the fertility of autumn, so shall you cleave to each other.” He glanced at the emperor. “Maximillian Titus Constantine, do you accept this woman, Janelle Aulair, as your wife?”

“Yes,” Maximillian said.

“No,” Janelle said.

“No one asked you,” Maximillian told her.

“The hell with this,” she said. “I’m married to Dominick.”

Anthony cleared his throat awkwardly. He produced a scroll and handed it to Maximillian. “I’ve already signed it.”

Alarm surged in Janelle. “That’s *it?*”

“It is done,” Maximillian said. “You are Empress of Othman.” His voice cut like steel. “And you will learn to respect me, wife, or you will find out just how thoroughly that title can be a curse.”

\* \* \* \*

## VI

### **The Fire Palace**

The stars glittered as soulless witnesses to the passage of the army. Here in the plains, the night never cooled; even hours past midnight, the air felt like a steam bath. Lines of riders bearing torches wound across the land in rivers of fire.

Janelle dozed, leaning against Maximillian. When she opened her eyes, bleary and confused, the sky had turned crimson. Silhouetted against the horizon, a palace dominated the view. It dwarfed Dominick’s home. The central onion dome was surrounded by smaller domes that clustered like great water droplets, gold-plated and glistening. Bridges arched from tower to tower, glowing in the dawn as if they were flames. The palace shimmered in the morning’s fire.

“Do you like it?” Maximillian asked.

“It’s spectacular,” she admitted.

“It is my home.” He sounded tired but satisfied. “And now yours.”

\* \* \* \*

The stairway wound around the tower, circling a central shaft of air. Janelle could see over the railing all the way to the bottom, many stories below. They climbed single-file: two guards, Janelle, Maximillian, and two more guards. She could barely walk, she hurt so much from the ride. Only the unwelcome prospect of being carried kept her from collapsing. Maximillian was a foreboding presence at her back, threatening in his silence and unstated intent.

At least he had no time for her now. The moment they arrived, people had sought to see him: officers, clerks, servants, aides. His advisors were at the bottom of the tower, sorting out what needed to be done, but he obviously had to return to his duties.

Their climb ended at a landing with a heavy wooden door. One of the guards lifted its iron bar and pulled the handle. With a creak of protest, the door swung ponderously open.

They took Janelle into a circular stone cell with a high ceiling and four small windows, one each looking north, south, east, and west. A wheel across the chamber was wound with a thick chain, which then snaked up the wall and across the domed ceiling to its highest point, held in place by iron rings. From the top of dome, it hung halfway to the ground. A pair of leather shackles dangled from its end.

Two guards went to the wheel, and one tapped a combination into some mechanism there. Leaning their weight into their work, they cranked out the chain. It rattled up along the wall, pulled by its own weight as the shackles descended. A stench of oil permeated the air. The guards let the chain down to Janelle’s height and locked it in place. Another guard pushed her forward, and she stumbled into the shackles, which swung away, then came back and thwacked her shoulder. The entire time, Maximillian watched with an avid gaze.

While Maximillian watched, two guards came up on either side of Janelle, towering over her. They stank like sweat and biquines. They lifted her arms, and they tightened their hold when she tried to pull away. Then they shackled her wrists above her head.

“*Why?*” she asked Maximillian. “I’ve done nothing to you.”

“Nothing?” he said, incredulous. “You’ve torn apart my life and destroyed my bond with my brother. That prophecy has brought us nothing but endless grief.”

“That may be true. But I have nothing to do with it.”

“Of course you do. You *are* it.”

“I’m here *only* because Dominick looked for me. If Gregor had never said anything, you would have never known I existed.” She suspected Maximillian and Dominick would have been antagonists anyway; they were too much alike, two conquerors in a land that had space only for one.

“You would have come anyway,” he said. “When you were seventy.”

Janelle doubted it. By that time, he and Dominick would be close to ninety, if they lived that long. Age added a great deal to a person, maybe the serenity of a long life or a cynicism steeped in discord, but whatever happened, surely they wouldn’t still be locked in this duel of fates half a century from now. Far more likely, Gregor or the “seeress” had misread whatever evoked this miserable prophecy.

The guards at the wheel cranked out the chain, and the shackles rose until they pulled Janelle’s arms tight over her head. She had so far hidden her distress, but as the chain continued to rise, lifting her into the air, it was too much. She groaned, and a tear ran down her face. When they finally locked the chain in place, she hung painfully by her wrists in the center of the cell.

Maximillian came over and stood eye-to-eye with her. “My brother thought he could take my title and my life. He will pay for that.” He lifted his riding quirt in front of her. “I shall send him this. Soaked with your blood.”

She wanted to spit at him. “I don’t care how great your title. What you’re doing is sick.”

Janelle expected him to deny it. But he only said, “A man in my position can never show weakness.” Fatigue saturated his voice, revealing far more pain than he probably realized. “For our entire lives, Dominick and I have been pitted against each other. He must learn I will never tolerate his betrayals. It is true, you will pay the price. But that is the way of life.”

She regarded him steadily. "He would never do this."

He answered bitterly. "Dominick and his 'moral imperatives.' It is easy for him to preach when he has never had to serve as emperor. He grew up flawed by a mother's softness, and now he presumes to suggest I lack a conscience. But inside, he is just like me."

"If he chooses compassion over cruelty, so can you."

"You confuse weakness with compassion."

Her anger sparked. "Brutality is easy. It takes no strength."

A muscle twitched under his eye, and his voice hardened. "I will see you tonight." He went to a small table by the door and set down his whip so she would be staring at it. Then he regarded her with an unyielding gaze. "While you are waiting, my empress, it would behoove you to think long and hard about how you speak to me."

Sweat gathered on Janelle's forehead. She was having trouble breathing, and her wrists burned from supporting her weight. "You can't leave me like this."

"Why not?"

"I'll suffocate." She strove to keep the fear out of her voice. "If I die, so do you, according to the prophecy."

He raised an eyebrow, but he didn't refute her statement.

"At least give me the combination to release that wheel with the chain." She suspected he would refuse even if he thought she had a good point, to assert his control, but he might let a guard bring her down if he could do it in the guise of denying her request. After all, the guards already knew the combination. And the emperor would want her in good enough shape for whatever he intended later.

Maximillian didn't take the bait, though. Instead he smiled with condescension. "You couldn't figure out the combination even if I gave you the key."

She scowled at him. "Why not?"

"You may be well apportioned in certain aspects." He looked over her

body, while her face heated. Then he said, "But I hardly imagine abstract thought is one of them."

She had to make a conscious effort to hold back the retort that hovered on her lips. His attitude gave her another idea, though. If he thought she was stupid, he might respond just to taunt her.

"As long as this key doesn't involve math," she said, trying to look blank.

"What, you don't like numbers?"

She grimaced with distaste. "They don't like me."

"Very well." His laugh grated. "The combination that releases the chain is the same as the number of terminal zeros in 4089 factorial."

What the blazes? She understood what he meant, but it astounded her that he offered such a game of number theory. It wasn't something most people knew even in her own universe.

"You do know what a factorial is?" he said.

"No," she lied.

"Pity. Not that it would help you. You could never multiply all those numbers together." With that, he motioned to his men. They strode from the cell, and the door slammed shut, the rumble of its closing vibrating through her prison.

Janelle closed her eyes, demoralized. Then she steeled herself. She had to escape. She didn't know what to think about this "key." Of course he thought she couldn't solve the problem; to calculate 4089 factorial she had to multiply the first 4089 natural numbers together. No way could she do it in her head. Except ... she didn't need the entire number to determine how many zeros it ended in; she needed only to know how many factors of five it contained. Every five, when multiplied by an even number, added a terminal zero. It was simple. She had done such problems in middle school.

Janelle concentrated. Dividing 4089 by 5 gave 817 plus a remainder she discarded. She divided by 52, 53, 54, and 55 and added the results. The first time she calculated 1018. So 4089 factorial ended in 1018 zeros—if she hadn't made a mistake. She redid it and got 1019. Again, for 1017. It took six tries to convince herself 1019 was the answer. All that



time, the pain in her arms and shoulders worsened.

“Now what?” she muttered. She stared at the table where the whip lay, along with several spiked implements she neither recognized nor wanted to. Flinching, she wondered if she would pass out when Maximillian went to work on her. It would be *hours* until night—

No. It wouldn't be that long. She gritted her teeth. He had left her this way because he wanted her to dwell on it. So she would think about something else. She craned her neck to look around the cell. If she swung like a pendulum, she might reach the walls and catch the chain where it stretched up the stone. From there, she could stretch her leg down to the wheel.

She kicked her legs to start swinging, which worked, but it also made her spin. Her clothes chimed, creating far too much noise. The chain twisted until it could wind no tighter and then unwound, faster and faster. When it finished, it twisted the other way. It was agonizing on her wrists, and bile rose in her throat. As she came to a rest, she closed her eyes and breathed slowly until her nausea receded.

Then she tried again. This time she controlled her swings better. The chain still twisted, but less than before. She finally managed a big enough arc to hook her foot on the chain where it snaked up the wall. She jerked to a stop—and her foot slipped. With a groan of frustration, she swung away, across the chamber.

Janelle slowed to a stop and hung there, breathing hard. She strained to hear if anyone was outside, but no sound penetrated the thick walls. That worked in her favor; she doubted anyone could hear her bells ring, either. The Sun was low in the sky, shining through a window, and she closed her eyes against the glare. She cursed at Maximillian's image in her mind—yet it was the same as the man who had treated her so well the night before. No, it wasn't the same. She would never confuse the cruel lines etched into Maximillian's visage with Dominick's starkly handsome face.

Wetness ran down her arm. Looking up, she saw blood ooze out from under one shackle. *Deal with it*, she thought, and kicked her legs to swing again.

On her fifth try, she caught the chain and wedged her foot between it and the wall so she didn't swing away. Straining, she stretched her other leg to the wheel. Her big toe barely scraped the lock, which consisted of five horizontal levers. She had no idea how the levers corresponded to 1019, if

they did at all. For lack of a better idea, she assigned the digits 0 through 9 to the five levers, two for each. Then she pressed out 1019 with her big toe. Each time she pushed a lever, it snapped back up into place.

Nothing.

Gritting her teeth, she reassigned the numbers and tried again. No success. Her third attempt fared no better.

Janelle blew out a gust of air. Holding herself by the chain on the wall eased the strain on her wrists, but her foot ached and her leg was shaking. She scraped the levers with her toe and noticed they tilted backward as well as forward. Maybe that was how they accounted for ten digits. She assigned 0 through 9 to all the positions, forward and backward, and retried the pattern.

Nothing.

Sweat ran into her eyes. Maximillian had probably made up the damn combination. She couldn't quit, though. She switched numbers and pressed the combination—

The lock snapped open.

With a squeal of metal, the wheel jerked and the chain slid up the wall, rattling against the stone. Janelle's foot slipped and she swung into the center of the cell, all the time dropping as the chain played out. Her feet smacked the ground and her arms slammed down in front of her. As she sprawled onto her stomach, the clang of the chain hitting the floor rang through the chamber.

For a moment she lay, stunned. Then she sat up, shaking, praying no one had heard. Euphoria swept over her, followed by an urge to cry, then to laugh. No time to hesitate. She pried at the lock on one shackle, but it didn't budge. With her muscles protesting, she climbed to her feet and limped to the table, dragging the chain. A belt studded with metal spikes lay near the whip. She blanched, hoping she never found out why Maximillian had left it there. She had her own use for it, though. She worked a spike into the shackle, and kept at it until, with a loud snap, the lock clicked open.

As Janelle took off the shackle, blood oozed over her wrist. Ignoring the queasy lurch of her stomach, she went to work on her other wrist. As soon as she was free, she dropped the chain and ran to the closest window. Rising on her toes, she peered through the pane. It looked north,

over the plains where Maximillian's forces had camped, thousands of men and biaoquines, more even than she had seen in Dominick's army. They must have been coming in all day. If she climbed out on this side, anyone down there could see her.

The east window also faced the army. The south overlooked a garden with a fountain. Two women sat on a bench, chatting and eating fruit. The west window faced another tower, and the palace spread out below in a jumble of yards and crooked alleys. She pressed close to the glass and squinted down at her tower. She was in its dome, which curved out and down from the window to a ledge that circled the widest point of the onion. The ledge didn't look sturdy, but she saw no better options.

The window, however, wouldn't open. Janelle ran to the table and lugged it across the chamber, her sore arms protesting. She swung it hard at the glass, and the pane shattered under the impact, shards flying into the air. She knocked off the jagged pieces with one of the table legs, acutely aware Maximillian might return any moment. Then she set the table under the window and climbed through the opening, careful of the broken glass around the edges. Finally she was outside, sitting on the slanting dome, balanced high above the world. Wind blew back her hair, and for a heart-stopping instant she felt certain it would knock her off her precarious perch and send her plummeting to the ground far below.

*Breathe*, she thought. She waited until her pulse slowed. Still sitting, she inched down the bulb, using friction from her soles to control her descent. She started to slide anyway, until she feared she would hit the ledge and flip into the air. She dragged her palms on the surface, and it burned her skin, but it slowed her descent. With a jolt, her feet smacked the ledge, and she crouched down, fighting for balance. Her heart was beating so hard, she could feel it pumping.

A breeze clinked the bells on her girdle. She held her breath until they quieted and her pulse calmed. Then she inched along the ledge toward a bridge of scrolled grillwork that arched from this dome to the next. Far below, an alley squeezed between the towers.

After what felt like eons, she reached the bridge and climbed onto it, keeping low behind its grill. Then she crouched down, absorbing that she hadn't fallen to her death. *And now?* She was trapped in a place full of people with no reason to help her and plenty not to. If she reentered the palace, she could be caught. She peered between the scrolled bars of the bridge. The small courtyard below contained no people, only a cart piled with rugs. No ladders descended any wall she could see, but a flimsy trellis

with vines and red flowers stretched up the other tower.

*Don't look down.* She checked the doors at both ends of the span, but neither opened from the outside. Finally she clambered over the bridge above the trellis. Gripping the iron, she lowered herself until she was hanging from the bottom of the grillwork. Her feet scraped the trellis. She concentrated on finding a foothold and tried to ignore the trembling of her aching arms. But she had hung too long in the cell; her arms gave away and she lost her grip.

With a gasp, Janelle fell down the trellis. She managed to grab the framework and yank to a shoulder-wrenching stop. Immediately she thrust her feet between the slats, taking the weight off her arms, and then she clung there, gulping in air as if it were a rarity she might never again experience. But she couldn't stop. Clenching her teeth, she resumed her descent. She closed her eyes, narrowing her world to the lowering of her body inch by inch. She waited for the trellis to break, for someone to discover her, for that shout of recognition—

Her foot touched the ground.

Janelle collapsed against the wall. But she had no time to rest; voices were coming from the alley that curved around the tower. She darted into a recessed doorway and knelt in a deep pool of shadow created by the building.

Two men entered the yard carrying boxes. From their conversation, it sounded like they were taking supplies to the monastery. They loaded the cart promptly, with no fuss, and returned to the palace.

Janelle ran to the cart and climbed in the back. She had no wish to end up at a monastery supported by Maximillian, but this might at least get her out of the palace. Working fast, she hollowed out a cavity under the rugs, then squeezed in and hauled the rugs over her body, arranging them as much like before as she could manage. Several sack of some goods and a crate poked into her cramped hideaway under the rugs. Weighed down by carpets, buried in the sweltering heat, she waited.

The darkness grew close, and the odor of dyed cloth was smothering. Any moment Maximillian would discover her escape and search the area. If this cart hadn't left by then, she would be in serious trouble. She had been a fool to hide here. She should have snuck into the palace, found some clothes, and pretended to be a servant.

A shout came from the courtyard, and her pulse leapt. Another shout—and with relief, she realized one of the monks was telling the other to hurry up.

The cart jolted into motion. She held her breath, though she knew, logically, they couldn't hear her through piles of rugs. A different voice called out, and the cart stopped while conversation trickled into her hiding place. Did Maximillian know she was gone? *Let it be something else.* Anything. Maybe a sentry had to check their identification.

The rickety cart started again. Its wheels creaked, planks groaned, and the rugs whispered against each other.

After a while, she breathed more easily. She parted the rugs a bit, to make a spy-hole. They were rolling through the encamped army. It seemed to go on forever, soldiers everywhere, with biaoquines, oxen, supplies, and the many helpers who tended to the needs of a military force. Gradually the sea of people thinned out. She couldn't see much through the hole, only that they were headed toward the mountains.

Janelle lay still, wrestling with her thoughts. She felt as if she were part of a jigsaw puzzle. A prophecy pulled a mathematician from one universe to another; a gate relied on an abstract concept somehow turned into reality; a fabulous hall was named after a mathematician. Dominick understood abstruse theoretical concepts with little background, and his twin also had an unusual knowledge of math. *Why?* She could see the pieces, but not the overall picture.

Her stomach growled, a reminder she had eaten nothing since last night, when Maximillian shared his trail rations. Taking care to be quiet, she checked the goods crammed tight around her, several sacks and a crate. The sacks held grain. It tasted awful, and she disliked taking supplies from monks, but she liked the prospect of starving even less.

Then she hit gold. Or, more accurately, wine; the crate held ten bottles. It took a while to dig out the cork in one, but she managed. She drank in gulps, soothing her parched throat. By the time she finished half the bottle, she felt amazingly content. She had escaped Max the Nightmare, and she could almost forget she had no refuge.

The pain in her wrists was harder to ignore, and she feared the lacerations would become infected. Then it hit her: she had an antiseptic. Shifting her weight, she poured wine over the cuts. It stung like the blazes, but she was so tipsy it dulled the pain. She opened a second bottle as a

reward for her efforts, and soon after she started it, she fell asleep.

\* \* \* \*

Fire licked her wrists. Flames, heat, burning, burning, *burning...*”

Janelle opened her eyes, passing from sleep to waking without the usual moment of pleasant nothing. The agony in her wrists made that impossible. Tears wet her cheeks. Her spy-hole revealed that night folded over the land with only a flickering glow to light the way, probably from a lamp near the driver.

With clumsy hands, she cleaned the cuts on her wrists again. Then she ripped strips of cloth off one of the sacks and bandaged her wounds as well as she could manage. She drank more wine to ease the pain. Eventually she dozed, floating in a sea of flame.

Birdsong woke her. Bleary-eyed and hung-over, she peered through her hole and saw dawn lightening the world. The pain had receded, and she dozed more easily this time. Around noon, she roused enough to change her bandages. Dried blood caked the cloth, but the scabs were clean, without infection.

Sometime in the afternoon, the cart rattled up to a building of dark red stone that could be the monastery. Square towers rose at its corners. Voices rumbled nearby, and she glimpsed two men walking from the cart to the building.

With caution, she widened her spy-hole. The cart stood in a yard paved with stones and mud. Mountains rose behind the building, sharp in the sky, rough-hewn sentinels not yet softened by erosion. Moving stiffly from her cramped sleep, she squeezed out of the cart and eased down by its large wheel. Her head swam, but even as she sagged against the side, voices came from the left side of the building.

She took off in a limping run, and dodged onto a narrow path between the right wall of the monastery and a muddy hillside. Her vision blurred, but she kept going, holding her bells against her body and praying no one heard the infernal clinking of those she couldn't reach.

Janelle wasn't sure what to do. She could ask for sanctuary, but she questioned whether anyone would honor that request. She doubted they wanted to provoke Maximillian, particularly in the matter of this odious prophecy.

She came out behind the monastery. The roughly mortared wall in the back had two entrances, each a wooden door with iron braces. The first opened on a storeroom stacked with crates, which didn't bode well if the monks were about to unload the cart. She went back outside and ran to the second door. It opened into a foyer, with a staircase to the right. After easing the door closed, she limped up the stairs. At the landing, they turned right, and sunlight slanted through a round window high on the outer wall. She looked out onto a walled quadrangle in the center of the building, a yard open to the sky. The three men crossing it didn't fit her image of monks; instead of robes, they wore trousers, work boots, and simple shirts.

She continued up to another landing, this one with a door. When she leaned against the portal, she heard nothing. She edged it open, and a long hall stretched before her. She limped to the first door and listened; voices rumbled in the room beyond. At the next one, silence greeted her. Holding her breath, she opened the door.

A library. An *empty* library.

Janelle slipped inside and locked the door with a large key she found on a hook inside. Then she took stock of her refuge. A table occupied the center of the room, old and exquisitely carved with vines. But what compelled her were the *books*. They filled shelves on every wall. The only open space was a panel across the room, where a cushioned banquette stood below a window. She hurried to the window and looked out. The quadrangle lay below, empty now except for vegetable plots and apple trees.

With a sigh, she sank onto the bench. The worn look of this place suggested either the monks had forgone material wealth or else they had poor support. She fingered the coins on her girdle. Would it backfire if she offered them payment to send for Dominick? With all the gems and precious metals she was wearing, she might have some bargaining power. Then again, Maximillian would probably reward anyone who returned his wife, and she doubted her bangles had much value compared to his wealth. Nor were her jewels likely to tempt people if they feared helping her would earn them the type of punishment the emperor had threatened her with in the tower.

Janelle raked her hand through her hair. She needed to know more about this world. She went to a shelf and pulled out a book at random. The text had an odd title: *Elektron Motion: Antique Editions, Monographs of*

*Rekord. Elektronik form: Alhambra Graphiks.*

The date was 1546 a.d.

She squinted at the cover. If dates were the same here as in her world, this book was centuries old. Elektronik form? From *1546 a.d.*? The title implied it was a collector's monograph, an "antique" created from an electronic publication. Given everything she had seen, that level of technology five hundred years ago made as much sense as cave men with cell phones.

Then again, these people could step between universes.

She flipped through the book. A preserving finish protected its pages. Reading wasn't as difficult as she expected, despite the odd spellings; physics was physics regardless of language. The first chapter dealt with electronics and the second with an electron gas. A chapter on electrochemistry followed, then one on quantized energy levels of an atom. Unlike texts in her world, which treated the topics as different subjects, here they were lumped into one text on "elektron motion."

She replaced the book and took another. Even older than the last, from 1489 a.d., it discussed heat flow. Although the models differed from those in her world, they gave the same results: heat came from molecular motion and was a form of energy.

Eager now, she pulled out a fat tome titled *Dynamical Analysis*. The first half focused on her specialty, differential equations, and the rest applied their solutions to problems in classical motion and semi-classical models of molecular behavior. Other books followed the same form, opening with chapters on theory, followed by applications. A book on genetics described how biaoquines had been bioengineered from horses for strength, speed, and the ability to fight.

Then she found a treatise on tensor analysis.

By themselves, tensors were just arrays of numbers. Nothing unusual. But they appeared extensively in certain sciences, including general relativity. Einstein's bailiwick. Einstein had believed it was impossible to travel faster than light, a result that would limit the ability of humans to leave the solar system. This theory closely resembled his work, with one difference—its author assumed faster-than-light travel existed. A chill ran through Janelle. This read like a historical text, one written *after* the advent



of such travel.

She began a methodical search then. And she found what she sought. Titled, simply, *Advanced Formulations*, it covered wormholes, space warps, and complex speeds that circumvented the singularity at light speed. One chapter presented resolutions to the paradoxes for superluminal travel, including a discussion of alternate spaces and times. It proposed a “Riemann screen” that could offer views of those other continuums. Then she understood; the “Jade Pool” of the prophecy was a viewing portal into alternate universes.

The final chapter detailed the design of a starship drive.

Janelle sat at the table, surrounded by books, too stunned to read any more. If this record was accurate, these people had achieved interstellar travel *five centuries ago*. What the blazes had happened since then?

Footsteps sounded outside.

Janelle froze. A door opened nearby, then closed. She glanced around quickly, but saw nowhere to hide. As the doorknob to the library turned, she jumped to her feet, and her clothes jangled.

The footsteps receded.

Janelle went to the door and leaned against it, straining to hear what was happening outside.

More footsteps.

She backed up until the table stopped her retreat. A key clinked in the lock. *No*. To have come this far, to have made this incredible discovery, only to be caught—*no, not now*.

The door opened.

\* \* \* \*

## VII

### **Prophesier**

A slender man stood in the archway. Wrinkles surrounded his eyes,

and he wore his gray hair long, in a queue. His clothes were simple, brown trousers and an unadorned gray shirt. For a long moment he stared at Janelle. Then he stepped inside and closed the door.

“This is an odd place for a bride,” he said.

She folded her arms over her skimpy clothing. “I need to contact my husband.”

“I’ve seen that girdle,” he said coldly. “The emperor’s aunt wore it at her wedding. So will the bride of the emperor’s brother.”

“Yes, I’m Prince Dominick-Michael’s wife.” In truth, she had no idea who she was married to, but she wasn’t about to tell him that. “I need to send him a message.”

He spoke dryly. “My apology if this is too blunt—but why are you in a monastery, alone, on your wedding day?”

“It’s not my wedding day.”

“Why else would you dress that way?”

“The wedding already took place.”

“Who hurt your wrists?”

Startled, she covered one of the bandages with her hand. “I must go to Dominick.”

He lifted his chin. “This monastery serves the emperor. We will send for him.”

“No! You can’t do that.”

“We are loyal servants to Maximillian.” He made no attempt to hide his suspicion. “If his brother needs to be contacted, the emperor will do so.”

“I can offer you a reward.” Inspiration came to her. “One worth far more to you than jewels or gold.” She indicated the books on the table. “I can tell you what these mean. It could improve your lives beyond imagining.” Whether she could actually do that was debatable, but she had no doubt she could offer him more than he had now, if the level of understanding she had seen accurately portrayed how little the people here

retained of their ancient knowledge.

“That is hard to believe,” the monk said.

“But true.”

His voice hardened. “Prince Dominick-Michael would never marry any woman except the one from the prophecy. And, Lady Janelle, the emperor would do anything to prevent that marriage.”

She stiffened. “You seem to have decided who I am. You have me at a disadvantage.”

“I am Gregor.”

Her anger surged. “*You* made that ghastly prophecy.” She waved at the library. “You figured out enough here to look across space and time, right? But you don’t really understand it, do you? Otherwise, you could have told them more, like how it works.”

Anger tightened his expression. “I have spent my entire life studying these books. I understand them better than anyone else alive.”

She plunged ahead, ad-libbing. “That’s why I’m the prophecy.” For all she knew, it was true. It was no stranger than anything else that had happened. “I was sent to you, Brother Gregor. Would you like to know more? Give me sanctuary and I’ll tell you.”

“You think I would betray Othman in my own lust for knowledge?”

“A love of knowledge is a gift, not an undesirable lust.”

He scowled at her. “You talk a great deal.”

“Think what you could learn. You’re a brilliant scholar; you must be, to have tamed space and time.” She didn’t know him, but if he understood even a small part of these books with no formal training, it could be true. “I can help unlock these mysteries for you.”

“You speak *blasphemy*.” He cut the air with a sharp wave of his hand. “Such study is for men, and only those who dedicate their lives to the monastery, forgoing riches, prestige, *and* women.”

“A lot of these books have female authors.”

He glared at her. "That may be. But living women aren't allowed in here." His gaze traveled over her body, and he made a visible effort to pull his attention back to her face. "You will not seduce me into betraying the emperor."

"What betrayal?" She clenched her fists, ignoring the pain in her wrists. "You think it's all right for Maximillian to kidnap his brother's wife, but heaven forbid she should protect herself?"

"I don't claim Maximillian is a gentle man." He stepped back to the door and pulled a cord hanging there. "But he is my master and I am sworn to obey his word and law."

Janelle swallowed. "What does the cord do?" When he didn't answer, her anger surged. "Was it a game, pitting Maximillian and Dominick against each other from the day of their birth?"

"No." Fatigue showed on his lined face. "It threatens all I value. The well-being of Othman."

"And you think that depends on me going to Maximillian?"

"He is the emperor." Gregor pulled himself up straighter. "It is my moral duty to act in his best interest."

She made an incredulous noise. "How can you talk about moral duty when you intend to send me to be raped and tortured by a monster?"

"I hardly think you are fit to pass judgment on an emperor."

"Why not? I know brutality when I see it."

Gregor shifted his weight. "How he treats you and how he rules Othman are different matters."

"Like hell."

"At your age and with your female attractions—" He cleared his throat. "You don't have what it takes to make such judgments."

"I may be young," she said, "but that doesn't mean my brain doesn't work. And what does you finding me sexually attractive have to do with my ability to think?"

His face turned a deep red. “You twist my words.”

“No, I don’t.” Frustrated, she said, “You make it sound as if I’m evil because I don’t want to go back to a man who plans to thrash me until my blood soaks his whip, after which he’s going to send it to my husband.”

“I have to do what I believe is right. I cannot sacrifice higher principles for your welfare.”

She regarded him steadily. “I question the validity of your principles.”

His face turned red. “If my principles weren’t *valid*, it wouldn’t have mattered to me whether or not you had reason to remain in your cold, soulless universe. You had no one there. Nothing to stop you from leaving.”

“What?” Janelle whispered. He couldn’t mean what she thought.

His voice quieted. “I saw them die. The nobleman in Andalusia. His lady. Their son.” Softly, he added, “Your family. I’m sorry.”

The air seemed to rush out of the room. At first she could say no more than, “He wasn’t a nobleman.” Then she inhaled deeply. “They were making bridges among different peoples. They *died* for it. How can you call that soulless?”

He shook his head. “Right or wrong, they left you alone.”

Footsteps sounded in the hall. Four men entered the room, all dressed like Gregor. Turning to them, he indicated Janelle. “We have a guest. We must send word to the emperor.”

\* \* \* \*

The monks gave Janelle a cloth she could use as a shawl to cover herself, though she suspected they did it more for their own peace of mind than for her. They locked her in a high corner room, provided water and a basin, and brought her fruit, cheeses, and a carafe of wine. Then they left her alone.

As demoralized as she felt, she was ravenous. She wolfed down the food, then washed up and searched her cell. Shaped like a piece of pie, it measured five paces by three at the wide end. The walls were whitewashed plaster. A bench stood against the outer wall, and above it, light trickled in a

window slit. Swirls on the cloudy glass reminded her of the Mandelbrot fractal. Had Dominick's ancestors learned chaos theory? *What secrets were locked in that library?*

She was still reeling from what Gregor had told her. He saw her family die. It was apparently part of what convinced him she was destined to come here. She knew he couldn't have affected what happened through the Riemann screen, that he might not have even seen their actual deaths, only that horrific news clip of the car exploding. But nothing would stop the pain that flooded her.

Janelle rapped the walls; she prodded, scraped, pushed, and yanked anything she could reach. She pounded the window, trying to break the glass, even knowing she couldn't wriggle out the narrow opening. It offered a view of the yard that fronted the monastery—and so she saw when the riders left, galloping down the same trail the cart had taken up here. She thought of Maximillian, and bile rose in her throat.

Eventually, she sank onto the floor in one corner and pulled her knees to her chest. Laying her head on her knees, she closed her eyes and gave in to her exhaustion.

Janelle awoke with sunlight slanting across her face. A clamor outside had roused her: men calling, biaoquines trumpeting, boots stamping. Muzzy with sleep, she climbed onto the bench and peered out the window. Warriors filled the slice of the yard she could see, men in armor on biaoquines.

And Maximillian.

Her panic flared. He strode across her field of view, his black armor absorbing the sunlight, his dark hair whipping around his face.

"No!" She scraped at the window, trying to dig out the glass. Only a sliver of stone crumbled under her assault. She kept going, frantic, knowing it would take hours to dislodge the window, that she wouldn't fit through the opening anyway. But she couldn't quit. She remembered the shackles, the whip and spiked belt, and the ugly hunger in Maximillian's gaze.

A key turned in the lock.

Janelle spun around. Jumping off the bench, she pulled the shawl around her body, as if that could shield her.

The door opened, revealing Gregor. Maximillian towered in the shadows behind him, the hilt of his sword jutting above his shoulder.

Gregor stared at her, his face unreadable. He stepped aside and bowed deeply to the emperor. Then he left, his footfalls receding down the hall. Maximillian remained, his unsmiling gaze fixed on Janelle. With a slow tread, he walked into the cell—

And it wasn't him.

*"Dominick!"* Janelle flung herself across the room, and he caught her in an embrace. She wrapped her arms around him and laid her head on his chest, closing her eyes while tears squeezed out under her lids.

"Ai," he murmured, stroking her hair. "I wasn't sure what to expect. I feared hatred."

"I don't hate you." Her voice caught. "I hate what you've done to my life."

He drew back to look at her. Then he touched her bandaged wrists. "I swear my brother will never hurt you again. *Never.*"

She felt dizzy with the release of fear. "Gregor told me he was sending for Maximillian."

"Whatever you said convinced him to seek me instead. His men found my army en route to Max's palace." Unexpectedly, he laughed. "You have sorely traumatized our Brother Gregor. He informs me that you are a most disturbing woman. He says he does not envy my marital state."

She managed a smile. "Trauma builds character."

"So it does." His amusement faded. "I will leave my Sixth Regiment here. You and I can ride home with the rest of my army."

From what Janelle had gathered, only twenty men lived at the monastery, scholars rather than warriors. "Do you really need so many to counter a few monks?"

"Not counter. Protect. In summoning me, they have risked Maximillian's wrath." He held out his hand. "Come with me, Janelle."

She took his hand.

\* \* \* \*

## VIII

### The Key

The library in Dominick's palace awed Janelle. She wandered through room after room with bookcases built into the walls from the floor to the vaulted ceiling. Sliding ladders gave access to the upper shelves. Engravings in the wood curved in vine motifs, and marble panels bore quotes from scholars she didn't recognize. Gold and burgundy brocade upholstered the armchairs. Tall lamps stood in the corners, flickering with flames behind their stained glass shades. Most of all, books filled the rooms, embossed, gilt-edged, gleaming everywhere in the golden light.

Janelle's bodyguards stayed back, giving her a semblance of privacy. She had barely spoken to Dominick during the ride here from the monastery today. She needed time to sort out her thoughts. Nor did she know what to say; they had so little in common, and she felt far out of her league with him. Yet he stayed on her mind. It was more than the physical attraction; he also intrigued and compelled her. But she wasn't ready for this man who would be emperor.

Perhaps he understood. He hadn't insisted on accompanying her here. He had to know she was avoiding him; what happy bride immediately sought out a library upon arriving at her new home? Then again, most brides hadn't just discovered such a momentous trove of knowledge. Although Dominick seemed puzzled by her excitement, he didn't resist her pursuit of the knowledge.

Judged from the most modern scrolls in this library, the year here corresponded to that in her universe. However, just as in Gregor's library, the science collection had no recent books. The tomes were centuries old, the most recent dated 1557 a.d. A layer of dust covered them. She found no history of science, no explanation of how these people had once possessed such great knowledge and now had so little.

In fact, she found few histories of any kind, though she searched for an hour. Several works described the reign of Dominick's family, but they didn't go back to the sixteenth century. Although it was harder to read the historical accounts, they clearly focused on wars and politics, what the authors considered great deeds of the Constantines. Yet she found many hints that his ancestors had also distinguished themselves in scholarly



pursuits, showing that same gift for abstract thought she had seen in Dominick and Maximillian.

One section of the library dealt with architecture, including books about the Palace of Arches. Nothing explained the Fourier Hall, but a few studies mentioned a “key” to that great room. She eventually found a description in a book on ancient military codes, of all places. Settling into an armchair, she pored over the text, puzzling out the words. The arches of that gorgeous hall formed a code. Their Fourier transform was a key. But to *what*?

Janelle sat back, thinking. In two dimensions, the transform would probably be a peak with rippled tails; in three dimensions, it might resemble the diffraction pattern for a circular aperture. The locations of the central peak would specify a time. For what? The text seemed to describe a portal, not the gate that had brought her here but something for a much bigger event.

She went to a desk and rummaged in its drawers until she found an inkbottle, quill, and parchment. It took her a while to figure out how to use the quill, but finally she set to work, trying to derive the Fourier transform of the arches. She couldn't do it exactly; that would require a computer. But the book gave drawings and measurements for the hall, and she could model the arches as the sum of a few squared sine waves.

As she ground away at the equations, the lamp behind the desk burned low. The transform had the shape she expected, with a large peak at the number 2057. Why 2057? She thought it represented a time. Perhaps it meant 2057 years in the future or that many years since something had happened. Or the year 2057.

A chill went through her. In 2057, she would be seventy-one, about the age of the woman in the prophecy. This *couldn't* connect to her—for that implied she would still be here in fifty years.

Dismayed, she went on another search—and hit gold: a modern account of the Jade Pool. The “jade-hued surface” had to be a Riemann screen. The author considered it an enigmatic artifact of mythical proportions and presented equations for it as if they were runes of a spell. Janelle could appreciate what Gregor had achieved, if he had unraveled practical knowledge from such fanciful treatments.

The book also discussed Riemann gates, which turned out to be a more complicated application of the screen. She didn't understand the

technology, but she worked through the equations. No matter how many times she tried to find a mistake in her work, she derived the same result: the gate didn't depend on two sheets—it involved *hundreds*. Dominick had managed to go back and forth to her universe because he used the same gate, but it was closed now, and the entire cycle would have to complete before it reopened. That would take centuries, maybe even millennia.

She stared at the parchment with its blotted ink. Then she folded her arms on the desk and put her head on her forearms.

Sometime later, a man said, “Janelle?” A hand rested on her arm.

She lifted her head to find Dominick watching her. He had pulled a stool up to the desk and was sitting next to her.

“What happened?” he asked.

She shook her head, too disheartened to answer.

“Tell me,” he said softly.

“I don't think I can go home.” The words burned inside her. “If you hadn't opened the gate when you did, you could never have found me. I would have been long dead before the cycle returned to my universe.”

“You are telling me the prophecy created itself? That if Gregor had never said anything, you wouldn't be here?”

She could only say, “Yes.”

He answered in a low voice. “Then I am doubly sorry.”

“Something happens in fifty years,” she said unevenly. “When I'm the age of the woman Gregor saw in the pool. Another gate is going to open. A big one. During those few months, your people may be able to do something incredible.”

He seemed bewildered. “What something?”

“I don't know.” She hesitated. “Maybe your ancestors didn't strand you forever. Maybe you can find them.” She laid her palm against his chest. “Your family had the gifts to understand once.”

A strange look came into his eyes. “There is a saying.” He spoke in

an unfamiliar language.

“What does it mean?”

“Roughly translated: Constantines are the key to the future.”

She stared at him. “Who else besides you and the monks has a library like this, with the ancient books?”

“Just Maximillian.”

“My God,” she whispered. “It’s *you*. Your family. *You’re* the key. The Fourier Hall is a clue, or a remnant, like the waveforms on the walls, but you’re the guardians of the knowledge. It’s probably why your family ended up ruling Othman.” She motioned at the library. “Everything you’ve lost is still here. The ability to unlock it is *in* you, in your genes, your minds. If you can find it.” She felt as if she were breaking. “But why me? How could you reach across universes for someone to help you do this?”

He spoke in a subdued voice. “Gregor said the pool showed many futures. My father wanted the one that maximized his empire. I always assumed it depended on who ruled, Max or me, and that you came into it because you brought power into our family, probably through an alliance.” Quietly he said, “Maybe it is much larger than this battle between brothers. Perhaps it is something only you can do.”

A tear slid down her face. “At what price to me?”

“Ai, Janelle.” He put his arms around her shoulders and drew her to him. “I don’t know how to take you home. But if you let me, I will give you a home here worth having.”

She laid her head against him and fought back her tears.

\* \* \* \*

Dominick’s suite was far different than the chamber where Janelle had spent her first night in the palace. It was five times the size. Low, black-lacquered tables stood around the room, surrounded by big cushions instead of chairs. Rich tapestries in gold, red, and green hung on the walls. The rugs he used for a bed filled one corner, tumbled with velvet pillows. Braziers burned in other corners, and oil lamps flickered in wall sconces, shedding a dim golden light. It all had a barbaric elegance.

Janelle sat with Dominick on his bed, leaning against the wall. They had come here from the library, and now he held her. She fitted to his side, unable to talk, her thoughts edged with pain.

After a while, she said, "It is hard to believe you are brothers."

He answered in a low voice. "Do not see me with blinders. What Max does and believes—it is in me also. I had a different life, and it taught me other ways. Had brutality molded me instead, I would be just like him."

"Will you go to war?"

"He is my brother, despite everything." He sounded tired. "But I will not desert my home and people to go 'across the sea,' as he says I must. If that means we must fight, so be it."

She understood. Six of his officers had died in the raid on the palace. He could rebuild the hall, but nothing would bring back those men. At least Kadar, the guard who had helped her in the tunnels, had survived. He had been injured, but he was recovering.

"Gregor told me about your family," Dominick said. "I'm sorry."

She couldn't talk about it. So she said only, "My father was an ambassador. Do you have them here?"

"Yes. It is a position of honor, usually held by a nobleman." He rubbed his hand along her upper arm. "The people of Othman have a history of strife with the Andalusian Empire. We descend from their colonies, but we gained our independence centuries ago."

Andalusia. Southern Spain. "The empire doesn't exist in my universe. But Spain is a nation. I lived there for years."

He didn't seem surprised. "It is no wonder the prophecy predicted you would affect our balance of power. Your background suits you well to the throne."

Dryly she said, "I don't think your brother was interested in my background."

The corded muscles in his arm tensed. "Max will never be satisfied until he takes you from me or kills us both." Grimly he added, "He will succeed with neither."

“He says he and I are married.”

Ire sparked in his voice. “He cannot marry my wife.”

“His spy told him you and I never wed.”

“I gave you the jewels. And we consummated the marriage. So we are wed.”

“Uh, Dominick.” She lifted her head. “We didn’t consummate it.”

“I stayed the night. As far as anyone knows, we did.” He cleared his throat. “Unless you plan to say otherwise.”

She smiled. “I won’t.”

He looked relieved. “Good.”

“I met your daughter. She’s charming.”

His tone gentled. “Yes. All my children are.”

“I’m sorry ... about their mother.”

“Ah, well.” He sounded muted. “It has been years.”

He fell silent after that, and she regretted bringing up the memories. After a while, she said, “What happened to your people five hundred years ago? Was there a war? A catastrophe?”

“I don’t think so.” For one of the few times since she had met him, he sounded uncertain. “Some of the people just left.”

“To where?”

Dominick pointed upward. “There. Somewhere.” He pushed his hand through his hair. “I have more education than most because my mother insisted Max and I study history, language, astronomy, and mathematics when we were boys, as much as anyone could teach us. But it barely touches what is my library. Why did our ancestors desert this world and never come back?” He shook his head. “We have lost that knowledge. They took so much with them. Legend says they left us behind deliberately. Some claim a political rift existed between those who went and those who

stayed. Others say we remained of our own free will, as guardians of Earth, and that those who left cannot return because they became lost between worlds, even universes.” Softly he said, “Perhaps it is both. But it’s been half a millennium. Our memories are faded.”

It was heartbreaking to think of the human race fractured that way. “Maybe they’ll return someday.”

“You will search for answers?”

She nodded, gratified he didn’t object. “Gladly.”

“You say I have some small talent for scholarly pursuits.” He sounded bemused.

“More than small, I think.”

“I haven’t the interest, though.” His smile flashed. “But ah, Janelle, our children will be brilliant.”

It hurt to realize her children would never know her world. Yet it was true; if they inherited their parents’ ability for abstract thought, and learned to use it, they might truly reach for the stars. She would teach them what she knew. But most of all, she would love them, as her parents had loved her.

He was watching her face. “Together, you and I can achieve much.”

“I hope so.” Her voice caught. “We will make a good place.” Somehow.

“Aye,” Dominick murmured. “We will.”

Janelle didn’t know if she would ever understand this complicated man, but she wanted to try. She knew life here wouldn’t be easy. It was a violent world, harsh and unyielding, and Maximillian would always be there. Yet it also had an incredible beauty. If she could never go home, she could at least have her work in the library, a family to love, and dreams of the day when humanity might soar beyond the bounds of Earth.

A bittersweet peace settled over her. This wasn’t a life she would have chosen. But it might hold joy, even astonishing events, and for that, she could look forward to the future.

