

Chapter 6 The Hall of Doors

“Wow,” Cassie said, staring around with wide eyes. Beside her, Magdalena whistled softly while Liz stepped past, holding her glowing blue stone in her hand.

They were in a hallway—somewhere in the middle of that hallway because it stretched in both directions as far as their lights let them see. The floor, wide enough for two cars to pass through, was smooth and covered with patterns, swirls and shapes in all sorts of colors. It felt like stone, maybe, but she couldn’t tell for sure, and it also had that strange, throbbing feeling that the door did.

The walls, too, were smooth and covered with patterns of all sorts. And all along them were doors, doors of every description. Some were wood, like their door, others stone, or metal, or made of other things that she couldn’t identify. Some were plain, others decorated. Some were arched, some rectangular, and one a few yards away was even a triangle. And they were all different, as far as she could see.

She looked up, but instead of a ceiling, she saw what looked like a metal path made of a see-through grate and attached to the walls on either side by supports, with little bridges leading to more doors. She shined her flashlight up there, but it didn’t find a ceiling, only another bridge and what looked like a third one beyond that.

“I don’t think we’re in your backyard anymore,” Magdalena said quietly.

“It’s so quiet,” Liz whispered. And it was. Except for the noise they were making, there didn’t seem to be any sound at all, though she could *feel* something moving through her, something low and deep.

“Let’s look around,” Cassie said.

“Not too far,” Magdalena said. “This place looks like it goes on for a long ways, and I want to make sure we can find our door again.”

“It’s the only one that’s open,” Cassie reminded her. “And plus they all look different. Here, let’s rub one of the other stones and put it on the floor in front of the door, and then we’ll have no problem finding our way back.”

“Okay,” Magdalena said, still sounding a little worried. She took a stone and rubbed it hard, harder than they had any of the others, until it glowed so bright that they could see up through the metal path above to the next level and the next and the next, where there were yet more paths, and more doors. And still there was no ceiling.

Carefully, Magdalena put the brightly-glowing stone on the floor.

“Which direction?” Liz asked.

“Either one looks fine,” Cassie replied.

“You’re the leader,” Liz said firmly. “You decide.”

“I am?”

“It’s your house,” Magdalena noted with a shrug. “Or at least that way is.”

“Let’s go right then,” Cassie said with a smile.

And so they started off, walking down the corridor, farther and farther away from the bright light behind them.

“I wonder where they all lead?” Cassie asked aloud. “They can’t all go to basements and things like that.”

“I wonder where this place is at all,” Magdalena said. “We’re not home anymore, that’s for sure. If this really were in your yard, Cass, then up there, those doors would be above ground, and the next level, those would

be at the same height as your roof. No, this is something else, something magic. Like those stones.”

“But where?” Cassie asked, not bothering to mention that magic wasn’t real. She’d pretty much given up on that idea as soon as they’d come to this place.

“No idea,” Magdalena answered.

“Hey, look at this!” Liz exclaimed.

“What?” Cassie asked, following the other girl. Liz had gone up to one of the doors, and was holding the stone right before it, bathing it with light.

“Someone wrote on this,” she said.

Cassie leaned in. This was a round door, made of something smooth and purple, with a long, white handle that reached all the way from one side to another. Above the bar was a white circle, and under the circle someone had written “LOCKED” in what looked like chalk.

“Someone’s been here before,” Magdalena said.

“Of course they have,” Cassie replied. “That’s what all the maps are for, and why everything was down by the door. Though why they threw away the key I don’t know. I wonder if it’s still locked.”

“I wouldn’t...” Magdalena began.

But before she could finish, Liz had already grabbed the handle and started pulling. When nothing happened, she put her shoulder against it and pushed.

“Yep,” she said finally. “Still locked.”

“I wonder if all the others have notes on them too,” Cassie said, and turned around to the other side of the hall.

The closest door on the other side, a few feet away from the locked purple one since they weren’t spaced evenly, was a regular-shaped rectangular door which looked like it was made of some sort of shimmering metal, maybe brass, or possibly even gold. It was tall,

taller than their door, and completely smooth except for a small handle just large enough to grab.

Cassie walked up to it, placing her hand gently on its smooth, warm surface, and looked around to see if there was any writing.

“I don’t think you *could* write on this in chalk,” she said, taking a step back.

“Here it is!” Magdalena said excitedly, shining her stone on the wall next to the door. There was a patch of red-orange there, and on it, written again in chalk, was the word “CLOUDS”.

“Clouds?” Cassie said. “I wonder what that means?”

“Only one way to find out,” Liz said.

And she pushed.

At once, the door swung open. Light poured in, so much that they were almost blinded. And Liz stumbled in after the door, her hand still holding the handle.

And she screamed.

Cassie spun around from where she’d been standing by the wall and stared out in horror.

Outside the door, it was absolutely beautiful, a bright, golden sky covered in swirling clouds of red, yellow, and purple, and beyond them was the bright red sun—and the other, smaller golden sun.

And no land, anywhere. Nothing but clouds, and sky. Except for the door, hanging there over nothing, and Liz, dangling from it with one hand, screaming to them.

“Help!” she shouted. “HELP! I’m slipping!”

“Hold on!” Cassie shouted back, dropping her flashlight to the floor and thinking furiously. What could she do? She couldn’t reach Liz, and she couldn’t get to the door...

Suddenly, she had it.

“Magdalena, do you think you can grab her if I get her closer?”

“I’ll try,” Magdalena replied. She was standing still, and her face had gone horribly pale.

“Liz,” Cassie shouted, “try to grab on to the handle with both hands if you can. You won’t slip as easily.”

“The stone...”

“Forget the stone,” she shouted, sounding a lot like her mother. “Just do it.”

“Okay.” She was sobbing now, but she managed to let the stone out of her fingers and throw the other hand up to wrap itself around the tiny handle.

The stone dropped and fell, continuing for a long while, until it was lost in the clouds below.

“Okay,” Cassie said as she dropped to the ground. “Hold on tight.” And then she grabbed for the bottom of the door, as far out as she could reach, wrapped her fingers around it and pulled.

“Aaah!” Liz shouted as the door swung in and her body flopped around.

“Still too far!” Magdalena yelled.

Cassie slid a little farther over, then pulled again.

The door closed a little farther.

“I’m slipping!” Liz shouted.

Desperate, Cassie slid quickly and pulled as fast as she could, slamming her fingers between the door and the floor and whimpering at the sudden pain.

“Gotcha!” Magdalena said, and then she was bowled over onto the floor as Liz landed in a heap on top of her.

Cassie pushed the door open a tiny bit, just enough to get it off her fingers, and stood, blowing on her hands to get the pain to stop.

“Next time,” she said, looking down at the other two girls on the floor, “next time we’re more careful, okay?”

Liz nodded silently, tears streaming down her face.

“God girl,” Magdalena said, hugging Liz to her, “you had me scared half to death.”

“Me too,” Cassie said, and knelt down beside her.

Liz hugged them both, holding tightly until she stopped shaking.

“Thanks,” Liz said finally, wiping her eyes with her forearm. “I thought I was dead meat there for a second. I can’t believe I was so *stupid*.”

“I can,” Magdalena said. “If you’d only listened to me...”

Cassie laughed, more out of relief and joy that her friend was still alive than because it was funny. And in seconds, the other two joined her, laughing and holding each other in the light of the two suns from the world beyond the door.