

CITY OF SOUND AND LIGHT

FIRST CHAPTER

DAVE WALKER



ONE

I always expected a Restricted Area would be a little more restricted.

“Why did you say that?” Tera whispered. She glowered at the crystalline spark twittering about the open door. The spark was Rayna, her other half and frequent pain her neck. Everyone was born with one, and they could all talk to each other. That meant anyone in the world could hear what it had just said. Anyone who bothered to listen to her, that is, which was hardly anyone. Wouldn’t hurt it to shut up sometimes, though. She never had been able to control it like she should. Discretion was not one of her strengths.

Still, Rayna wasn’t wrong. On the doorframe was a slip of paper with the words **RESTRICTED ACCESS, BY SPECIAL PERMISSION ONLY** written in bold letters and signed by Sergey-Watts, Master of the Mission State Library, her father.

For all his talk about Openness and Freedom, her father valued Propriety above everything. Freedom can’t survive being abused and all that. The biggest impropriety, of course, was not doing as he said. Such a hypocrite.

“Father will be furious.”

“It’s only a library,” Rayna said. “We’ve seen everything here. What could they possibly have that’s so secret?”

“Just be quiet for once,” Tera hushed it. Her spark was a walnut-sized crystal with many clean edges, like a multifaceted jewel. Everyone said this signified Tera’s intelligence and refinement, though no one was ever able to produce any further evidence. A faint light erupted from its translucent surface, casting a yellow tint on the white of the paper and a dim shadow on the edges. Floating of its own lightness and moving of its own will, it was like a personal fairy forever by her ear. It was that piece of her mind which existed outside her body—and beyond her influence.

“Whatever it is, we have a right to know. He doesn’t own the place. We can go wherever we want.”

Her spark was technically correct. The entire Mission State Library, like the rest of the city, was public, and though there were many places most people never went, there was nowhere they were forbidden to go. Private space was the kind of thing only found in the heights of the Capitol or someone’s innermost chamber. Even her father didn’t snoop around her room at home. So whatever right she may have to go, and however much she may hate the secrecy, she shouldn’t enter a private place without his consent. In the words of the old Masters, *Courtesy is giving to others what you would not allow for yourself*. Not to mention that she’d be the one to suffer her father’s retribution.

“Do you want to find out or not?” Rayna chirped.

“Of course.” A quick peek wouldn’t kill anyone. With that note, her father might as well be inviting her to check it out.

Not that she expected to find anything unusual. As a child she had explored every hallway and office and chamber. She was familiar with all the back passages only the cleaning staff used and the hard-to-find staircases no one did. She’d ridden up the cargo lift on more than one occasion, each time receiving a sharp lecture about safety and

propriety from her father. The novelty of those childhood adventures had long since faded. Nothing new had happened in years.

Entering once more into the Maritime Administration Records section, a long line of racks stuffed with piles of book and papers identical to those in every other section of the Library, revealed the same boring place she knew.

No signs of activity among the other aisles of the floor, either. Down the well in the center of the tower, the stenographers worked at their desks, row upon row, their sparks flickering constantly as they received information from distant governors or ambassadors or administrators or other great persons whose sayings and information were worthy of record. All their heads were down, and the whole library was covered in that dull, familiar calmness of murmuring voices and clattering typewriters and rustling papers.

“Satisfied?” Tera was more disappointed than she wanted to admit. Maybe her father had planned something for later, a meeting with foreign scholars he didn’t want interrupted or maintenance to the roof. But she’d never heard of him trying to close down a whole floor. Or maybe he had put the note there to teach her a lesson, knowing she’d be unable to resist. If so, he wouldn’t miss the chance to admonish her. Or maybe she was being paranoid.

“We should get home.”

Rayna hovered in front of her eyes. Yellow light pulsed from within it, humming with energy. Only one thing could get her spark so excited.

“How many?” she asked.

“Twelve so far.” Responses from other sparks, people who had heard Rayna’s message. Tera didn’t have many friends, much less a wide following, but twelve was a good number. Secrets always attracted attention. As lame and ordinary as it may have been to her, the Library was a mystery to most, a place they used but never went. Who knew what might be hiding in the lofty towers and sunken

innards where all the world's information was processed for public consumption? Pages upon pages of commercial shipping manifests, mostly, as Tera saw on the shelves beside her, but no one listened when she tried to tell them that.

“What's the reaction?”

“Curiosity, amazement, alarm. A warning.”

All for nothing, but they didn't need to know that. She might as well enjoy the attention while it lasted.

“Any word from Kieran-Nash?” A boy she knew from Tors, another city far to the east.

“Not yet. I can contact him.”

She shook her head. Strange. He must have been studying. “Father?”

“Nothing.”

Two bells, one deep, one high, chimed in sequence from the great clock atop the highest tower of the library. “What time is it?”

Rayna's light quivered in a new pattern, conversing with the Clockkeeper's Bureau in the observatory on Mount Kel. “Seventeen thirty-two,” it answered a moment later. The library bells were running behind. “There is one other place we could look.”

“Nothing's up there,” Tera said, thinking also of the clock tower and the old library museum within. It once boasted the best views of the city until the newer skyscrapers caught up to it. Now it was little more than an attic, soon to be overtaken by the endless multiplication of papers, if it hadn't been already.

“That makes it perfect, doesn't it?” Rayna said. “No one would bother to look.”

“But then you wouldn't need the sign.”

“Except you can only get to the museum through this section.”

“Or the maintenance lift,” Tera said.

“Maybe it's a diversion or he's being extra cautious. I'm sure he believes no one would dare disobey the great Sergey-Watts.”

“Except us.”

“Obviously.”

Tera shook her head. It still made no sense. The command only increased the chances that someone would notice. It couldn't be anything important. Her father wasn't stupid. “We should leave. We'll be in even more trouble if we aren't home for dinner.”

“I'm staying,” Rayna said. An empty threat. Her spark could not fly beyond her arm's reach, for it was an extension of her own self. She might argue with herself, might hate herself sometimes, but she could never leave herself. It would follow her forever. Where her body went, her mind would go. Or was it the other way around? Didn't matter. Tera might be in charge, but Rayna knew her better than anyone.

“This is crazy,” she said as she slipped over to the stairwell leading up the clock tower. “The library doesn't have any secrets. It's all open to the public. You could ask the secretary anything right now and he would tell us.”

“You want me to ask him?” Rayna said.

“I didn't say that.” Not knowing what her father was doing with that sign irritated her. He acted like he had to know everything she was doing. And he always did; Rayna made sure of that. Whatever it was, though, wouldn't be exciting. Nothing exciting ever happened here. “Why do you care so much anyway?”

“It's my nature to want to know.”

The museum on the first floor of the tower was hotter than the rest of the building and reeked of musty paper. The Library had never bothered to install the new electric lights, and the lanterns had long since burnt out, but the sun on its descent was level with the broad windows, casting thick light and long shadows over the whole room. Haphazard piles of books littered the floor, filling in the gaps around the glass cases and items on display. Here was a copy of the Mission Charter and the old-fashioned quill of Horatio-Semper, original signatory. Here were the spectacles and notes of Ignatius-Kant, inventor of

the Kant Index. Here were a dozen other relics only a librarian could care about. Tera rubbed her finger across a case, leaving a clean line in the dust.

“No wonder no one ever visits anymore.”

A replica of the first printing press dominated the center of the room, and against the back wall hung a large image of a man in full dress robes, his wrinkled, grey-haired head poised with stately certitude. A bright red diamond, his spark, was painted in the center of his forehead, as was traditional in portraits, and his dark eyes stared into the far-off sun. Tera paused under it. She admired the thick, bold oils if not the man himself. COPERNICUS-HOBS, the plaque read, founder of the Library, and below it a saying, THE CENTER OF MAN IS THE CENTER OF KNOWLEDGE. Tera had seen this phrase many times, for it was also written in large letters above the entrance to the lobby.

“Notice anything odd?” Rayna said.

A glass case held a few of his trinkets. A mechanical quill. A box of spare ink casings. A letter to the first Speaker of Missio. A golden pocket watch. A few other ordinary items. Not a piece was out of place, pristine and clear within the glass.

“The case has been wiped,” she said. “There’s no dust on it.” She flung open the doors to the cabinet below the case, pulling out book on the story of Copernicus-Hobs, another on the history of the Mission State Library, and a stack of papers documenting the artifacts. She reached into the back of the shelves, feeling each corner for secrets. Nothing.

Rayna hovered over the glass. “It’s been a long time since we’ve been up here.”

“But someone was definitely here recently.”

“Yes, and they left something. You wouldn’t notice unless you were very familiar with this place, but it’s right there in the open where—“

“Just tell me already,” Tera said. Sparks had near-perfect memories, while Tera struggled to remember where she left her hairbrush most mornings. Like everyone else, she relied on her spark—and the Library—for the bulk of her information, but Rayna enjoyed dragging her on a little too much.

“That ink box,” it said. “It wasn’t there before. It’s not in the documents either, I bet.”

She shuffled through the papers, but there was no mention of the ink box and no picture among the drawings. “Maybe it’s a new addition,” she suggested, but already her fingers were moving to the back of the glass, ignoring the sign about being courteous, and unhooking the metal latches.

She lifted the glass panel and slid the box out of the case. It was much heavier in her hands than she had expected. An ornate design of the sun and moon and stars was carved into the wood and inlaid with gold leaf. The bottom was polished leather. It was the kind of thing a famous scholar would have sitting on his desk to hold his ink, and it looked old enough to be from the founding of the city, but its touch produced a sense of uneasiness that was tipping toward nausea. Rayna twitched back and forth.

Tera set the box on the top of the case. Maybe it was enough to know that it was hidden, that her father was a hypocrite. Going any farther would be improper, an invasion.

“Can’t leave now,” her spark said with a flutter. “We have to know.”

Tera cracked the lid, revealing a lumpy, round rock, white like translucent marble.

“Help...” came a tiny cry, a fading echo of a voice.

Tera gasped. Rayna trembled.

Have you ever seen a ghost?

Tera snapped the lid shut. A separated spark. Impossible. Like an eye flying through the air or a brain getting up to walk. It was a dead

body waving from the coffin. Her stomach bubbled up into her throat. She thought of her mother when her life faded. The light went out, and her spark settled against her chest and dissolved into dust. They spread the grains over her body when they buried her. Tera wanted to retch. What had her father done?

She swallowed. "It's...it's a very convincing fake," she said. "We should put it back."

"Wait," Rayna said. "Didn't you hear it?"

"No," Tera lied to herself.

"What if it's in trouble? What if someone is in trouble? They would have to be nearby—"

"It isn't real!" Not only was it physically impossible, but the implications were even more preposterous. "What are you suggesting? That father kidnapped someone, stuffed their body somewhere in this museum a few feet from here, and found a way to capture their spark?"

"Or he's covering up for whoever did."

"And what's this, then? A magical ink box that can hold sparks away from their bodies and prevent them from telling anyone? It's not possible."

"I wouldn't have thought so this morning," Rayna admitted. "What other explanation is there? I'm querying the Continental death archives, and it says there are zero known instances of spark survival, so they must still be alive."

"Or it's a fake," Tera said.

"Open it up again and then say that."

Tera lifted the lid. The interior was covered in a dull grey material, and the small, white spark lay lifeless against the corner. It gave off no aura, nor were its veins alight with energy, nor did it make any noise, but its nature was evident; a whole life of possibilities dwelled within it. Even the finest jewel could not bear such soul, and even the greatest craftsman could not recreate such purity. The difference was

that between a doll and dead man. Yet there was something about it that was not quite right, some flaw that she could not identify, a certain strangeness to its shape and a roughness to its surface and an oddness to the pattern underneath that she had never encountered before. She had never seen a spark in such a dark and solid state. It couldn't be real.

Then it flickered. Tera jumped back, once again confronted with the unmistakable life of it.

"I got it!" Rayna said. "But I'm not sure what to make of it. It's not responding to my questions. Like it's not exactly alive, but not dead either."

"Without a body..."

"Yes, but it sent a message. I only got part of it, but it said, '—port Square on the fifteenth...don't let him—' Then it was garbled."

"Do you think it wants us to go somewhere?" Tera asked, curiosity overcoming fear. The spark had asked for help, now it sounded as though it was telling them where to give it. "Maybe it meant Midport Square. On the fifteenth. That's only a week from now!"

"Maybe," Rayna said, "but it wasn't a private message for me. I think this was a memory, that we are hearing from its past, something it once said to someone else or that someone said to it."

The spark was silent in the box, and no matter how long Tera stared, no more light would come from it. The sun hung a little lower in the sky, and shadows were crawling high up the walls. Above them, the bells played a brief chime.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Eighteen thirteen," Rayna answered.

Tera swore. They'd spent too long and weren't going to beat her father home. He'd chastise her for being late. If he knew why, it wouldn't end with words. "We have to go. Now."

"We should take it with us," Rayna said.

"What? No way! It's not proper. It's Father's..." She felt guilty

just for looking at it, guilty for being unable to stop looking at it, guilty for finding it a little beautiful as well as terrible. Guilty for coveting it. In this room of dusty relics, here was something new.

“We have to help it,” Rayna said. “Father probably wants to study it, dissect it, slice it up into a hundred pieces until it’s nothing but a diagram and a few words in an old book. And that’s the best case. It’s a person, Tera. It doesn’t belong to Father or to anyone else. We can’t leave it here to die or worse! You’re just afraid, but if it were a body in that cabinet, you wouldn’t walk away without doing anything.”

Its words were unnecessary. Tera had already decided the moment she first heard the small voice asking for help and offering in return the very thing that lured her to it: an experience. Her hand trembled between fear and excitement as she touched it, drawing back at first, like a hot coal. She had never held a spark before, not even Rayna, for they were as impossible to catch as smoke in a net. But then she had one in her palm. It was solid and cold and heavy, unlike everything she ever thought about Rayna, who was all sound and light and energy. It made no reaction at all to her touch. It did not dissolve into dust nor vanish into air. With her hand closed around it, it felt no different than a pebble, the stuff of the roads and the walls and the earth.

She was eager to share this knowledge with Rayna, with her friends, with the whole world, to validate and to claim her experience. But experience was a fragile and dangerous thing, like a lit match, and as they left, neither said a word. Tera clutched the spark in her coat pocket and dared not think what fires it might start, lest she snuff it out.