



Chapter Six

“Are you sure you know where you’re going?” asked Tourmaline tersely.

“You’re just in a bad mood because you’re nervous,” said Mai helpfully.

They were already in a lower chamber of the university, chilly and all but abandoned. There was no turning back now.

“Maybe we should turn back,” said George, his anxious whisper echoing strangely, his face lit eerily by the tallow lamp he was carrying. Tourmaline was used to George’s second thoughts, along with his third and fourth, which were usually along the same lines.

She took hold of his hand and kept walking.

“You know, these archives must be very special if

they're such a secret," said Mai. "What do you think they'll be like?"

Tourmaline opened her mouth to give her opinion, thought about it for a second, and realized that she didn't actually have one since until this week she had never heard of the Living Archives and had no idea what they were. They were one more thing her mother had never told her about and she still didn't like the uncomfortable feeling of knowing her mother had so many secrets.

"George?" she said, with the air of someone handing over a question to a colleague because it was beneath her to answer.

George frowned. "I've been thinking," he said, "that it might be something to do with why our university is the best there is. I mean, the Living Archives must be a secret for a reason, and Pellavere must be the best for a reason, and so I thought that maybe the two were..." He trailed off, realizing he hadn't answered the question. "An archive is like a record or a collection, so maybe it's where all the knowledge in the university is stored."

"But isn't that just another library then?" asked Mai

as they passed by a heavy oak door.

“I don’t think it can be,” said George. “Otherwise it wouldn’t be a secret.”

“What, then?” asked Mai. “What’s the point in all this knowledge if you aren’t supposed to use it?”

George, who thought his evening had been quite trying enough already without this determined line of questioning, gave up entirely.

“So we could be walking into a room full of carnivorous books,” said Mai, rather too cheerfully for George’s liking.

“That would hardly be likely.” Tourmaline had quietly been thinking about how many other things might have been kept from her, and whether she shouldn’t devote more time to spying on people to remedy that. But now she glanced at George to confirm what she’d just said. His expression wasn’t very reassuring.

“Or maybe it’s a fountain of knowledge,” said Mai, really gathering pace now. “I’m sure I read about that somewhere once. We should have bought swimsuits in case.”

“I don’t think it’ll be a literal fountain,” said George. He was wringing his hands.

“Talking owls!” said Mai. “Or unicorns! Are they wise? I think they must be. Maybe we’ll have to drink potions and they could give us all the answers our hearts desire. Or they *could* be poison instead and we’d never know until—”

“Mai!” said Tourmaline, who hadn’t known the other girl could be so imaginative. She had her arm round George’s shoulder by this point and she could feel him quivering slightly.

“What?”

“I think we’re here,” said George faintly.

Mai consulted the diagram. “Oh,” she said and even she sounded hushed.

They stood in front of towering arched doors flanked by stone pillars. Each door was carved with an intricate, minutely detailed pattern of leaves. Interspersed with the leaves were all manner of insects, crawling and wriggling and looping up and around and in between the leaves. Tourmaline noticed Mai shudder, though she tried to hide it.

On either side of the door, braziers hung from iron chains, casting flickering light over the children. George put his lamp on the floor. Tourmaline reached out a tentative hand. Her heart was beating uncomfortably, wondering what was on the other side of those doors. George told himself he was not, under any circumstances (except perhaps the carnivorous books thing being real) allowed to take a step back. Mai held her head up and assumed a disinterested air, while very firmly not looking at the mass of incredibly lifelike carved insects in front of her.

Tourmaline took hold of the iron ring (it was actually a snake, Mai noticed, with a barely suppressed shiver) and pulled.

Despite its height, the door glided open as though it weighed no more than a feather. George took a step back.

The avenue in front of them went on and on and on, straight as an arrow, until it disappeared into the distance. The light inside looked natural and when Tourmaline took a step forwards, almost compelled to get a closer look, she realized that the floor beneath her

feet felt almost like earth.

None of them spoke as they stepped into the Living Archives and on to the ground that wasn't quite ground. On either side of the avenue stood trees, or they might have been the ends of bookcases. On closer inspection, it turned out they were both. There was something about them George felt but couldn't quite see. When he looked at them directly, they were trees – ancient and gnarled, their trunks and branches shaped in ways that seemed to confirm their tree-ness. But if he looked at them out of the corner of his eye, he could just about see the books, hidden between leaves, obscured by branches and part of them at the same time. It was more than a little confusing and he was glad that Tourmaline had dragged him away before pudding now that the archives seemed intent on making him feel sick.

Tourmaline looked one way and then the other, then turned round fast, hoping to catch whatever it was that was always just out of sight.

“This isn't – I don't know what's – can you see what—”
Tourmaline stopped, realizing that she sounded, possibly for the first time in her life, like George.

“Never mind that. Look!” Mai pointed and all three of them looked.

The not-quite-forest whispered not-quite-words, and Tourmaline squinted to see if it would make any difference to the figures they were watching as they slowly moved in and out of the trees, or bookcases or whatever they were.

They looked not unlike the professors she was used to seeing in the levels of the university far above, except that they were older. Much older. Bent and stooped, shuffling and creaking.

“They’re just *people*,” whispered Mai.

“Yes,” said George, with great relief.

“*You’re* just a person,” said a voice behind them. George clutched Tourmaline’s arm as they all spun round.

“*I am a Living Archive.*”

The Living Archive standing behind them was old, but *old* wasn’t really an adequate description. She had skin like the bark of the trees that may or may not have been around them, and eyes so small they were barely visible. She was shorter than George and dressed in robes

that were either a greyish velvet, or very dusty, or both.

“*You’re* the Living Archive?” said Tourmaline. She looked around at the other elderly figures. “*All* of you? But then what’s this place?”

George gently elbowed Tourmaline to remind her about manners and respect and generally being intimidated by all adults and a vast number of other things.

The Living Archive looked offended and incredulous. “Only the backbone of this university, that’s all,” she said. “Only the reason that the professors know more than any faculty to ever exist. Only the reason that ground-breaking discoveries are made in our chemistry labs and new species of plants grow in our horticulture centre. That’s all. But never mind being aware of the most important resource in the whole place, just barge in here and start asking pointless questions, why don’t you.”

“We’re very sorry,” said George, hastily. “We’re sure the Living Archive is absolutely *essential*.”

Mai nodded fervently as another Living Archive glowered at them while pushing a trolley full of books

past. They were student textbooks for an astrophysics course and they seemed to be a little bit damp.

“Excuse me,” said Tourmaline, who did have manners but who chose to take shortcuts the vast majority of the time, “but I need to ask some questions.”

The Living Archive looked at her.

“We thought this was the best place to come. Since you’re so very clever,” she added, hoping a bit of flattery would do the trick.

The Living Archive looked at her.

Tourmaline glanced at George, who nodded encouragingly. “We’re in a hurry.”

“Oh, well, in that case, if you’re in a *hurry*, let me drop everything I was doing to assist you. It’s not like this is the second time this week I’ve been pestered within an inch of my life. It’s not like I was engaged in anything of particular importance,” said the woman, who turned tail and stumped off surprisingly quickly down one of the aisles.

Mai and George looked at Tourmaline.

“Excuse me!” Tourmaline ran after the Living Archive and Mai and George ran after Tourmaline.

They all left the path and entered a part of the not-quite-forest that felt older and darker and altogether wilder and less civilized than it had before. George caught sight of a book that he thought looked interesting as he ran, but it covered itself in moss and seemed to slide back into the branches.

“Please wait!” Tourmaline called out. “I need to find my mother! Do you know where she is? She’s gone missing and I think it’s something to do with a source, or with Evelyn Coltsbody!”

The Living Archive stopped, turned round and hurried back. She peered at Tourmaline closely, pulled out a monocle that magnified her left eye so hugely Tourmaline could see each individual blood vessel in her eyeball, then peered at her some more.

“Who is your mother, child?”

“Persephone Grey,” said Tourmaline, not sure what had brought about the sudden interest but very sure that she should use it to her advantage. “She disappeared and no one wants to do anything about it except that *I* do. But we don’t know where to start because we don’t know where my mother was

before she went missing so it's pretty difficult to know where she might be now, and George said—”

“George?” The Living Archive swung her magnified eyeball in George’s direction and scrutinized him from his boots to his brows.

“And who might you be?” she asked, continuing to Mai.

“Mai. My mother just started in the Department of—”

“I didn’t ask who you are,” snapped the Living Archive. “I asked who you might be.”

Mai glanced at George, wide-eyed, and George shrugged, very carefully, so as not to redirect the Living Archive’s attention to himself.

“Come with me.” The Living Archive stomped off again down the aisle and Tourmaline found herself caught somewhere between a fast walk and a slow jog to keep up. Questions kept snapping at her tongue to get out but she held them back, which was not an easy task. She was afraid that the Living Archive would change her mind again and leave them all in the flitting, changing shadows of the stacks of woods or

wherever it was that they were.

A sharp noise, like the cawing of a startled bird, came from somewhere above them.

George flinched. "Was that a crow?"

"Don't be ridiculous," said the Living Archive. "We're indoors. How could there possibly be crows flying around? Here we are."

She pointed ahead and the children saw a still pond, the water shining flatly without so much as a light ripple marring its surface. It had an iridescent sheen to it, as though it were coated in oil.

Tourmaline opened her mouth, closed it again, and finally said, "What...? How...?"

The Living Archive scratched her head and a small puff of dust escaped. "*I've* no idea where it came from, but then it's not my job to know that. All I know is that it's distinctly smaller than it used to be." She looked at Tourmaline pointedly and gestured to the pond. "Go on, then," she said, as if it was obvious what Tourmaline should do.

"I need to know where my mother is," said Tourmaline, in case the Living Archive had forgotten.

The Living Archive rolled her tiny eyes. “I’m an archive, not a psychic,” she said. “We hold a vast amount of knowledge here but I’m neither a private detective nor a lost-and-found box. If you want to find that which is lost, consult the pool. I don’t know *what* they’re teaching up there in that university these days.”

“Consult the pool?” Tourmaline looked at the Living Archive, then at the water, then at George, who was wishing he’d known that Living Archives were as prickly as they were turning out to be before he’d been instrumental in finding the way here.

The Living Archive just gestured in an impatient way then gave Tourmaline a surprisingly forceful poke with one of her bony fingers.

She approached the edge of the pond, which was still completely unmoving and cleared her throat.

“Show me where my mother is,” she said, adding, “please”, in case manners mattered to a pond. “Her name is Persephone Grey.”

She waited.

The Living Archive sighed. “Foolish girl. Honestly. *Look into the pool.* What’s the point of talking to it?”

A pool can't answer you, can it?"

George stepped forwards hurriedly to stop Tourmaline doing anything that he'd regret, and together they looked down at the silvery surface of the water.

"What can you see?" asked Mai, who had joined them and so far could only see herself and Tourmaline flanking George, reflected back at her with remarkable clarity.

"Us," said George. "But maybe that's the answer? That we need to search within ourselves and if we trust in our own ability—"

At this point, the Living Archive scoffed loudly. "That's not the answer and I'll tell you that for nothing."

"Oh," said George.

Tourmaline leaned forwards and the toes of her shoes slid into the darkly rainbowed water. She inched back hurriedly, but not before her socks were thoroughly soaked.

"It isn't working," she said impatiently. "I can't see anything."

"Patience!" snapped the Living Archive. She peered at it herself. "Although, the water *has* been here a very

long time and it's not exactly at its best any more.” She glared at the children. “You'll be lucky to get anything at all after everything it's done for us and with you having been so difficult.”

Tourmaline opened her mouth indignantly but just then, a single large leaf floated gently down from somewhere and settled itself on the pond, making the tiniest little quiver in the surface tension of the water. The leaf unfurled. It was green, and didn't look like it had any business falling off a tree just yet.

A picture began to form on the surface of the leaf and Tourmaline let out a startled noise.

Mai, who only saw a leaf, leaned back, caught George's eye and frowned (the confused sort of frown, not the concentrating sort or the angry sort). George shrugged. Maybe this had all been a bit much for Tourmaline. It was definitely a bit much for him.

“Ah, the old leaf illusion,” said the Living Archive sagely, as though she'd expected this all along. “We do get more of that these days. Still very effective, if less flashy than full-on teleportation.”

“Tele—?” said George, forgetting his own

apprehension for a second.

Luckily, Tourmaline interrupted and saved him from having to fret about his own forwardness later.

“Why am I looking into the pond if what I need to see is on a leaf?” She was starting to lose the edge of awe she’d had since they entered the archives, and finding that her usual store of irritation was still there underneath it.

“Because,” said the Archive, with a long-suffering air, “that’s the way the trees here work. If they work at all. But you know best, of course. Do feel free to leave at any time.”

Tourmaline suppressed a growl and turned back to the leaf. The picture on it was solidifying into what appeared to be a map.

George peered closely at the leaf. It really did look a lot like a leaf and nothing at all like anything else.

“Tourmaline,” he said. “What are you looking at?”

“The map,” said Tourmaline, as if that were obvious. “The ... map on the leaf,” she said, less certainly, as George continued to look at her blankly. “Can’t you see it?”

George looked at Mai in case it was just him.

“I can’t either,” said Mai. “It’s just a leaf, floating on the water.”

Tourmaline turned to the Archive. “But it’s right there, isn’t it? Tell them.”

“Tell them what?” asked the Archive. “That we can see something neither of them can?”

Tourmaline made several noises that indicated her general disbelief until George snapped her out of it with a quick pat on the back. “What does it mean?”

“Well, what do you think it means?” asked the Archive impatiently.

Tourmaline looked at George and George looked at the Archive cautiously. “That the map is only for Tourmaline?”

The Living Archive raised her eyebrows and opened her mouth in what was very clearly exaggerated mock-surprise. George’s mouth became very small in response. There was no need, he thought, to belittle him. He was quite small enough already.

Tourmaline, meanwhile, was watching the leaf, which was perhaps listening to the Archive (she couldn’t bring

herself to think too much about how all this worked), because it drifted slowly to the edge of the pond where it butted gently but insistently against Tourmaline's shoe. She bent down to pick it up.

"Don't touch the water!" shouted the Archive.

All three children jumped.

Tourmaline scrunched her toes inside her wet shoes.

"Why not?"

"Well, go ahead and do it, then," said the Archive crossly, "as long as you don't mind paying for it." She produced something that looked like a well-used oven mitt from about her person, fished the leaf out of the water and spent an annoyingly long time drying it. Tourmaline used the time to quietly wipe the toes of her shoes on the backs of her legs and hope no one had noticed. Finally, the woman presented her with the leaf.

"I'm really the only one who can see this?" She looked at the map, which was etched into the leaf as vividly as if it had been the most brilliant ink on the finest parchment.

"Do you think it's where your mother is?" asked

George, looking first at Tourmaline, who didn't answer, and then at the Archive. "Is that what the map is for?"

"I shouldn't think it means anything else," said the Archive testily. "And it's the only answer you're getting because you only get one question with trees. They're absolute sticklers for it."

Tourmaline was frowning at the map. "It is," she said suddenly. "It is where my mother is. She said something about an island before she left, and I can see an island, right here. But who's going to use the map if only I can see it?"

"Well, *I* don't know, do I?" said the Archive, and walked off, muttering to herself. "Talk about ungrateful. You go out of your way to help someone and this is how they act. Become a Living Archive, they said. Greatest honour our family could ever know, they said. Bah. What, exactly..." Here she became inaudible and George, for one, was quite relieved.

"Can we go now?" he asked. "This place isn't ... usual. Not usual at all."

They started walking back the way they had come and George gave up trying to catch more than a glimpse

of the books on the way. No matter how interesting they probably were, they kept hiding themselves with moss and shadows every time he tried to look at them and he was beginning to think that they didn't deserve his interest after all. There were perfectly nice books in his bedroom that never hid from him and were always there when he needed them.

As the towering door came once again within sight, they passed an old man who was shuffling along reading from a book that seemed to be lit by an internal light that passed along the words as they were read.

Suddenly the man looked up, straight at Tourmaline, who sucked in a breath.

"Just you remember," said the old man, pointing a finger at her, "the source *can* change an artefact, but that doesn't mean it *should*." Then he added, "You know, the island won't let her go."

"Who?" asked Tourmaline, startled. "My mother? What does that mean?"

The Archive gave something between a rumble and a growl. "You'll find out, once it's too late."

Tourmaline looked at George, who shrugged helplessly.

“Excuse me, sir,” said Mai, “but do you happen to know who Evelyn Coltsbody is?”

The old man frowned, his whole face lowering into an expression of suspicion.

“Someone who wants power,” he said, “and it won’t be good if they get it. Not good at all.”

“Why not?” asked Tourmaline, her whole being concentrated on every word the old man said.

“Well, let it happen, then,” he said, suddenly offended, but at what, Tourmaline had no idea. “See if I care. It’ll only be a disaster. But nobody listens to us, do they? No, they think they can do a better job with whatever *they* decide is best. I don’t know why anyone consults us. It’s all nods and smiles when you give them the information they asked for. But do they use it properly? No. No, they just do whatever they wanted to do in the first place, that’s what, and never mind truth or facts.”

The old man stopped to draw breath and Tourmaline hastily said, “Thank you so much. We really must be going now.”

She elbowed George and the children hurried

towards the door.

“I still can’t believe that they’re *people*,” Mai breathed in the breathiest of whispers.

“What were you expecting?” asked the old man, lifting one tremendously shaggy white eyebrow with what looked like an effort. “Carnivorous books?”