

Shadowland

Rhiannon Lassiter

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Dedicated to Chris Fox

Because writing inside books is like
taking things out of their boxes.

Prelude

The Converse Court in the Great Library had acquired a new statue. A young man dressed in white and gold with a spiked silver mesh wound into his golden hair. He stood facing the central pulpit, one hand on the hilt of his sword and the other clenched into a fist, regarding the empty air before him with an expression of implacable rage.

In all the known worlds the Great Library is a thing apart. Inhabited solely by agents of the mysterious organization known as the Collegiate, it is said that even they do not know its true purposes or extent. Beyond this plain room lie hundreds of thousands more; all with the same book-lined walls, the same unassuming wooden furniture, the same open archways leading through more shelved corridors to more book-filled rooms. Papered with books and riddled with Doors, magical portals to other worlds, the Great Library holds more secrets than a lifetime of study could encompass.

In the Converse Court a group of people had clustered around the frozen figure and were murmuring softly to each other as they studied it. The young man's motionless body was covered with a dazzling haze of silver sparks, which fizzed violently when one of the surrounding people came too close.

'It looks like a spell,' someone was saying as a young woman, wearing a curved sword and a sickle-shaped dagger, came to join the edge of the circle.

'Dalandran cast a spell on him earlier but it should have worn off now,' one of the Jurists replied. 'He was a trial witness who had to be suppressed.'

The newcomer had been listening to this with only half an ear, studying the motionless figure with a troubled look, but now her brown eyes flashed and she spoke for the first time.

'His name is Kal khi Kalanthé and he protested when this court separated him from his lover.' She glanced around the circle with a fierce glare to fix her gaze on the last person to speak. 'You said the spell should not have lasted so long. Seek the magician who cast it and bring him here. Now.'

The Jurist she spoke to blinked in surprise but, taking in the dangerous look in her eyes and her confident stance, swallowed the objection he had been about to make and nodded instead. The other bystanders edged away a bit and then backed up further when the young woman turned towards them, finally melting back into the rest of the crowd that wandered through the room. As they did so, a younger girl with a mass of reddish-brown hair came up beside the fighter and stared into the dazzling haze that surrounded Kal.

'What's going on, Jhezra?' she asked.

'I don't know.' The dark-haired girl frowned. 'One of the Jurists said the spell that was cast should not

have lasted this long.’ She paused. ‘What do you think, Zoë?’

‘It looks like static electricity,’ Zoë said thoughtfully and then shrugged at Jhezra’s look of incomprehension. ‘A kind of energy.’

Slowly she put out a hand towards the figure and then suddenly pulled it back. Jhezra looked at her with sudden concern but Zoë shook her head, looking embarrassed.

‘I’m fine,’ she said. ‘It was just a nervous reaction. Static electricity gives you a shock . . . a jolt if you touch it. I’m a bit scared to touch him.’

‘I could . . .’ Jhezra began but just then a tall imposing figure in dark robes strode up next to them and said in clipped tones, ‘Did one of you want to see me?’

It was Dalandran, the magician who had sentenced them. Jhezra turned towards him but although her eyes were angry her voice was calm and controlled.

‘This person came to you for justice and you cast a spell on him. Perhaps you would now remove it?’

‘He was out of order when he objected to our verdict. Nonetheless, I’m gratified to see you’ve obeyed the court’s order to set aside your blood feud with him,’ Dalandran said sententiously and then looked towards Kal with a frown. ‘Give me a moment,’ he said and closed his eyes, assuming an air of concentration.

The two girls watched him silently for a moment and then Jhezra asked softly, ‘Where’s Laura?’

‘I don’t know and I don’t care,’ Zoë said bitterly. ‘This latest mess is all her fault. I’d never have come to the Converse Court if I’d realized how this would end.’

‘Speak softly,’ Jhezra warned, taking Zoë’s arm to move her away from the figure of the magician. ‘But I agree.’ She looked over at Kal’s frozen figure and said, ‘I believe the court tried to be just . . . but how

could they know the full truth of what has happened to us?’

‘Laura was very convincing,’ Zoë admitted. ‘But she used us all to get revenge.’ Her expression faltered and she bit her lips unhappily and Jhezra remembered how young her friend was.

‘It’s not your fault,’ she said, squeezing Zoë’s arm in a gesture of reassurance.

‘I just feel so responsible,’ Zoë said miserably. ‘Everywhere we go, everything we do . . . just makes things worse.’ She looked at the floor and her voice trembled. ‘I wish I’d never taken a step off Earth.’

‘You could have gone back,’ Jhezra said carefully. ‘When the Jurists sent Morgan and Alex home.’

‘Yeah, right.’ Zoë’s voice hardened as she looked up to meet Jhezra’s eyes. ‘If you believe for one minute that’s where those Wheel agents are taking them . . . I wouldn’t trust them as far as I could throw them.’

Jhezra couldn’t help a bubble of laughter at the foreign expression, translated through her amulet. But her expression grew serious again immediately.

‘You don’t think they were telling the truth?’ she asked and Zoë shook her head.

‘Morgan and Kal didn’t trust them,’ she said. ‘Even the Jurists weren’t completely certain or they wouldn’t have sent those two bodyguards along too. Plus they looked like robots or zombies.’ She shuddered. ‘Did you see their eyes?’

‘I did,’ Jhezra said grimly. ‘And I agree.’ Her gaze drifted back to the rage written across Kal’s immobilized face. ‘I don’t think Kal will be pleased when he awakens.’

‘If he wakes up at all,’ Zoë said, looking miserable again. ‘He’s another person whose life we’ve destroyed.’

Jhezra tried to find some comforting words for Zoë.

The younger girl might feel guilty but Jhezra knew better. The devastation of her home world wasn't Zoë's fault; she of all of them had the least involvement, having been dragged into a situation she knew nothing about against her will. But then Dalandran turned away from Kal's motionless body and looked at them with a puzzled expression.

'This spell is none of my doing,' he said. 'It's a defensive magic that deflected my spell and now continues to hold this young man bound.' He shook his head. 'It's magic of a type unfamiliar to me.'

'Then you can't take it off him?' Zoë said, concerned, and the magician shook his head.

'No,' he said. 'I cannot.'

1

Alex Harrell, walking down a book-panelled corridor under guard by four Collegiate agents, was trying to work out how everything had gone so badly wrong.

He'd always prided himself on his logical mind. Back on Earth when he, his sister Laura, and her friend Morgan had first discovered the Door Between Worlds he'd taken a practical approach to everything. While Laura played politics with the merchant guild and Archon's court and Morgan had fallen in love with the idea of herself as a magician, Alex had done real things instead. He'd learnt to ride and fight and had come up with a workable plan to conquer the city. The city's destruction had been a terrible accident, one that had left him shell-shocked for a while.

Coming to the Great Library had been a bad mistake and seeking help from the Jurist faction a worse one when Morgan and Kal turned up and laid charges against them. Laura's testimony to the Court had

dumped him right in it and she'd saved herself at his expense. While she'd been exonerated of any guilt, he'd been blamed for the destruction of the city of Shattershard and agents had been appointed to forcibly return him to Earth. It wasn't any consolation that his sister had done the same thing to Morgan.

Morgan had been taken aback when she was held responsible for cursing Laura with blindness. Either she honestly hadn't known about the rule against harming other world travellers or she thought it didn't apply. Alex could see how she'd come to use her magic against Laura and for a moment in the Converse Court he had thought she would do it again. But Laura had convincingly made Morgan look like a psychopath and now she stumbled along beside him with blank eyes, as if she still couldn't accept what had happened to her.

Back on Earth he'd only known her as his sister's friend, two years below him at school. In Shattershard she'd seemed pathetic, making people think she was a powerful mage because she wore black. Only recently had he come to realize that her magic was both real and dangerous. But now she seemed in the same dazed state he'd been in after the fall of Shattershard and the collapse of his hopes and dreams. Not like someone with a deadly and controlled magic but a victim going to the scaffold.

He couldn't expect any help from Morgan. It looked as if they were going to be taken back to Earth whether he liked it or not, since he was only one against four. The two who walked at the back of the group had spoken to each other quietly a couple of times but he hadn't been able to make out their conversation. The two at the front had walked in complete silence, setting the pace for the group and choosing the turns and twists of the route.

He was still trying to understand how all these Collegiate factions worked together. The agents at the back were Jurists, appointed by the court to see them safely to Earth. The ones at the front had described themselves as agents of the Wheel. They were eerily similar and although they looked like teenagers they had spoken like adults to the Court. They seemed to know everything about the Collegiate and how to cope with its arbitrary rules and obscure customs. They were dressed plainly and their pale pointed faces and weird dark eyes made them look meek and fragile. But Alex couldn't help looking at the weapons they wore: the wooden longbow slung over the boy's shoulders and the short swords hanging from the girl's belt.

Their names were Ciren and Charm and Morgan had been afraid of them. Alex wished she were alert enough for him to whisper to her and ask why. He suspected it had to do with magic. He'd never paid much attention to otherworld magicians and now he was suffering the consequences of that; having no idea what the twins were capable of.

'We are approaching the Bridge Across Darkness,' Ciren said aloud, turning to regard them with those strange black-purple eyes. 'We must watch where we walk.'

'What do you mean, the darkness?' asked one of the Jurists.

'See for yourself,' Charm said stepping aside, and looking past her Alex found himself suddenly blind.

The illusion passed as he looked back to the others and he blinked as he tried to make sense of what he was seeing. Underneath his feet the wooden floor continued as before and a row of hanging lights suspended from the low ceiling glowed dimly from above. But on either side of the passageway, where there

would normally be the inevitable shelves lined with books, there was nothing. Instead of walls was a void of impenetrable blackness, as dark as the Doors Between Worlds.

The two Jurist agents took the lead on to the bridge, moving slowly and uncertainly. Ciren took Morgan's arm and guided her after them. With Charm gesturing that he should precede her, Alex had no choice but to obey.

As he stepped on to the bridge he was instantly claustrophobic. It wasn't that long since he'd been trapped beneath Shattershard, stumbling down narrow tunnels through the debris of fallen rock and seeing the path ahead dimly in the feeble light of Zoë's electric torch. Now there was wood just above his head and beneath his feet and the darkness on each side was like a wall.

To distract himself he squinted through the darkness, trying to work out what it was. Like the Doors Between Worlds it was totally black. At the edge of the corridor it cut off as cleanly as a cliff face. The first time he'd walked through the Door he'd fallen over, disoriented by the passage. It had only lasted an instant but the feeling of being enclosed so entirely in blackness had been like passing out. Staring into the darkness on the side of the bridge he wondered what would happen if he were to jump into it.

'It's been tried.' Charm's voice came levelly from behind him. 'No one came back.'

'There are other experiments.' This time Alex could hear his voice sounding unstable and he could almost feel the hairs rising at the back of his neck at the way Charm had effortlessly read his mind. 'You could tie someone to a rope . . .'

'They come back unconscious or raving.' Ciren's voice

floated back to him in measured tones as if they were having a pleasant conversation. 'Don't walk too close to the edge or you might faint and fall.'

'But why is this here anyway?' Alex asked, trying to keep control of his voice. 'You called it the Bridge Across Darkness.'

'There's a theory,' Ciren said, his voice the only sound in the black void that surrounded them, 'that the Library exists in the space between worlds and the Darkness is what remains when you take away the walls and the books.'

'Is this something your faction constructed?' one of the two Jurists asked from ahead but Charm didn't answer and Ciren was speaking to Morgan.

'See, we're nearly at the end of the passage,' he was saying and Alex stared past him to see an oblong of light outlined ahead of them. The darkness cut off around it like a television screen and Alex wrenched his eyes away as he realized he was feeling dizzy.

Behind Alex, Charm spoke suddenly, causing him to straighten up instinctively.

'The Bridge Across Darkness is on the way to the most closely guarded worlds of the Wheel. It is one of the methods we use to protect ourselves.'

Alex had stepped off the end of the bridge just before she spoke, into a small square book-lined room. He heard the sudden edge in her voice and flinched away in time to see the blade of a sword flash past him.

Flattening himself against the side of the room, Alex saw Ciren pull Morgan out of the way, turning her head so she wouldn't see what was happening. Charm's swords sliced through the air so fast they seemed to hum as she cut the first Juriſt once across the face and twice across the stomach, rending flesh and spilling

blood and entrails in a sticky mess. The man screamed and fell, dead before he hit the ground from the look of the blood pooling from his open throat.

‘No. Please . . . Don’t do this . . .’ The second Jurist was backing away, whimpering under his breath as Charm stalked forward, her face expressionless save for that small smile.

The smell of blood hung heavily in the air, iron and tannic, and Alex seemed to see in slow motion the blood running down Charm’s swords and dripping on to her hands as she raised them once more.

‘Mercy!’ The second Jurist’s cry was lost in a bubbling sound as Charm slashed downwards. Blood spattered the floor and walls and across the rows of books that lined the room.

Charm turned to regard Alex with a small smile.

‘But we have many ways of protecting ourselves,’ she said, picking up the conversation as if nothing had happened.

Morgan whimpered and Alex caught a glimpse of green eyes wide in a pale face before Ciren drew her further away.

‘Don’t be afraid. The Jurists were your enemies, Morgan,’ he said. ‘They wanted to imprison you on your own world. We’re your friends. We rescued you from them.’

Morgan didn’t seem capable of response but Alex found himself replying, speaking unsteadily because the smell in the room was making him nauseous.

‘They were sent to make sure you took us back safely to Earth,’ he heard himself saying, hardly believing that he was arguing the point. ‘Since you killed them you must be planning to take us somewhere else.’

‘Do you object?’ Charm’s voice was cold but her lips were still set into the same sweet smile. ‘Returning to

Earth was supposedly a punishment for you. The Jurists wanted you cut off from the Collegiate.'

'I want to know what's going on.' Alex's voice didn't tremble as he finally tore his gaze away from the red sheen on Charm's blades and met the doubled gaze of the twins. 'I thought you were on their side when you said you knew the way back to Earth, but you killed them. Are you seriously asking me to believe that you did it for Morgan's sake?'

'We don't ask you to believe anything,' Charm said. 'We work for the Wheel and we answer only to our patron.'

'So where are you taking us?' Alex asked, looking from one twin to the other. 'To this place of yours you have to . . . protect?'

'It's called Chalice,' Ciren said, speaking as much to Morgan as to him. 'It's very peaceful, very safe, and very beautiful.' His dark purple eyes met Morgan's compellingly. 'It's the world you've been looking for,' he said.

Alex watched doubtfully. It wasn't as if there was anything he could do about it or any reason why he should even care that the twins seemed to have Morgan spellbound. But in the circumstances he doubted everything they said.

'Nonetheless, it is what you're looking for,' Charm said and he turned with a start to see her watching him and smiling. 'Power and a weapon and a cause to work for.'

Alex was silent but Morgan's forehead creased as if she was trying to remember something.

'Is it your world?' she said uncertainly, looking towards Ciren. 'Is that where we're going?'

'It's the world of our patron,' Ciren told her and Charm stepped forward to move Alex along as she added,

‘Chalice and everything on it belongs to Vespertine Chalcedony.’

Laura Harrell tied her green silk scarf, feeling its smoothness under her careful hands as she bound it across her blinded eyes. She’d only been blind for a couple of weeks but already it felt like forever. She couldn’t imagine what it would have been like to be sightless back on Earth but, strangely enough, the blindness seemed to fit with the person she was here.

Laura imagined herself as others might see her. A girl with light brown hair and bandaged eyes, who held herself straight and tall despite her disability. A girl who had defended herself against accusations in the Jurist court and triumphed over her enemies. A girl who looked helpless in the face of weapons and magic but whose words had a power that could not be denied.

She smiled to herself, savouring the feeling of triumph. Laura had always known she had the power to rule worlds inside her and here, in the Great Library of the universe, she had found it.

‘You must be very happy,’ a voice said and Laura turned her head slightly in its direction.

‘How so?’ she asked. It was Glossali Intergrade, a young Collegiate man who had guided them through the Library and whose advice had helped her to manipulate the Jurists during the trial.

‘You won!’ Glossali said. ‘They punished the girl who blinded you and sent her back to her own world . . . aren’t you pleased?’

‘I suppose so . . .’ Laura said softly and her shoulders lifted and fell in a small sigh. ‘But I’m still blind, Glossali . . . How can I survive like this?’

‘No true Collegiate member would ever harm you,’

he said hastily, his words stumbling over each other in an effort to reassure her. 'Why don't you come and stay with my faction, the Catalogue Cult? We'd look after you . . .'

'Thank you, Glossali,' Laura said, turning her face towards him and trying a small brave smile. 'But I have to go on. I haven't given up hope of a cure, you see.'

'Oh, of course. I should have realized,' Glossali replied, and Laura felt his hand touch hers gently. 'But you can't just strike out all alone . . .' He radiated concern and she imagined his face flushed with worry for her. 'You're safe in the Great Library but there are savages out in the worlds. Anything could happen.'

'I know.' Laura suppressed a smile, thinking of everything that had happened already, and hid it by putting her face in her hands. 'I don't even know where to begin,' she said in a voice that trembled with laughter as she felt Glossali put an arm around her shaking shoulders. 'Tan Ecesis said my only hope was to find a world without any magic at all . . . because the spell on me wouldn't work there.'

'A world without magic.' Glossali thought about it and then said with renewed enthusiasm, 'There must be some. Your own world even . . .'

'No.' Laura jerked her head up sharply, a frown creasing her forehead. 'Not there. I'd be nothing there.' She hastily softened her voice as she turned towards Glossali again. 'I have to find a place where I can be useful, or I'll just be a burden to my friends.'

'You could never be that,' her supporter reassured her. 'But I understand your feelings.'

'So can I.'

Laura started and felt Glossali jump as well at the sound of a newcomer's voice. It was dry and held a hint

of amusement and after a moment Laura placed it as belonging to Lisle Weft.

‘I gather you’re not content with the court’s verdict, Laura Harrell,’ the voice continued and Laura couldn’t avoid the feeling that she had been seen through. Lisle Weft was an elderly woman, a member of the Jurist faction who had asked some penetrating questions during the trial. Laura wondered uneasily how much the woman had overheard of her conversation with Glossali.

Composing herself, Laura smoothed down her hair around the blindfold and replied, ‘I was just telling Glossali that I have other ambitions besides achieving justice,’ she said and to her chagrin Lisle laughed out loud.

‘I’m sure you do,’ she said. ‘But I thought I should warn you that this might not be the place to pursue them.’

‘Why not?’ Laura asked suspiciously and there was a pause.

‘I think perhaps this is a conversation best had in private,’ the elderly woman said. ‘Perhaps you might give us a few moments alone?’

‘Oh certainly.’ Laura heard Glossali move to leave before he thought to add, ‘If that’s all right with Laura.’

‘Yes, go,’ Laura said impatiently, frowning under her scarf. Glossali had been helpful so far but Lisle was by far the more interesting character since she obviously knew the Great Library well and her faction, the Jurists, were far more effective than the foolish Catalogue Cult. Although Laura had the impression that the woman disapproved of her, she couldn’t help being intrigued.

The Great Library was not safe. Laura knew that even if Glossali did not. But she was ready to face the dangers when there was so much to gain. The Library Doors led

to hundreds and thousands of worlds. She'd been a fool to waste her time trying to take over Shattershard when she could pick and choose from worlds without end.

According to the twins this new world was named Chalice. Alex didn't trust anything they said although he couldn't see what reason they would have to lie about it. But when Ciren and Charm had murdered two other Collegiate members in cold blood, he'd realized that trusting the twins was a way to get yourself killed.

Alex had been a warrior. Not for long; and his first serious battle had put an end to the war. But he knew something about killing, more than the other teenagers from Earth realized and he knew that if someone could kill so easily, without warning and without offering the possibility of surrender, you could never turn your back on them. So now, he wasn't thinking about escape or even attacking the twins, he was thinking about how to stay alive.

So far his prospects didn't look good. The twins had taken him with them so that they'd be believed when they promised to take him and Morgan back to Earth. But instead they'd killed the Jurist witnesses and brought Morgan here, as a tool for their faction to use, and the only reason Alex was still alive was that so far they hadn't thought it necessary to kill him. This was only the fourth world Alex had ever been on, not counting the Great Library, and he knew nothing about how it worked. But his new plan meant that he had to know everything that could help him to stay alive so he watched and listened and said nothing.

The Door had opened into a plain square of stone, bracketed at four corners with half-pillars; uniformed guards stood behind each semi-circle shielded by the

stone and with weapons held ready. Even that told Alex that he had finally hit the big time.

This world was organized. The guards' uniforms had the same black and red insignia that stood for the Wheel. This was a world that the Wheel controlled and the only way to reach it was through a Library section they also controlled, or through Doors that would be guarded.

'Agents Ciren and Charm reporting in,' the boy twin said and the guards relaxed minutely while another soldier with extra flashes on his uniform saluted from the edge of the stone square.

'There are two bodies on this side of the Bridge Across Darkness,' Charm, the girl twin, said expressionlessly. 'Send a Sanitation Squad to retrieve and cremate them.'

'It will be done,' the commander said and made some kind of signal behind him. Alex didn't look to see where. His mind was feverishly trying to process all this information.

Ciren and Charm were young but they weren't only trusted agents, they gave commands and expected them to be obeyed. This commander might not be very senior but he was an adult and he was in charge of at least these four Door guards and probably a troop of others.

'Also arrange for increased guard duty at this position until further notice,' Ciren added and Alex thought it hardly seemed necessary.

This wasn't a world that people were getting on or off without the Wheel's permission. The commander saluted again and Ciren and Charm started walking, Ciren keeping his light hold on Morgan's arm. Morgan didn't even seem to notice she was under guard. She was crying again, the tears just spilling out of her eyes and leaving shiny snail-tracks down her face.

'This way,' Charm said to Alex and he started walking.

He could feel the eyes of the Door guards on his back as he walked. He forced himself to remember that the real danger came from the twins. It was they who would attack or, more likely, give the order to have him cut down.

Beyond the stone platform there were more stone buildings and a straight gravel path leading between them. The buildings were only a storey high but Alex could see that walkways and parapets linked them at the top and the corner positions were all guarded. The path they followed led through the centre of what Alex was certain was an army barracks and came out the other side, and suddenly Alex could see for miles.

The stone buildings were at the top of a hill. A hill so square and regular that it might be artificial. The path ahead widened into a road with a surface as smooth as a road back on Earth. Beyond the road was a countryside divided into squares. Fields were divided by low stone walls with roads running in between them. Smaller buildings were grouped at regular intervals and in the far distance fortified positions like the one they had just come from stood on more hills, regularly spaced about the landscape, extending as far as the eye could see to the horizon with the pale grey-violet sky.

'This is Chalice,' Ciren said again, his attention on Morgan, but Charm was already looking over to her right where another soldier snapped instantly to attention.

'Summon transport to Vespertine Chalcedony's villa,' she said. 'For three.' She turned to look at Alex with her lips twitched into a tiny smile and he felt his stomach turn over, certain he was about to hear the order that would have him killed.

'Vespertine may wish to question him,' Ciren said and Alex could only stare, not even certain that the words

meant a reprieve until Charm looked away from him again.

‘This is Alexander Harrell, an inexperienced and unallied world traveller with some understanding of the Collegiate. Schedule him for Salvage.’

‘Yes, sir, right away,’ the soldier said and he glanced at Alex for a second to add: ‘You, follow me,’ before turning crisply on his heel and walking away.

Now was the moment to say something if he wanted to stop the twins disposing of him like unwanted baggage or perhaps to say something to Morgan or make some gesture. But it was too late. All he really wanted was to get away from the twins and his body had already stumbled into motion at the order and he was following the soldier away.

‘Mancer, Drake, have a transport here on the double,’ the soldier snapped, throwing the words over his shoulder to two figures Alex barely glimpsed before they set off at a run.

He wetted his lips to try to speak to this soldier, anxious to know what Salvage was. But he was led at a military jog-trot back inside the barracks and, almost before he realized what was happening, ushered into a plain stone room.

‘Stay here. Don’t leave the room,’ the soldier said and waited for a beat.

‘Yes, yessir,’ Alex managed to say and the man nodded and closed the door in his face.

Morgan watched Alex taken away and another part of her died inside. Once, years ago, she’d had something of a crush on Alex. During the excitement of discovering the Door Between Worlds it had melted away and she’d lost her awe of him. Now, she didn’t even like

him, but when he was gone she had lost her last link to the past.

Her face felt raw and numb simultaneously. Her mouth and nose stung and it was hard to breathe. It hurt to cry and hurt to stop and Morgan wondered if it would ever stop hurting. Around her people came and went, exchanging words with the twins, but she couldn't speak. Everything seemed to be happening on the other side of a veil as thin as gauze and as heavy as lead.

'This way,' Ciren said, his hand on her arm guiding her forward and upwards through the door of some kind of coach drawn by two grey horses. It was high, three steps off the ground, with slippery leather seats inside and small high windows with shutters.

Morgan slid across to the far side of the seat and against the side. In the darkness of the coach, pressed into the corner, she felt the tears start again.

'There's no need for distress,' Charm said, as she followed her twin into the coach and pulled the small oval door shut behind her. 'You've been rescued, remember?'

'I don't think she can hear you,' Ciren said. 'She's shell-shocked.'

'She can hear me,' Charm said. 'But her mind is like fog. She hears but she can't find words to speak.'

'Will Vespertine find that acceptable?' Ciren said, and Morgan felt a sense of resentment stir at how easily they discussed their plans while she sat next to them.

'Does it matter?' Charm was saying. 'We've achieved what we were sent to do.'

'No. It doesn't matter,' Ciren replied but then he fell silent himself.

The twins had been her friends. Before she'd found . . . but Morgan wouldn't think about Kal. She'd met

Ciren and Charm in the magical guild-house in Shattershard. They'd frightened her at first but when she'd got to know them she hadn't found their difference so strange. Morgan's friends had always been odd, the people on the edges of society who no one else could be bothered with.

Laura was the only friend she'd had who was popular, and that was because people on Earth didn't know Laura, didn't know how little she cared about anyone except herself. Zoë hadn't been her friend at all, caring too much about appearances to waste time on anyone not at the centre of things. If it hadn't been for the Door Between Worlds Zoë would never have spoken to her. Alex had never been interested in her, or in anything she found interesting, treating her like a child playing with toys while he concentrated on more serious business. Only one person had ever seen her for who she was.

Laura didn't know what to make of Lisle Weft. The older woman had helped them at first and then later sat in judgement over them but Laura had the impression that through all of it Lisle was thinking and feeling very different things from the public persona she presented. She was a politician, much more so than the other people they'd met in the Library, and Laura wondered uneasily if perhaps the older woman could read people as easily as she could herself.

Lisle travelled everywhere with a dog, although Laura only knew this because the others had told her so. Most of the time Pepper was quiet, only making a sound if Lisle herself seemed angry or upset. Now, trying to make a friendly gesture, Laura extended a hand towards the floor.

'Is Pepper with you?' she asked.

'Naturally,' Lisle said calmly. 'Perhaps you should consider some form of animal companion, to guide you.'

'Perhaps,' Laura said vaguely. She'd never had a pet; her mother always claimed dogs and cats brought in dirt and she hadn't been able to find the idea of a gerbil or hamster interesting. When she was twelve she'd had a tank of tropical fish for a while but although fish looked attractive at first they'd got strange fungal diseases and she'd given them away.

'Then again, you seem to have made something of a pet of that young Cultist,' Lisle said. Her voice was so reasonable that it took Laura a moment to realize what she'd said.

'Glossali?' Laura tried to put the right amount of outrage into her voice. 'He's a friend . . .'

'Spare me,' Lisle's voice snapped. 'I don't have time to fence with you, Laura Harrell. Your act doesn't convince me.'

For the first time since she'd been blinded Laura felt herself straining to see, wanting to see the expression on Lisle's face. But it was useless and she sat in silence, not knowing what sort of response was expected.

'I'm not trying to trap you,' Lisle said after a moment. 'The trial is over, you won your case and that's the end of it as far as I'm concerned. But you've set in motion events that are larger than you realize and you're woefully ill-prepared for the consequences.'

'What do you mean?' Laura asked slowly. She didn't know what kind of game Lisle was playing and she wasn't about to lower her guard just because the old woman said it was safe.

'I mean that you are not the first person to twist Collegiate law for your own purposes,' Lisle said sharply. 'And that you may have found it amusing to act weak

and defenceless but I think you'll find the reality less enjoyable.' Her voice was sharp and Laura heard a low growl of sound and felt her skin prickle with alarm.

'Are you threatening me?' she asked incredulously.

'No. Believe it or not, I'm trying to help you.' Lisle spoke quietly but with conviction. 'This part of the Library may be about to become very dangerous and your clever excuses won't help you when the weather changes.'

Laura shivered, despite herself. She wondered if maybe she'd been too hasty in casting all the blame on Alex during the trial. Her brother might not have been much of a defender but up until now she'd always been able to rely on him supporting her. Now he was gone and the other members of their group seemed to have vanished.

'You've alienated your companions,' Lisle said, echoing her thoughts. 'You've thrown your brother to the wolves and now all you have to rely upon is that naive and impressionable Catalogue Cultist. I'm offering you a way out, if you choose to take it.'

'And why should I trust you?' Laura asked sarcastically. 'You with your vague premonitions and obscure threats?' She felt herself getting angry as she added: 'I've done all right so far, haven't I?'

'Have you?' Lisle's voice seemed to hold a thread of pity. 'I heard what you said before. You may have escaped judgement but your ambitions have come to nothing. You have to start all over again.'

'And you're offering to help me?' Laura said, disbelievingly.

'I'm offering you a chance,' Lisle corrected. 'Only that. A chance to start again in another world.'