



EMERALD EYES DESTINY

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Excerpt of three chapters

CHAPTER ONE

Cindy Meikin was bored. She gazed around the classroom and stifled a yawn as her math teacher told everyone for the third time there was only three weeks until the senior exams. She wished they were all over and the summer vacation had arrived.

"As if we didn't know," said her friend Tess from the seat next to her.

"True," sighed Cindy. She glanced out the window to where a bird was fluttering around the branch of an adjacent tree. Without really thinking she stretched her right hand down the side of the desk to relieve cramp caused by constant writing. Her fingers touched something and tingled. It wasn't unpleasant but unexpected and she glanced down at her hand.

"Oh, my God," she whispered. She could see nothing beyond the end of her sweater sleeve. Where was her hand?

She jerked her arm up and it reappeared. It felt cold as if it had been removed from a warm pocket on a winter's day. With the math lesson forgotten, she gingerly dropped her arm down the side of the desk again. Her eyes widened in amazement as, her fingers followed by her whole hand disappeared from view.

She gasped.

"I'm glad you're finding the lesson interesting, Cindy," said her math teacher with sarcasm in her voice.

Cindy's face went white. "I'm sorry, Miss Hughes," she replied.

"Are you feeling ill, Cindy?" Allison Hughes asked kindly. "If you're not well you can go to the medical room."

Cindy smiled faintly. "No, Im fine, Miss Hughes."

The teenager stole another glance down at her arm and wriggled her fingers. She saw nothing; only an empty sleeve but there was feeling in her fingers. She stretched further down and touched something cool and solid.

In fright, Cindy jerked her hand and stared at the place where it had been. All she could see was the blue carpet and a bit of litter on the floor. Once more she slipped her hand down the side of the desk and again her fingers, followed by the rest of her hand, disappeared. She reached further. Yes, there was something there ... some invisible object.

Very carefully she gripped whatever it was between her thumb and forefinger and held on. The object felt quite light as she lifted her whole arm up. As her hand appeared she stifled another gasp. She held a small oval shaped mirror. She lifted it onto the desk and gazed at her reflection.

Bright green eyes stared back at her from an oval face surrounded by blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail to comply with school regulations. The mirror looked quite normal, but it began to feel felt warm. She glanced away when her teacher coughed and pretended to concentrate on the lesson before stealing another look at the object.

This time, though, the mirror didn't reflect her image. It was completely black. Cindy frowned and shook it. The surface moved and, before her eyes, formed into a series of shapes or characters like a foreign language such as Hindi or Hebrew.

"What are you?" she whispered and shook the instrument again. It was obviously something far more sophisticated than a mirror. Perhaps it was one of those new paging machines the telephone company sold. Suddenly the silver characters moved again until they formed two words written in English.

Touch me, it spelt out.

"Touch me," whispered Cindy as she bent over closer. "Where?"

The words faded and a new word formed in the top right hand corner. Here!

Cindy reached out and pressed the top corner with her little finger. Immediately the silver lines made an impression of her fingerprint on the black surface. For a second it stayed before everything faded and new words appeared.

You are true I have found you.

Those words also faded to be followed by, Keep me hidden. Show nobody. Promise?

"I guess so," said Cindy, "but who are you?"

Will soon explain. Danger! Must go. The words went fuzzy, and her reflection stared back at her?

"Cindy, are you okay?" It was her friend Tess speaking. "You look as white as a sheet."

Cindy shrugged. "I just feel a little queasy, that's all."

"Well go to the medical room," said Tess. "I'll come with you."

"I'll be okay," said Cindy as she glanced at the instrument in her hand again and saw it still looked like a mirror. She slipped it in her pocket and smiled at Tess. "It's only ten minutes to the end of math."

Over the next two hours Cindy moved onto other subjects, but her mind was distracted. She constantly pulled the mirror out to check. Never once, though, did it change. Cindy frowned and wondered if the whole thing had been a hallucination. She'd often had strange dreams and had awoken with a pounding head to find herself covered in perspiration. Perhaps she'd nodded off in class and dreamed it all. But the strange thing was there, in her pockets; she couldn't have dreamed that. Cindy sighed and waited impatiently for the school day to finish.

After school she walked home by herself. It was a warm afternoon and she usually enjoyed this time wandering along by herself. At home were the usual chores and homework that needed doing before her mom arrived back from work about five fifteen. She crossed the road a small park with shady trees and neatly mowed lawns. As she stepped up from the curb her hand touched somebody behind her.

"Sorry," she apologized and withdrew her hand. She turned to see who was there but only a couple of children a hundred yards away. At the same time the mirror in her pocket felt hot. She reached in and pulled it out. It was black again. This was creepy. Cindy glanced around, but the street appeared to be no different. The children were still playing; a car drove by. When she glanced down at the mirror in her hand she jumped in fright. It had started to form words again.

Who are you?

"I'm Cindy," she said before realizing how silly it was to talk to a computer or whatever it was.

Hello Cindy, my name is Sylvia Von Hilderthorn. I really need of your help. Grab my hand. Please!

"How?"

Reach down like you did earlier.

Cindy anxious but curiosity made her continue. She stopped, put her schoolbooks down on the grass and reached towards the ground. Once more she saw her hand disappear and that warm feeling. She reached further and felt something touching her. Someone or something was squeezing her hand.

She gasped in alarm and lifted her arm. Something else was wrong. A weight pulled her down. She yanked herself up and saw her hand appear but it was holding another hand.

"Oh, my God!" she gasped and stepped back several steps.

As she did, a shimmer appeared in the air and, there on the sidewalk staring up at her was a girl about her own age. She was dressed in what would have been a beautiful, full length silver dress except it was stained and ripped down one side. An exposed leg was covered in ugly purple bruises above some leather boots. The girl's blonde hair was knotted and unwashed. One of her arms was bleeding from a huge cut above the elbow.

"Are you Sylvia?" Cindy said in a hushed choke.

The girl blinked and stared around. She started to say something then shut her eyes. For a moment all was quiet then she opened her eyes and smiled.

"Cindy?" she asked in a clear but slightly accented English. "You rescued me. I thank you." For a second their eyes met, then the girl gave a low moan and collapsed, unconscious, onto the ground.

Cindy stared down at the stranger lying on the path and froze. Things were happening too quickly. Before she had time to recover her composure a car pulled up beside them and a

woman wound down the passenger window.

"What happened to your friend?" she asked.

Cindy looked up. "I found her lying here. Shes hurt," she said as the woman got out of her car and walked around to where the girl was lying.

"She's either been in an accident or has been mugged. You say you found her here?"

"Well, sort of," said Cindy and hesitated. "I ...err.. arranged to meet Sylvia at the corner park but was late. She's my cousin," she lied. "When I arrived she was on the sidewalk here."

"She does look like you. I can see quite a likeness but enough small talk. Your cousin needs help," continued the woman. "Help me put her into the car and Ill take her to the hospital."

"Homes closer," said Cindy quickly. For some unknown reason she felt it wouldn't be a good idea to take Sylvia to a hospital.

"Are you sure?" The woman frowned.

"Quite sure. Moms there. If necessary we can go on to the hospital later."

Sylvia moaned and opened her eyes as the good Samaritan and Cindy helped her into the car. The strange girl seemed to have realized what happening while at the same time appearing to be terrified of the car.

"This lady has kindly offered to take us home," Cindy said hastily.

Sylvia nodded. She said nothing, but her eyes darted wildly around as the car drove off. Cindy reached across to comfort her and felt the other girls hand trembling.

"You'll be fine," she whispered then spoke in a louder voice. "Turn left at the next street, please. Our house is half way along the block."

After arriving Cindy escorted Sylvia up the side steps and hoped the woman wouldn't follow. If she didn't leave it could be a nuisance.

Hi, Mom, she called out knowing there would be nobody inside. "Poor Sylvia's had a fall. We got a lift home." She turned and waved at the woman. "Thanks ever so much," she called and breathed a sigh of relief as the car drove away.

"What sort of magic was that?" asked Sylvia.

Cindy stared at her. "Magic. What magic?"

"That strange animal we climbed inside."

Cindy frowned. This was getting weird. "Oh, you mean the car? That's not magic. Its just a machine."

"You mean like a cross bow; a thing made by humans that doesn't think?"

"I guess so. It's more like your little mirror machine that you contacted me with."

"But that is magic," Sylvia said.

Cindy scratched the back of her head in exasperation. "Don't worry," she said. "Come inside. Your arm's still bleeding. You certainly had a nasty fall. How did it happen?"

Sylvia's face clouded over. "The jailer attacked me with a knife, but I managed to use my powers to knock him away. He would have come back..." She stopped and stared in alarm as Cindy opened the door and switched on the light.

"It's electricity," explained Cindy. "Haven't you ever seen electric lights?"

"Do you harness lightning bolts?"

"Not really, Cindy relaxed and chuckled. "It's similar, I guess."

She shook her head in wonder at this strange companion and took her through to the bathroom where there was a small first aid kit. Sylvia stared at the water running out of the faucet but said nothing while Cindy bandaged her arm and applied ointment on her other bruises.

"Would you like a shower?" asked Cindy. "I did it backwards, didn't I? You should have had a shower before I put on the bandage."

"Do you change the weather, too?"

"No. The water comes out little holes to clean you. Look." She led her companion through to the bathroom, reached up and turned the shower. Sylvia stared at the warm water streaming down. She reached out, ran her arms under it and wiped herself.

"Yes, Cindy, I think Id like a shower. Are you sure it will be all right?"

"Of course. There's nobody else here. I often have a shower when I get home. Look, Ill

get you some of my clothes. Were about the same size. Your dress is a bit torn."

A few moments later, Sylvia walked barefooted into the sitting room in Cindy's jeans, blouse and sweater. She tenderly crossed to where Cindy was sitting on a couch and sat beside her.

"Now," said Cindy kindly. "Tell me about yourself. Where did you come from and how did you get hurt?"

Sylvia looked at the carpet then stared up miserably. "I don't know what to say. It's been so awful. Your land is so strange, yet you and that lady were so kind."

She hesitated for a moment before continuing. "Our land was one of the finest places in the world. All the creatures lived together in peace with humans, dwarfs and elves all contributing to society. I come from a special branch of humans called wizards, who use the natural elements around to create magic. There are schools of magic where we learn to control our natural abilities to help our citizens."

She stopped and frowned. "It is difficult to use your words to describe our things."

"You're going well," praised Cindy. "How is it you know English at all?"

"My powers," said Sylvia. "Within a few moments of meeting you my powers taught me your language."

"Gee," said Cindy. "I wish I could do that. I've been learning German for four years and still have trouble."

"Well, if you want me to..." said Sylvia

Cindy grinned and held up her hand. "Not now, thanks. Im more interested in your story."

"The troubles started when we were invaded by a massive army from Mersovia, a country to our south. This was before I was born. The Mersovians captured all except a small mountainous area of Urania -- that's my country. They set about ruthlessly killing or sending any creatures they didn't classify as humans into slavery. That included us because of our powers.

We were easily recognized because of our eyes and we became known as Emerald Eyes. There were never a huge number of us in the first place and when I was born, Free Urania consisted of a small mountainous land that could be easily defended.

It was at this time, about fifteen years ago, when we tried to contact other worlds. This was extremely difficult and was mainly by trial and error. Often it would be months before one was found. Once a suitable world was discovered we would send a wizard through to see what it was like.

Some were sent to your Earth and they became receptors who could be used if anyone of us wished to reach here."

"What's a receptor?" asked Cindy.

"You are," answered Sylvia. "It's a person with magical powers to contact us through the void."

"But I have no magical powers."

"Not here, maybe, but in our world you would have."

"I see." Cindy was completely mystified. "How do you know I am one of these receptors?"

"The receptor messenger I sent you. Your hand appeared out of the void and... well, you know the rest. If you weren't a receptor, I wouldn't be here right now... Your eyes, too..."

Cindy frowned. "I guess they are different," she said. "I take after Mom. She said our green eyes are a family trait."

Sylvia stared at Cindy but said nothing for a long time. Finally she asked, "Where did your mother come from?"

A bewildered look appeared on Cindy's face. "Somewhere in Eastern Europe. She refuses to speak about it. All I know is that she was a refugee who escaped to this country about sixteen years ago when I was a toddler. I've asked about her homeland but all she said was it was a cruel, ruthless place, and Dad and other relations were all killed there. Once she cried so I haven't bothered to talk about it lately."

"It sounds like the part of Urania controlled by the Mersovians," said Sylvia.

"You mean Mom may be from your world?" gasped Cindy
"You could be from there, also," replied Sylvia. "Nobody remembers what they were doing when they were two."

While the two girls were engrossed in their conversation a car pulled into the driveway and Cindy's mother, Natasha Meikin, climbed out with a bag of groceries. She walked into the kitchen and ignored the voices from the adjacent room. It was not unusual for Cindy to have friends around in the evening.

However, some of the words drifting through the doorway from the adjacent sitting room triggered something in her mind. She frowned and walked across the kitchen in time to eavesdrop while the girls talked. A scowl crossed her face and she rubbed her lips with her fingers when she heard Sylvia speak. The voice seemed to stir old memories. She was sure this wasn't one of Cindy's usual friends. Natasha pushed the half opened door back and stood staring at the scene inside. For a second it seemed that Cindy was sitting on the couch before she realized her daughter was standing facing away from her and a second girl was sitting there dressed in clothes similar to those Cindy usually wore.

Cindy turned and saw her mother standing there. "Hi, Mom," she said. "You gave me a fright. I never heard the car."

Natasha, though, was looking at the visitor. "And who are you, young lady?" she said. Sylvia blushed in embarrassment and stood up. "I'm sorry, My Lady. I shouldn't have intruded." She turned. "Bye, Cindy. I'll be going..."

Before Cindy could do anything, Sylvia headed to the door. At the same time, Natasha stepped sideways to block any escape. For a second both of them were immobile in the doorway. Sylvia stopped and her eyes met Natasha's for a second before the strange girl stepped back and gazed at the floor with her shoulders slumped.

"Don't go," Natasha whispered in a voice that Cindy could hardly hear. "I'm the one who should be sorry. I spoke out of turn. You're welcome. Its just that..."

"Just what, Mom?" Cindy was indignant.

Natasha looked at her daughter then on to Sylvia before brushing her hand over her forehead. "It's just such a long time. I never dreamed Id see someone like your friend ever again, Cindy Dear."

"This is Sylvia, Mom," said Cindy with uncertainty in her voice.

Natasha smiled and reached out her two hands to grab Sylvia. "You're very welcome, Sylvia," she said. "My goodness, look at you. Its obvious, you've had a hard time. Sit down. I caught part of your conversation. You're from Urania, aren't you?"

Cindy stood staring with her eyes went round in amazement.

"Yes, Mrs Meikin, I am. Cindy pulled me through the void and rescued me," Sylvia said

"Cindy?" replied Natasha in astonishment. "How could she? She knew nothing of your world." She walked over and sat on the couch. "Perhaps you had both better explain what happened."

Sylvia glanced at Cindy with a white face and pursed lips but said nothing.

"Don't worry, Moms okay," said Cindy and turned to Natasha. "Sylvia is in trouble, Mom. Ill tell you everything I know."

Natasha listened to Cindy's description of the strange events that took place that day without saying a word. At times she gave a tiny smile and when Cindy had finished she turned to Sylvia who was still standing by the door.

"Sylvia, she said kindly. "I'm glad you're here. This is now your home for as long as you wish to stay. Please..." She stopped to wipe away a tear appearing in the corner of her eye before continuing. "I never realized the war was still being fought. I lost all contact. I never knew..."

Sylvia turned her piercing green eyes at the mother and daughter and sent out a mind

probe as naturally as a human would acknowledge somebody with a facial expression. A feeling of warmth and trust flushed through her body. These two were genuine. In her probe she discovered Cindy never knew of her world and Natasha had indeed lost contact with it. She had forged out a new life in this strange environment. It was all true. They were compatriots.

Tears streamed out of her eyes and her body shook in huge uncontrolled sobs.

"What's wrong, Sylvia?" said a distressed Cindy. "Mom, what have you done to her?"

Sylvia looked up. "No, its not your mom. It's okay!" She smiled between the tears. "You're more than I could have hoped for. I'm so thrilled."

Natasha frowned. "You used a mind probe, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Sylvia. "It was a mind probe. I never gave up. Even the archwizard told me last month it was futile trying to establish contact but I found you. Im so happy."

"Not Archwizard Lightshield," asked Natasha. "Is he still alive?"

"Oh, yes, very much so."

"And he never left...?"

"No. We all retreated to the mountains and finally to the Fortress of Frozen Stars. That's our last remaining stronghold. The Mersovians have it surrounded and are maintaining a siege to starve us out. Its been on for three months now, and were almost out of food and water..."

Sylvia stared at Cindy's mystified face. "Perhaps I should start from the beginning," she began...

CHAPTER TWO

The Fortress of The Frozen Stars, more commonly known as Fort Star, stood stark and white at the entrance to the only pass through the Northern Mountains and had originally been built to stop hordes of barbarians from entering the lowlands. Now it was the last bastion of resistance in the twenty-year war. Surviving remnants of the once powerful Free Urania Army were trapped inside while thousands of Mersovians occupied the adjacent land.

The fortress consisted of five enormous towers linked together by concave granite walls to form a massive pentagon. The interior was open to the sky and, at the moment, occupied by a tent city of soldiers and refugees. Humans, dwarfs, and even occasional elves huddled together for mutual protection and hope that their last tool of defence, the mighty walls of the fort, would save them from the brutal enemy. Few of the fort's occupants believed their leader, the wizard, could really save them. After all, if his magic was so powerful, why hadn't he driven the enemy away years before?

The fort's massive walls and a valiant defence force had halted three attacks by the enemy. After hundreds of fireballs had stifled the last frontal attack, the Mersovians had retreated out of crossbow range and started a new phase of the conflict. Forces were sent north to block the mountain passes. No supplies had entered the fort for three months. A state of siege now existed.

In Tower Five, Archwizard Lightshield looked out over the plains where hundreds of campfires were burning in the dull cloudy light. As far as he could see these dots of flickering flames indicated the sheer size of the enemy that surrounded them. He sighed and rung a tiny bell on the desk he was standing beside. The door opened and an old butler entered.

"You rang, Archwizard?" he asked very formally.

"Yes, Barrie. Do you know where Sylvia is?"

"Probably attending the wounded in the infirmary, Sire. She spends most afternoons there now."

"Yes, of course. Could you fetch her, please?"

"Certainly, Sire." Barrie bowed low and retreated from the room.

"Formal old stuff shirt," the archwizard muttered to himself when the butler had gone. "He should realize the days of bowing and scraping are long over."

Ten minutes later there was a knock. Sylvia appeared, smiled and waited for the archwizard to speak.

"I have a mission for you," said Lightshield. "As you know we have failed to establish any links with other worlds so I think we are foolish to gamble on any help from that direction."

"But," said Sylvia with a frown. "The receptor Messenger works well. Just give us a little more time."

The Archwizard held up his hand. "That is what we haven't got, my dear. Our most urgent need at the moment is food. I want you to try to use your powers to establish a link within this world, a few thousand leagues to the eastern or northern lands over the ocean. We used to trade there many years ago and this could become an escape route for us all."

"But why me?" asked Sylvia. "I'm only a trainee."

"Yes but I have been keeping an eye on your talents, young lady. You are one of only a few who has the power to move through space. It's in your genes. Different families have different strengths. Mine is harnessing natural elements, Milford heals the sick and so on. Will you help?"

"Of course," Sylvia replied. She had great respect for her mentor and friend but her voice portrayed the disappointed at the change of tact requested.

"Thank you, my dear," said Archwizard Lightshield. His eyes peered at the youngster from under shaggy eyebrows as he leaned forward on his podium. This was one of the more difficult requests he had had to make. One more avenue of escape was to be abandoned but the faint hope of outer world contact could not now be relied upon to save them. His latest idea might just work.

Sylvia walked slowly back to her modest quarters three floors below, deep in thought. She tossed her jacket on a chair and went through to a small room lit by the light from a single narrow window of the towers inner wall. This was her family's library. Old texts of cloth covered books that had been in her family for generations filled shelves of two walls. They often held knowledge long forgotten in their present world.

Sylvia lit an overhead oil lamp and opened an ancient but still very serviceable filing cabinet. She thumbed through the small yellowing cards until she came to Transportation Spells.

The references were numerous but seldom led to more than the briefest mention of the topic. There was much on interworld movement and receptors but nothing that would help her with her new assignment.

For the whole afternoon she continued her research but found nothing of any use. Finally, she gave up and walked down the circular stairway to the ground floor where the communal dining room was open for supper. The rations had been cut again but the toast and soup still tasted appetizing, thanks to the talents of the chef, a podgy little man who delighted in stretching enough food for four into a gourmet supper for a dozen. Many locals reckoned he had access to a secret food supply while others thought he had asked the archwizard to make a spell so everyone thought they were eating well when, in fact, there was only stale bread on every plate. Everyone agreed, though, that he did a wonderful job.

Simon, another wizard trainee, joined Sylvia at her table. "Why don't you visit the forts library over in Tower Two," he said after hearing of Sylvia's assignment. "It's filled with ancient books and formulas."

"I guess so," said Sylvia, "but its such a dreary old place. Would you like to come with me?"

"Sure."

After their meal the pair walked around the courtyard and gazed sympathetically at the tent city where a line of refugees waited for their daily food rations. It was twilight, and an old dwarf was walking along with a flaming torch, lighting the oil lamps attached to brackets that

leaned out from the interior walls of the fort.

"Evening Mistress Sylvia, Master Simon," he said politely and tipped his tiny pointed hat as they walked by.

"Evening, Grimswild," they both replied.

They were about to continue onward when the dwarf called them back. He stared at Sylvia with yellow eyes and frowned. "Mistress Sylvia," he said in an unusually serious voice. "Are you about to take a journey?"

"No," said Sylvia. "There's no place to go, is there?"

"Your shadow in the lamplight, Mistress; it has a red haze surrounding it. You are in great danger. Take my advice. Don't leave the fort within the next two days."

Sylvia frowned. Grimswild had never been like this before. He was a funny little dwarf but was usually optimistic and cheerful.

"Thank you, Grimswild," she finally said, "but don't worry, I'm not going anywhere except the library."

"So be it, My Lady," Grimswild replied and ambled along to light the next lamp.

"Silly old fellow," muttered Simon. "Don't worry about him."

"No, I guess not. It's strange though. I also had a feeling of danger when we walked across the courtyard." She swung her hair back. "It's just these bad times, I suppose."

At the library they walked down long corridors of shelves until they came to the *Spells and Magical Potions* section. The librarian, who looked as old as the library itself, sniffed and snorted when asked for help but her attitude changed when Archwizard Lightshield's name was mentioned.

"Why didn't you say you were here for the archwizard?" she said. Her crinkly face turned into a beam. "Of course I can help you with transportation spells."

She led them through a labyrinth of passages until she came to a dark corner. "Not many people use this section," she said. "They're only reference books. No loans allowed. They're too valuable."

"Of course," said Simon and Sylvia grinned.

They spent over an hour searching and were about to give up when Simon found a slim green book entitled *Spells to Transport Material Objects Across Continents*.

"Would this be any good?" he asked.

"Could be. Let's have a look."

She sat down and began to read the difficult archaic text full of 'Wherefore thy esteemed wizard or Thou shalt honor thy ancestors. Sylvia struggled on while Simon grew bored and wandered away to look for other books.

"Any luck?" he finally said a quarter of an hour later.

"I think so," said Sylvia. "There's enough to experiment with. Could you grab a slate and write down what I read out?"

"Glad to help." Simon grabbed a slate from a nearby table and copied out Sylvia's dictation.

"That will do," Sylvia said when they had finished. "I'll show Archbishop Lightshield tomorrow. Let's go home."

Archwizard Lightshield read the notes with interest and glanced up at Sylvia. "It may work, you know. I understand most of the spell but a few of the words are unknown. Leave it here and I'll test it out."

"I'll try it," said Sylvia.

The archwizard raised an eyebrow. "The one condition is that is if you get it operating you don't go into it yourself. Send one of the laboratory animals through like Silky here." He pointed to a huge white rabbit sitting in a cage across the room. "He's trained to come back

through anything he's been sent. I've used him several times."

"Okay," said Sylvia, "but even if Silky comes back safely, someone will have to ultimately go through."

"That's what we've got warriors for," snorted the Archwizard. "They will take the initial risks. That's an order."

"Yes, Archwizard Lightshield," said Sylvia in a disappointed voice even though she understood the logic of the orders.

For three days she worked on the ancient spell without any success. Two of the ingredients seemed to be ancient potions unknown to her. Simon suggested they go back to the library and look through some more old reference books and she reluctantly agreed.

"Look, you stay in the laboratory and keep experimenting. I'll go," suggested Simon. "I'm not much help here, anyway."

"Thanks," replied Sylvia. "While you're gone, I'll try one more idea."

Up to this stage she hadn't used the receptor messenger at all. What was needed was a trigger to set things in motion. She took the instrument out of an inner pocket of the long silver gown she was wearing and started a chant. For several seconds she continued the complicated spell until the section where it had always disintegrated before was reached. At that point she switched on the receptor messenger to find the mirror had changed to black. Little silver lines flashed across it to form the words Sylvia spoke.

When her directions were completed, Sylvia cried, "Activate!"

Immediately the outer wall of her laboratory shimmered and a circular shaped hole appeared showing pine trees but little else. Suddenly the air around her began to move. The warm air in the room was being sucked out into the colder outside climate. With a sudden swish, it increased intensity and Sylvia found herself being dragged towards the hole.

She screamed and grabbed at the bench but the suction was too great. She felt herself skidding through the hole. Floorboards beneath her disappeared and she found her boots pushing against pine needles. She was on the other side!

There was a faint whine, the wind stopped and the magic circle disappeared. With a pounding heart, Sylvia staggered to her feet and looked around. Behind her were the trees she had originally seen, but in the distance was a huge pentagonal shaped fortress stretching across the valley.

"Oh, my God," she gasped. "That's our fort. I've been transported only a wee way." Simon must have made some miscalculation."

Her feelings of relief turned to despair when she glanced around. Across the valley leading to Fort Star were enemy troops, hundreds of them. It was the same view she had got used to from the fort except that she was now on the outside looking in.

"The next few hours were terrible," narrated Sylvia to Cindy and Natasha. "I tried to cast an invisibility spell but couldn't maintain it. Then everything went blank. Someone must have hit me from behind. I awoke to find myself in a horrible room being held by two massive enemy warriors. An officer was shouting at me and when I didn't reply I was poked by a spear. That's how I got the cuts."

"Take the witch down below," snarled the Mersovian officer. "I'll interrogate her later when she stops snivelling. Be careful, though; she is still capable of casting spells."

Two warriors poked Sylvia with their evil spears. "Move it, witch, you heard the commander," one said.

She was forced along a corridor and down a windy stone stairway. For over a thousand years prisoners had stumbled along the stone corridor of the lower dungeon before being thrown into one of the numerous cells that lined each side. Ancient instruments of torture lay rusting and unused along the walls while rats darted along the floor and into holes where the

ancient mortar had crumbled into dusk. Oozy slime covered the walls and ceiling, and there was a constant drip of moisture that seeped through from the ground above.

Sylvia attempted to walk with pride but injuries received in her capture and rough handling by her captors caused her to stumble several times as she was prodded by the steel capped spears.

However, the burly men were careful not to approach too closely. It was as if they were not convinced she couldn't, with a snap of her fingers, cast lightning through the corridor and incinerate them both. Sylvia sighed and wished she could.

Near the end of the corridor the head jailer drew a ring of keys from his belt and unlocked a massive iron door.

"Inside." He gave Sylvia such a shove she went sprawling forward to crash on her knees. "You stay there until you're wanted, wizard. One of the officers may wish to interview you later." He smiled grimly, slammed and bolted the door.

Sylvia stared around the filthy cell. Except for a small flickering oil lamp bolted to the wall, the only object in the room was a wooden bench chained to the wall. Dirty brown water dripped down one wall and green slime covered half the floor. The air was putrid with the stench of mould, dirt and rotting vegetation interspersed with the more familiar smell of burning oil in the lamp.

Now that nobody could see her, Sylvia allowed tears to stream down her cheeks as she sat on the bench. Her whole body ached, and blood from her cut arm dripped through her sleeve onto the floor.

"After all," she said to herself, "they never killed me outright." She shuddered at the thought of what her fate may be.

Her only hope lay in the tiny receptor messenger. All her personal items had been removed but somehow they had missed the instrument from a deep inside pocket of her dress where she had placed it. Sylvia reached for the object and flicked it on. Except for this latest experiment, the receptor messenger hadn't ever been used for short distances. Perhaps she could reverse the spell and return home to the castle.

She tried to remember her original chants but they were so complicated, the precise wording alluded her. Every attempt at finding her way magically back to the castle was futile.

The hours ticked by and, more out of boredom than from any real hope of success, Sylvia went through all the earlier spells she had used with the receptor messenger. One by one she chanted them orally until her head spun from the concentration and her fingers turned white in the chilly air.

Finally, the distressed young wizard fell into a sleep on the bench. She awoke, stiff and cold hours later to find the cell much darker than when she was thrust into it. The flickering lamp was barely going. She guessed it would soon be out of fuel and the cell would be plunged into complete darkness. She shivered.

Without really thinking she stood up and flicked the tiny switch of the receptor messenger on. A sudden noise made her leap in fright and stare apprehensively at the door but it remained shut. There was, though, a definite noise. Sylvia sat down on the bench and held the tiny instrument up. The sound was coming out of it. This had never happened before. There were voices in a foreign language and even laughter. Then the screen lit up. Light blue words saying Contact Made flashed at her. Sylvia wondered whether she should try a chant or merely wait when, out of the air above, an arm appeared, a hand with well manicured nails and a tiny ring on one finger.

She heard a gasp and it disappeared. Noises still filtered through so obviously the link was still connected. In desperation, Sylvia reached up to where the hand had gone but she saw felt nothing.

"What shall I do?" she whispered to herself.

Contact had been made but she didn't know what would happen next or how long it could be maintained. Thoughts rushed through her mind. Who did the hand belong to? Should she grab it if it returned? The hand appeared to belong to someone of slight build, it wasn't any larger than her own. What about the owner? Would he or she be terrified if she grabbed it? Sylvia knew that she would be in similar circumstances but what else could she do?

Before she had time to devise a plan the hand reappeared and Sylvia held the receptor messenger towards it. The hand touched it, pulled away then reappeared with wiggling fingers as if searching for what it had touched. Sylvia held her breath and handed the receptor messenger up. Fingers curled around it and the tiny silver object disappeared .

"That's really my story," said Sylvia. "I found that when I spoke I heard a girl's voice respond but I couldn't understand the language. The receptor messenger must have been working by itself because shortly I heard someone saying in my language, 'but who are you?' I cant remember what I replied because everything went quiet as if Id lost contact. The next few hours were agony. The jailer came back in the morning with some watery soup and hinted that I would be having a visitor soon. He sort of leered at me sadistically and I'm sure he would have attacked me if he weren't scared of my powers, not that I had many that I could use if he had decided to do so.

"Your turn will come, Madam Witch," he said when he left.

I was terrified."

"Well, you're safe now," said Natasha kindly. "My entry into this world was, in many ways similar to yours, and I've been here ever since. The only difference is the receptor messenger. It's a new device I never had."

"You are both so kind," Sylvia said, "but I cant abandon my friends and country. I need to go back."

"You shall," said Natasha. We all shall, Cindy, yourself and me." She glanced seriously at her daughter.

Cindy looked at her mother and frowned. She had never heard her speak in such a determined way before. This was someone different from the gentle kind person she knew and loved. She studied Sylvia and saw someone who needed their help, someone from her mothers unknown past who needed them.

"Yes, Mom," she said. "I certainly want to help."

"There is much we need to do before our return," continued Natasha. " It will need careful thought and help from our friends, but I'm sure something can be done to help you, Sylvia." She smiled and stepped across to hug the young visitor that Cindy had dragged into their world. "When we return we will be prepared."

CHAPTER THREE

Natasha sat deep in thought as she watched Sylvia talking with her daughter. After all this time it was difficult to be suddenly confronted with her old life again. The memories came back like a flood: her youth, family and friends. It was going to be difficult, but she was determined Sylvia would get all the help she could possibly give her. Her thoughts turned to something in the attic, the last remaining thing she owned from the old world. It was an old tin trunk filled with the few items she had brought through from Urania.

It was almost midnight before Cindy and Sylvia stopped talking and at last went to sleep. Natasha climbed the ladder and switched on the attic light. Amongst the usual old books, children's toys and clothes that most householders kept but never used again was an old tin trunk held together by two leather straps. Natasha dragged it out and lugged it into the living

room.

Inside, she found her original clothes that were similar to Sylvia's except that these were a pale green silken material. The knee length leather boots could have come from the same market as Sylvia's. Other items included a knife with a highly decorated polished handle, jewelry and some small cloth covered books.

Natasha picked one of the necklaces up and ran it through her fingers. It must have been over fifteen years since she had last worn it. As her fingers ran over the little pearls, one began to glow a bright pink color. From out of nowhere, an ancient language Natasha had almost forgotten filled the room.

However, moments later it switched to English and the message was repeated. "A meeting of wizards has occurred" said the voice. "If the Deities allow it, your charges and yourself will return to our homeland and drive out the evil forces of doom. Be warned. The path to justice is unpredictable. Go in peace, my daughter and may Deity Thresimeriam protect you all."

Natasha stood up, trembling and stared around the room. It was her father speaking. He had disappeared along with her husband, Cindy's father, two months before she had come to Earth. She was so deep in thought she never noticed Sylvia standing in the room behind her.

"I heard my own language," Sylvia said quietly in a sympathetic voice. "A meeting of wizards. What's that?"

"Its us," said Natasha looking up at Sylvia. "At least it seems to be you and Cindy. I somehow don't think it was a coincidence your receptor messenger found Cindy."

"But what's important about us? Cindy knows nothing about our world."

"I don't know, but I have a feeling these old books in the trunk here may have an explanation. You can help here. I doubt if I could read our old language after fifteen years."

"You will. In fact, I guarantee you'll find they have been changed into English."

Natasha reached for one of the books and opened it. A musty smell of old paper reached her nose as she turned to the first page. Faded red ink on the faded yellow paper seemed impossible to read. Suddenly, though, the ink became brighter and the funny little symbols moved and changed into an English alphabet. A few seconds later they moved again, then again until the whole page appeared in English.

"Told you so," said Sylvia. "The receptor messenger works the same way. Now you have some bedtime reading. I'm off back to bed. See you in the morning." She moved towards the door before turning and glancing back at Natasha.

"Thank you," she said in a whisper. "I'm glad I found you."

"I am, too," replied Natasha and meant it.

The next morning was Saturday so Cindy didn't have to worry about school and was looking forward to showing Sylvia more of her hometown. However, while they were having breakfast a somewhat serious Natasha said shed like to talk to them both.

"I read through the ancient books," she said. "They were written over two hundred years ago by a prophet. According to his words, the future of Urania is to be determined within the next few months. Listen to this part..." She opened the little green book and read. "...and behold, a female wizard of tender years shall join forces with an exile residing across the void and together they shall free the world of tyranny."

"So you're going to help Sylvia free her world?" said Cindy.

"No," said her mother. "According to the book, you are. Apparently, I can't go back. Wizardry often works in generations. You are both a similar age and have the power to work together. That is why the receptor messenger found you instead of me. I can't return to my old world." She smiled faintly. "Anyhow, I'll need to stay on Earth with the receptor messenger. Its the only way to maintain the link between our worlds."

"That's crazy," said Cindy. "I'm no wizard. I haven't the slightest idea what to do or even want to know."

Her mother sighed, "I was stranded in this world with a baby, Cindy, and had to build a

new life. This I have done, but destiny has caught up with us. We really have three choices."

"And they are?" asked Sylvia in a serious voice.

"Well, you can remain here with us, return by yourself or take Cindy with you while I help from this end."

"I see," said Sylvia. "As kind as you've both been, I can't expect either of you to endanger your own lives. Ill return by myself."

"Its not that simple," continued Natasha. "You see, you'll be returned to exactly the same spot you left and that's the dungeon cell."

Sylvia's face turned pale. "That complicates matters, doesn't it?"

"Well, stay here," said Cindy. "Mom did."

"Perhaps we can eliminate the danger in the dungeon," Natasha said quietly.

"But how?" asked Sylvia.

Natasha gave a mean little grin. "I'm sure Graham knows someone who is an explosives expert. The army has lots of them."

"Graham is a friend of Mom's," said Cindy. "He's a sergeant at the local army base."

Sylvia frowned. "I don't really understand what you mean," she muttered. "I know what an army is, but what are explosives?"

Natasha grinned. "We don't have any magic in this world, but we have chemicals that mix together to do a similar job. It works like your lightning spell, but is much more powerful."

"Oh, I see," said Sylvia, "but how ? If we're the only ones who can go through the void Graham couldn't get into our world."

"Leave it to me," said Natasha. "Those jailers are going to get one big surprise."

It was late the next afternoon when a jeep drove into the Meikins driveway. Two men in army uniforms climbed out, walked around the back of the vehicle and carried a wooden container onto the back lawn.

"Hi, Cindy, Natasha, and I guess this is Sylvia," Sergeant Graham Larson said to the three spectators. "This is Corporal Adrian Miller. He's our big bang man."

Once everyone exchanged greetings Adrian looked around the tiny section in confusion. "You cant blow anything up here, Sarge," he said. "Half the house will disappear."

After Graham had seen Sylvia's arm disappear into nowhere and heard her story, he became enthusiastic.

"Set it up, Adrian so all Sylvia has to do is plug it in. Okay?"

"If you say so," replied the corporal.

He watched in amazement as Graham explained the situation and Sylvia turned on her receptor messenger and demonstrated her disappearing arm again. This time, though, she went further and stuck her head through the void. Below, as if it was under the back lawn was the dungeon looking as grim as when she had left it. All the others saw, of course, was Sylvia bending over and her head vanishing .

Corporal Miller turned a gray color and muttered a few obscenities well used by army personnel, but the demonstration convinced him something was there. He listened intently as Sylvia described the dungeon she had been imprisoned in.

Within a few moments he had unwrapped a long tube of plastic like stuff as well as a reel of black wire connected to a electronic timer. The other end had a plug similar to one at the back of a computer.

"This is plastic explosive," he explained. "It is perfectly safe as long as its not plugged in. When you get in the room squeeze it out around the door or in some little cracks in the stonework; even along where the floor meets a wall will do. Then poke this plug in one end and press the red button on this instrument. I've set the timer to ten minutes. If anything goes wrong press in the code 9999 and it will stop counting down. Understand?"

Sylvia stared at the complicated device and shook her head. "I'm sorry," she said almost in a state of tears. "I don't understand. Its so unreal. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," said Natasha. "Just think of it as a different type of magic."

"Mom," said Cindy. "I'll go. I know what to do."

"But you cant!"

"Let her," said Graham. "We'll put a rope around her. If anything goes wrong we can pull her back. The whole thing will take less than five minutes."

Natasha took some more convincing but finally she relented and watched apprehensively as Cindy picked up the plastic explosive and walked into the slight shimmer on the lawn caused by the receptor messenger. A terrible smell made her cough and her eyes focused on the dim interior. The dungeon cell was even worse than she imagined from Sylvia's description.

Feeling only partly reassured by the rope tied around her waist, she started squeezing the plastic putting around the door and along the walls as Adrian had directed. It actually took a while as bits tended to come off because of the grime. Finally, though, she had it all placed and was about to tell the others when the door rattled. Someone was placing a key in the lock. She could actually see the end of it sticking through.

"Trouble!" she shouted. "Someone's unlocking the door."

What should she do? There wasn't time to plug in the arming device. It was only seconds since she had heard the noise but it was like an eternity. Another noise made her jump in sheer terror and turn. Sylvia was standing beside her with an ashen face.

"We got your message. You get this thing connected and Ill try to hold the door shut!" Sylvia said in a high pitched voice. She crossed the cell in three steps and leaned against the door.

"Don't think you can stop me, witch," came the muffled snarl through the door.

Very slowly, the door was being pushed open. Sylvia's weight was not enough to stop the brute force being applied to the other side.

Cindy felt a strange peacefulness pass through her body as if she had all the time in the world. She took the tiny plug and inserted it in the end of the explosive, then carefully she pressed the button to arm it. Immediately red digital numbers lit up on a small screen to start the countdown. Nine, fifty nine... Nine fifty eight...

The door was now half-open, and a massive hairy arm appeared and reached out for Sylvia. She muttered three words in an unknown language and poked the arm. There was an angry scream and it withdrew. Cindy jumped in fright and stared at the other girl.

"What did you do?" she gasped.

Nine forty five... Nine forty four...

Sylvia slammed the door shut. "A burning spell," she panted. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, but where do I go?"

"Follow the rope."

Cindy reached out, grabbed Sylvia's hand and together, both girls tore towards the invisible exit.

The door flung open and the jailer charged in. His eyes widened in amazement as he saw not one, but two women in front of him.

"No you don't," he screamed and lunged forward.

The girls burst through onto the Meikin's back lawn in a frantic dash. As soon as they arrived Natasha switched off the receptor messenger and ran forward to gather both girls in her arms.

"You're safe," she cried. "You can stop. Its okay."

"Oh, Mom." Cindy stared wide eyed at her mother. "It was terrible. I was almost caught. If it wasn't for Sylvia..."

"If I was braver you wouldn't have had to go," interrupted Sylvia.

"But you did," said Graham. "As soon as that little machine of yours spelt out trouble we couldn't stop you."

"I'm proud of you both," said Natasha. "Let's hope that explosive does its job."

"It will," said Adrian with a slow smile. There was enough explosive there to blow up half a block. I wouldn't want to be in that castle, or whatever it is, in about five minutes." A

frown crossed his brow. "Are you sure it won't blow back through?"

"Quite sure," said Natasha "Its a whole world away."

Cindy glanced at her watch. It was about now when the plastic explosive would detonate.

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