



EMERALD EYES MIST

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Excerpt of three chapters

CHAPTER ONE

Even though it was only late afternoon the winter sun had disappeared behind the North Cascades in Washington State. Two blonde women skated on the frozen lake and smiled as the foreshore suddenly lit up and a gigantic fir tree burst into Christmas lights. To a stranger Cindy Meikin and Sylvia Von Hilderthorn looked so similar they could be twins, which was indeed what they were. The two sisters, though, had been brought up separately and had only met three years earlier as teenagers. Their deep emerald eyes hinted that these young women were somehow different from normal humans. Now, however, they were normal sophomores studying at a local college. Their other world experiences were only spoken of in family meetings and, for two years now, the pair had led the life as ordinary students.

It was the start of the Christmas vacation and they joined a party of thirty fellow students visiting a mountain lodge for a vacation of skiing and skating. The snowfall from earlier in the day covered the forest and a distinct smell of wood smoke clung to the lakeshore, white in frozen beauty.

Cindy was quite an expert on her skates but Sylvia appeared more nervous.

"Wait for me," she shouted as her sister did a twirl on the ice and bent forward with her arms swinging wide. Cindy accelerated forward towards a bend in the foreshore and was momentarily out of sight.

"Show off," Sylvia called out and followed, not as graciously but still with a rising confidence she demonstrated in any new endeavor.

She reached the bend and could see only the natural twilight as no lights reached this far. Ahead in the silver ice, Cindy glided off shore turned and began to return. Her skates hummed on the surface and flung up minute particles of ice as she circled in and halted.

"You're doing well," she said. Condensation puffed from her mouth in a tiny cloud.

"Sure," Sylvia retorted. "I'm like an old lady of ninety while you make everything seem so easy. How do you manage?"

Cindy chuckled. "Just experience I guess. Anyhow, shall we head back? I reckon it's dropped twenty degrees since the sun went behind the mountain."

Sylvia, though, wasn't listening but instead stared up the lake. "That's strange," she whispered.

"What?" Cindy replied and swung around.

"That mist."

Where Cindy had been skating mere seconds before, a sheet of white mist had descended. The view of ice and firs silhouetted on the lake's far shore was now a blanket of shimmering white. Even as they watched there was movement from one corner and a small object flew out. It was a bird but one quite unlike any Cindy or Sylvia had seen before. Its wings beat frantically but the bird's forward momentum seemed restricted as if it was fighting a current but there was no wind. Everything was so calm even the firs remained motionless under their blanket of snow.

Suddenly, two things happened simultaneously; the sheet of mist disappeared with a faint sucking sound and the bird was propelled forward. It rocketed into the air above the pair, found its wings and flew back, straight towards them.

Before Cindy had a chance to react the new arrival landed on her shoulder and gave her a tiny peck on her frozen cheek.

"It's tame," Sylvia said. "Poor little thing looks frozen. It looks like a colorful sparrow, not a native."

"You're right," replied Cindy. "There's more. Look!"

She reached up and the bird hopped across to her extended gloved finger. Two black

eyes looked at her. A brown beak opened the bird chirped and held up one leg. Attached to it was a naming tag.

Sylvia reached across. "There's a clip," she said. "Can you hold him a moment?"

"Sure."

The bird didn't object when Cindy reached out and tucked her fingers around the yellow, orange and gray feathers. She turned the bird slightly to give Sylvia access.

Her thick gloves were a hindrance but Sylvia managed to move a clip back so the tag expanded and slid over the bird's claws. "There's something inside," she said.

With Cindy peering over her shoulder and the bird's head cocked sideways as if it, too, knew what was happening. She pulled out a long strip of tissue paper.

"Oh my God," Cindy whispered.

There were words written on the paper. They were crudely written in capitals as if the author was unfamiliar with the English alphabet. It could, though, be understood.

"We need your help. If you are real, please come. Muftin will guide you."

"Who's Muftin?" Sylvia asked. Immediately the bird flew across to her shoulder and gave her covered ear a distinct peck. Even though the woolen earmuffs she felt the distinct nip. "So you are?" she continued and lifted her other hand up.

The bird hopped onto her finger and peered at her. Sylvia turned to Cindy with her face drained of color. "Muftin, here, can't communicate because magic doesn't work on Earth. Isn't that right, Muftin?"

The bird fluffed its feathers and whistled three shrill notes.

"Of course," Cindy replied. "Like with us, his magic doesn't work on Earth." She turned to the bird. "You can talk back in your home world, can't you, Muftin?"

The bird almost jumped up and down on Sylvia's finger and whistled again.

"Okay," Cindy said. "One whistle for no and two for yes. Can you understand me?"

"Whit! Whit!"

Cindy glanced wide-eyed at her sister. "You are in danger?"

The bird cocked his head. "Whit!"

"Someone else?"

"Whit! Whit!"

The girls were oblivious to the encroaching darkness as they both questioned Muftin. Through trial and error they found out he came from a world unknown to them and none of their friends from Sylvia's original home was involved. Muftin, though, knew of them and needed their help.

Finally, the frustrated bird leaped back across to Cindy, ran down her right arm and pecked at her wrist where her jacket and gloves met.

"Oh hell," Cindy whispered. She pulled her sleeve up to expose a golden bracelet, a very special item of jewelry that both the twins wore. For the first time in two years the bracelet glowed and felt warm.

Sylvia gasped and felt her right wrist with her own left hand. "Mine's hot, too," she said.

"So what do we do?" Cindy asked.

The bird flew up onto her head and gave an almost angry crow.

"It's important?" Sylvia asked.

"Whit! Whit!"

"But we have no supplies or anything to help."

"I think it is urgent," Cindy said. "If we don't do something quickly we may never be able to help Muftin."

"Whit! Whit!"

"Oh my God!" Sylvia gasped and squeezed Cindy's arm.

The sheet of white mist had returned and was hovering in the center of the lake. Muftin squawked in alarm for the solid sheet was dropping water like condensation off a heated window! Sylvia screamed and began a frantic skate straight towards it.

"Wait!" Cindy yelled but already Sylvia was half way across the ice with Muftin flying above her head. "Well, here goes," she muttered to herself and followed.

With her superior skating skills she caught up and grabbed Sylvia's arm just as they

reached the mist. Muftin landed on her head and the lake disappeared. There was a sensation of clammy dampness, swirling clouds and a high pitched buzz that grew in intensity. Cindy wasn't skating any more but felt as if she was floating, perhaps swimming in a thick substance like trickle.

But she could breathe and all her senses operated. Sylvia's hand found hers; the bracelet shone red and almost burned her skin. Muftin's claws dug through her woolen Balaclava as if he was gripping with all the strength his tiny body could manage. It must be important that they all remain in physical contact with each other. With her one free hand she reached up and gently held the bird in her glove.

The buzz became a high pitched scream that hurt her ears scream and white light appeared ahead. No it was sunlight. She saw the sun high in a pale blue sky. Wherever they were it was midday and not the evening. Oh my God, they were hundreds of feet in the air above a valley of firs. Below was a snow-covered valley while a distance mountain chain towered into the air, steep craggy mountains unlike any she'd seen before.

They were falling.

"It's okay," Sylvia called. "We're slowing down. It's as if we have a parachute."

"You're right, Sylvia," replied a high pitched voice.

Cindy jolted in fright at the voice until she realized it came from immediately above her ear. It was Muftin speaking. "We're in your world aren't we Muftin?" she said.

"That's true," the bird replied, "but almost missed the white mist. Lucky Sylvia had the sense to follow me. I can't say I liked your place. You guys couldn't understand a world I said. Why do you want to live in a blank world?"

"Blank world?"

"One with no magic, Mistress Cindy. How could you survive there?"

"Just Cindy will do," she replied and, in spite of their current situation, had to laugh. She had had the same problem with Sylvia when they'd first met. Her twin had come to Earth though a void and it wasn't until much later that they learned they were sisters. Now, it appeared they had traveled through another void into an entirely different place.

"Watch it!" warned Sylvia.

The snowy countryside rushed towards them. With a jarring crunch, they landed in a snow bank and the screaming stopped. The bracelet on Cindy's arm turned back to gold and cooled down. The weather was even colder than the frozen lake they'd left and it was snowing.

"Wait," Muftin cried as he flapped into the air. "I'll check to see if they're still here."

Cindy and Sylvia scrambled to their feet, brushed snow off their clothes and glanced at each other.

"We've never been here before," Sylvia said

Cindy nodded at her sister. "There's something else, too. Look at your skates, Sylvia."

Sylvia did and gasped. Their footwear looked no different, ankle high boots above thick socks. What was different was the underside. There were no skates there, only a deep treaded soles and heels that would be perfect for walking.

"Oh hell," she said. "There is a reason for us being here, isn't there?"

Cindy nodded. "Come on. Muftin's getting impatient."

The bird had already returned. He landed on Cindy's shoulder and spoke in her ear.

"They're just around the corner. Tulco is in pain but is no worse than when I left." He cocked his head before adding, "No better either, I'm afraid."

When they almost reached their objective, Cindy just had to smile when someone new appeared. Glaring at them with annoyed eyes and thrusting beard was a dwarf. His leathery skin and old-fashioned clothes reminded Cindy of another world.

"And who are you two?" he snorted. "You don't look like goddesses to me."

"That's because we aren't," Cindy replied.

"Well, Muftin brought someone, I guess," The dwarf sniffed. "Two human girls aren't going to be much use though. Probably, just tell your kin where we are."

"So I see even dwarfs on this world never learned about manners," Sylvia retorted.

The trail ahead narrowed to become just a path between firs. Muftin flew into the air, ignored the dwarf and disappeared.

Cindy heard faint sobbing. She rushed forward around the corner and gasped. A girl of about twelve was sitting awkwardly in the middle of the track with frightened eyes peering out from a frozen face. She wore a blue woolen sweater and an old fashioned dress that reached to her ankles.

One ankle caught Cindy's attention. It was purple, misshapen and caught in a gigantic steel trap. Dried blood had soaked into the dress hemline and covered a fur sock. The steel trap joined a chain that was padlocked around a tree trunk.

"This is my friend, Tulco Uvujin," Muftin squawked and flew onto the girl's shoulder. "Tulco, we found not one but two of your kind. Two wonderful wizards who can help."

The girl stared at the visitors and attempted to sit up by using her arms and free leg. "It can't be," she whispered and sat up. "It's all a deception."

Cindy frowned. Tulco's eyes, though, puffed and blood shot were emerald in color and identical to her own.

"Muftin found us," Sylvia said. "So we'll see if we can get you out of the trap, shall we?" She squatted down and gently raised Tulco's dress to examine the wound.

"It's a bear trap" the girl whimpered. "There's no way of unclamping it without a key. Her pale lips trembled. "They'll be here soon. I told Gikre and Muftin to leave. They'll be killed for helping me."

"They'll come up the valley behind," the dwarf said. "I'll go back and keep an eye out." He nodded. "There's not a lot of time, fair ladies."

Cindy was already examining the chain and steel teeth. They were embedded so deep in the girl's ankle the skin was pierced.

"It's no good," Tulco whispered. "Gikre tried everything. If his strength couldn't help you can't."

Cindy glanced at Sylvia who had taken the girl's hand in hers. "You're better than me," she whispered. "How about a demonstration?"

Sylvia gulped. She knew what her twin was thinking but could she perform? After all, it was years since she'd decided to live on Earth and leave her magic behind. This place wasn't even her own world so would her powers return?

"We'll stop the pain first!" she said and squeezed Tulco's hand. Her warm fingers seem to throb and their heat moved from her finger tips onto into the frozen hand she held."

A line of red sunburn traveled up Tulco's fingers and disappeared under the girl's sleeve. Seconds later it ran up Tulco's cheek. Thin blue lips became flush with red and their edges curled up in a smile.

"My leg's stopped hurting but feels like pins and needles."

"Good," Sylvia replied. Hold Cindy's hand and I'll see what I can do about removing this clamp."

"There's no time," Gikre interrupted. "They're coming. "

"I'll look," Muftin cackled and flew back around the corner. He returned almost immediately in a highly agitated state. "Three horse soldiers are coming up the valley. They'll be here within ten minutes," he gasped.

"If we can lift Tulco back off the track," Gikre said but his eyes appeared pessimistic.

"Sylvia!" Cindy asked again. Though, magically the more powerful than her sister, she didn't have the skill or knowledge to draw on this power. It was as if the magic came and controlled her rather than vice versa. Sylvia, though, had spent years in her own world studying magic and could use it with ease.

Sylvia turned to the dwarf.

"We will have to use another spell."

Gikre shrugged. "I don't know, Sylvia. Your off world magic may be different. It might be dangerous."

"Try," Tulco cut in. "The first one worked. Look!"

Though still embedded in the ugly steel teeth, the youngster's ankle was its original size and the skin appeared a healthy tan. Even the congealed blood had mysteriously disappeared.

"True," the dwarf replied and glanced up at Sylvia. "Do what you can, Lass," he said. "If they arrive none of us will survive the afternoon. The enemy are ruthless killers."

"Go on," Cindy said. "I'll help if I can."

Sylvia smiled slightly as her confidence returned. It was something that flowed in her veins, a feeling long forgotten back on Earth.

"The horses," she said. "Are they capable of speech like Muftin?"

"No," Muftin replied. "There are only a few creatures like myself who can communicate with humans and wizards. Why do you ask?"

"I don't want to be unkind but it is the magic here that makes you capable of speech. Remember what happened on Earth."

"So?" the bird replied.

"A talking animal would use magic and could perhaps block my spell..."

"Hurry," interrupted Gikre. "We haven't time for this talk. Do what you can, girl. We have nothing to lose."

Sylvia glanced at the dwarf's apprehension and walked back down the trail. At the corner she could see the valley and mountains behind. In the distance, three dots grew larger. The horses were being run at a gallop so, with luck, the spell that rushed into her mind could help.

She began to sing, a high pitched melody that rose in pitch until everything went silent. She was still singing but the sound was now beyond human hearing range. Gikre arrived and stood beside her, the top of his head barely reached her waist.

"Just the noise won't stop them, Sylvia," he said.

She grimaced but didn't stop her lilt. The horses would be within earshot soon. The next minute was crucial.

"There she is," screamed a horseman. "The dwarf, too,"

The three were dressed like nineteenth century military cavalry with riding breeches, swords and fur caps. They were standing in the stirrups and flogged their mounts without mercy. Snow pitched into the air with every footfall as the beasts galloped forward. Sweat glistened on their black flanks and froth formed around mouths.

The second horseman raised an ancient pistol, aimed at the waiting woman but frowned. "Captain," he called. "It's not the witch child. This is someone different."

"Still a witch! I can see her blonde hair from here. Fire while you have the chance."

But it was already too late.

The horses neighed and stopped dead. One horseman kept going and ended up on the snow. The leader could only curse as his horse rose on its back legs, stepped back two steps and collapsed, literally, onto the ground. Only the man with the pistol remained in his saddle but his horse was in full retreat.

"Whoa!" the man screamed. His voice turned to a screech when his pistol moved.

The barrel became a slimy head with darting eyes and forked tongue. A small snake with green skin and yellow dots curled around the man's hand. The man's eyes stared in terror. This was a plok, a deadly snow snake. One bite and one's life expectancy was reduced to mere minutes.

This soldier was normally as brave and disciplined as the rest of the cavalry but his only

thought was to get away. He leapt off the horse, whipped his arm out and had the satisfaction of seeing the snake fly through the air. But it wasn't a snake but his pistol he had thrown away.

Before he even had time to curse himself for by being fooled by a simple disillusionment spell, something else happened. His world went white.

"No," he screamed in utter terror. "We're your friends..."

Sylvia stopped singing and watched as the horses reacted. Her high pitched song would bring excruciating pain to their ears. What was unexpected, though, was what followed.

A sheet of mist, just like the one on the lake back home, descended on the valley. It shimmered before vanishing into nothingness. When it lifted everything had vanished. The snow was like a virgin blanket. It was as if the soldiers had never been there.

"I'm glad this vapin is on our side," Gikre snorted.

"What's a vapin?"

"The fog," the dwarf replied. "It helped, you know."

Sylvia stared at the empty valley but her relief from a moment before turned to apprehension as the dwarf's words filtered through her mind.

"You talk as if it's alive, Gikre," she said.

"Oh it is," Gikre replied. "A vapin is as alive as you or me. That's our problem."

"But how is it a problem?"

"I'm not sure," Gikre replied. "It is pure energy, I guess, only visible as that wall of mist you saw. Most vapin make an orange or red cloud. They're not to be trusted. Only the white one is our friend."

"I see," said Sylvia. "So it helped Muftin find Cindy and me?"

"And brought you back."

"So why are we needed? That creature or whatever it is seems to be capable of destroying anything in its path."

"True," said the dwarf. "I said the white ones was our friend but it is not strictly correct. It has its own priorities and only helps if it wishes. Lately, it has helped us. I don't know why."

"How do they communicate?"

"Pronouncements in the head. Never questions, just orders. They told me they would take Muftin to find you, not vice versa." The dwarf stroked his beard and glanced up at Sylvia "There may be more than one but I still don't trust them. They only help us because it suits their needs."

"And what are these needs?"

"I have no idea," Gikre said. "I only know about the humans. They want all dwarfs and wizards dead. They're ruthless and thoroughly nasty species, if ever there was one. Pity you had to look like them."

CHAPTER TWO

While Sylvia performed her magic to halt the enemy Cindy remained with Tulco who had lapsed into a contented semi-conscious state.

"I'm glad you came?" the girl said. "Muftin said he'd get help but I thought he was just being kind."

"We were needed so came," Cindy replied. She immediately bit on her bottom lip. What a pompous thing to say. What could she do to even help? Sylvia had been brought up in a world of magic but she felt no different from at home. In fact she realized she was shivering from the

freezing temperature. The Washington lake Sylvia and herself had been skating on appeared as a vision.

But it wasn't a vision. They were there! She had her skates on again and was skimming across the ice. In front was the lodge with Christmas lights along the foreshore.

"Damn," she cursed until she realized she was holding a gloved hand.

Perhaps it was all a dream. She glanced sideways expecting to see Sylvia.

Emerald eyes smiled at her but it wasn't Sylvia but Tulco who skated beside her.

"The trap. It's gone," the girl shouted.

Sylvia looked across. Tulco's long tatty dress had changed, too. She was wearing a modern jacket with fur-lined cape and a tiny mini skirt that fluffed out as she skated. Beneath bright red leotards covered her legs down to white skates that glistened in the evening light. There was no sign of the ugly steel bear trap.

They cruised to a stop and Tulco stared ahead at the lights and lodge. The silhouette of a dozen skaters could be seen while the smell of wood smoke touched their senses.

"Your world?" the girl gasped. "And my clothes. They're beautiful, Cindy."

"Yes, we're home," Cindy replied. Her immediate delight turned to fear. They were here but where was her sister? "Sylvia," she howled. "She's left behind."

"And my friends," Tulco added also in alarm.

Cindy blinked. There was a brief sensation of spinning in a cloud and she was sitting back on the trail beside Tulco. Sylvia's voice could be heard in the distance.

"Cindy!" Tulco screamed. "You did it."

"Did what?"

"Look!" Tulco was back in her long dress but her ankle had no bear trap and chain around it. She was free.

Cindy stared. "I don't think it was me," she whispered.

"Of course it was," Tulco responded. She flung herself forward and grabbed her in a massive hug just as Sylvia and Gikre, with Muftin on his shoulder, appeared.

"What happened?" Sylvia called. "Oh my God, Tulco. Your leg..."

"We went home," Cindy gasped, "but it wasn't my magic that did it."

"Okay, so we know the humans here are your enemy, there are mysterious mists with the white ones on our side. Is that correct?" Cindy asked.

It was an hour later and they had reached a small sheltered bank where they stopped to rest. Tulco sipped the mug of hot tea the dwarf had poured out of an ancient looking thermos flask and nodded.

"And your friends Muftin and Gikre are helping you escape from those horsemen." Sylvia added.

"The attack," Tulco replied.

Cindy frowned. "Attack?"

"They attacked Waymot, our village," Tulco whispered.

Gikre produced a long black sausage from his pack, sliced off several pieces and handed them around. "We have to go easy on the food," he said. "It may have to last a long time." He stuck the knife back in his thick belt and continued Tulco's story. "The humans came in these sailing ships. We were lucky, I guess."

"Lucky," Tulco retorted. "Do you call being hunted like animals lucky?"

"You are alive," Muftin said. "If we hadn't seen the fleet before they reached the bay I would have never got to the village school in time."

"But why just me?" Tulco whispered. "What happened to my friends?"

"And family," Cindy added.

"Tulco is an orphan, who lives with Muftin and myself," Gikre explained and turned back to his charge. "If we'd waited for your friends you would have been caught. You know that, Tulco. Anyhow the invaders weren't interested in them. They're probably back at school right now worrying about you."

"I guess," the girl said. She munched on her black sausage and glanced up at the twins. "Do you really want to know what happened?" she asked. "Of course," Cindy replied, "but only if you want to tell us." "It was just an ordinary school day," Tulco began.

The schoolhouse consisted of a single room, thirty pupils from six to fourteen years old and Mr. Sniflon, Old Sniffy everyone called him when he was beyond earshot. He was a dwarf as were all the children in the room except Tulco. At a stride-sixty, she towered above everyone and had the respect and friendship of all those around. Pupils at Waymot Village School looked to Tulco for protection from Sniffy's acid tongue and violent outbursts.

"Five lashes," the teacher growled as he hauled a nine-year old up by an ear. "I told you yesterday your homework was to be done."

"Mama's sick and I had to feed the family." The dwarf was already in tears and shaking in anticipation. "There was wood to cut for the stove and the cows to feed."

"Excuses, Sam," Sniffy whispered. "Everyone else has chores, too. It gives you character. If you weren't so lazy..."

"Leave him, Sir," Tulco interjected. She stood "He also had to wash down his uncle's fishing boat."

Sniffy swung around and glowered at the girl towering above him. "Sit down, Tulco or you can take half his punishment."

"That's a bit hard, Sir," the girl replied.

The scuffling in the room stopped as everyone stared at their friend. She was the only one who dared backchat the teacher.

Sniffy's eyes turned hard. "What do you mean?" he hissed.

"Five lashes, Sir. Half of five is two and a half. How do you give half a lash."

A snigger went through the room but cut out immediately when the dwarf's yellow eyes darted around.

"Out. Get out!" the teacher screamed and raised the cane in his hand. He looked as if he was about to strike at Tulco but hesitated. "Your step-father shall hear of this, Tulco. Even he does not tolerate insubordination."

"Gikre believes in justice, Sir," Tulco replied, "not picking on pupils who are only trying to do their best. "

Sniffy glowered at Sam. "Tomorrow," he hissed. "And your essay can now be three pages long." He turned to Tulco. "I told you to get out. Sit in the woodshed until morning interval. The lessons you miss will be done during lunch break."

"Yes Sir," Tulco muttered. She felt pleased, though. Her intervention had stopped Sam being thrashed.

A blast of cold air hit her as she found her jacket and headed for the woodshed down a brick path at the rear of the grounds. She'd been banished there before and even had a couple of readers stashed in one corner for such occasions. She settled down in a corner, pulled her jacket closer and began to read.

The story was so enthralling she never noticed the bird fly in and land beside her.

"Tulco," Muftin squawked. "You must come, now. Warriors...."

Tulco knew to trust Muftin but it was too late. Even as she reached the open front of the woodshed a row of grim faced warriors appeared at the school gate. They were quite unlike anything she had seen before. Every one was dressed in a long dark coat, wore a triangular hat and held a strange gun with a sword attached to the end. An officer whispered a command and they fanned out to surround the schoolhouse.

"Muftin," the girl whispered.

"Get back in and pull wood around yourself," the bird replied. "I'll be back." He flew into the air and disappeared.

Tulco searched around. It seemed hopeless. There was no time to pull wood aside and, anyway, the slightest noise would make a warrior glance around. She gulped and peeped out

again.

A whistle sounded, the warriors gave a bloodcurdling scream and, as one, charged the building. Within seconds, the back door was flung open and the four warriors in view disappeared inside.

Children's screams followed.

Tulco swallowed bile and decided to leave. She slipped sideways along the front wall in full sight of anyone who happened to look her way. But nobody did. She reached the side and stepped backwards with one hand feeling the wall. She made it to the rear and crawled into a small gap beneath overhanging fir branches.

What should she do? Ahead was a steep climb through dense firs but it was the only sensible way to go. Up she went, cursing her long frock that caught every obstacle. However, the tree trunks were helpful. By stepping up the inside she used them like a ladder until, five minutes later she was higher than the schoolhouse's roof.

She stopped, exhausted and risked a peep out.

The children were all assembled in three lines on the front ball court. At least eight warriors surrounded them and one with feathers in his triangular hat was talking, or was it shouting, at Old Sniffy. The teacher cringed back, said something and pointed to the shed.

Oh hell, he was telling the invaders where she'd been sent.

Tulco moved back and, with renewed energy tackled the next section. The trees were close but she squeezed through and heaved herself up in a continuous climb. Scratches and sticky sap covering her hands were ignored. She gasped for breath, blinked dust from her eyes and just kept going.

A volley of shots rang out, so loud Tulco almost lost her handhold in fright. She knew about guns but had never heard one being discharged before. However, she couldn't see the grounds below so continued climbing. At the crest of the hill she staggered through wiry grass into a small dip facing away from the school.

"Bastards!" The familiar voice in her ear sounded nervous. It was Muftin. "I thought you were inside."

"What do you mean?" the girl panted.

"They shot up the woodshed. No warning! Nothing! If you were inside...." His claws dug into Tulco's shoulder as it did when he was annoyed.

Tulco paled. If she had of hidden under wood... She swayed and felt ill, blinked back tears and reached out to steady herself. "Gikre," she whispered in a sudden panic. "Where's Gikre?"

"He's okay, Tulco. He'll be at the south beach cave by now. I doubt if any of the enemies even know it exists. Come on. You've done so well, I'm proud of you. Now make your way along this ridge until we're beyond the village then it's only a wee way to go.

"Gikre was waiting for us," Tulco said to Cindy and Sylvia. "I didn't know until then that he had supplies hidden in the cave, you know, food, spare clothes...everything. We waited until it was dark and headed into this valley. That was three days ago."

"So where does this valley go?" Sylvia asked.

"It becomes a mountain pass," Gikre said. "The trip's long and dangerous but on the other side, the villages are free." He shrugged. "They're a different dwarf shire but should be sympathetic towards us."

Cindy frowned. "But you don't really know?"

"Our land is divided into many shires, some good, others not so. We have traded with the mountain dwarfs, as we call them, but don't really know much about them."

"Is your whole country populated by dwarfs?" Cindy asked.

"This part," Gikre said. "Until the humans came, that is. Many are under human control now. Dwarfs are allowed to stay but have lost all their rights. They're really just slaves under an occupying power. Many became refugees in our shire." He handed everyone another slice of black sausage. "It's unusual for them to invade in winter, though."

"They heard Tulco was here," Muftin said. "It was a special attack not a full invasion. They came directly to Waymot and the school. They're scared of emerald eyes. That was why they shot up the woodshed. "

"But I know no magic," Tulco protested. "I couldn't harm them even if I wanted to."

"Magic comes with puberty," Sylvia said. "At least with me it did. I guess they want to catch you before you become a woman and begin to use magic."

"They failed, though," Tulco whispered. "Now you two are here. Why don't you just go and blast them to hell."

"Magic doesn't work like that," Cindy said. "If we used it that way we'd be no better than them. We'd be the monsters."

"I guess," the girl replied, "but why do the good people have to be the ones that suffer?"

"It might look that way," Cindy said, "but I have the strangest feeling we will be okay in the end."

Tulco gazed at her and gave the merest glimpse of a smile. "You're as mysterious as the white mist is sometimes," she said. "But I'm glad you're here. You could have stayed back in your homeland, you know."

"And miss all the fun." Cindy laughed and wrapped an affectionate arm around her young companion.

The trail up the valley became steeper and colder. Snow began to fall again and the weary travelers pulled their collars up and trudged on. Muftin found a pocket in Gikre's coat to wriggle in with only his head peeping out. Tulco, who had the lightest clothes, tired first and only halfheartedly objected when Cindy wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

"We need to stop," Gikre said after they had trudged on in silence for another half-hour. He turned and wiped snow off his jacket. "I doubt if anyone is following us."

"I'll check," Muftin replied. He pulled himself out of Gikre's pocket with his beak, stretched his wings and flew away.

"We're cold but will get colder when we stop," Sylvia warned.

"I've a tent," Gikre said. "I only planned on Tulco so it's only small. If we find a sheltered spot we can get a camp set up before dusk." He pulled an ancient pocket watch out of a vest pocket. Four fifteen. It'll be dark in forty five minutes and the temperature will plummet."

Since the sun had disappeared behind the mountain pass, the temperature had already dropped to below freezing. Faces were a combination of red caused by the excursion of hiking, blue lips and frost covered eyebrows.

The visibility was down to a few strides and there was that eerie silence of snow covered landscape. They continued on to a small level area sheltered from the north. Gikre disappeared under the trees, returned and said he'd found a suitable spot. It was a small area, free of tree boughs and far enough from the trail to be hidden from anyone coming up the trail, not that they expected visitors.

He was efficient and fast. Within moments the tent was up and Tulco was told to get in a fur-lined sleeping bag. He produced a small handful of dried wood from his pack and started a fire

"Well, there will be nothing suitable to start a fire out here," he said after Cindy had commented on his thoroughness. "Once we get some heat up, wet wood can be added."

Supper warmed hungry stomachs. The light faded and darkness dropped like a curtain, the fire became a few embers and talk stopped as, first Tulco then the others became immersed in their own thoughts.

Muftin returned. "There's a party of a dozen or more warriors half way back," he said. "They've set up camp for the night. We'll need to be out of here before first light." He fluffed his feathers and pecked at the small bowl of seed Gikre had set down before him.

"We need to get some sleep," Cindy said.

"You three and Muftin use the tent," the dwarf said. "I'm used to sleeping outside."

"You'll freeze," Sylvia said.

"So create a spell," Cindy replied. "You should know how."

"It could be traced." Sylvia frowned

"I doubt if the humans have enough magical knowledge to do that," Muftin said.

"I agree," Gikre added, "and with the snow still falling, they won't attempt anything until morning. There is no hurry as far as they're concerned. They'll have supplies and can just follow us for days until we weaken. We must keep warm." He turned to Sylvia. "Can you do it, Lass?"

"I'll try."

She squatted beside Tulco and shut her eyes. For several moments nothing happened, Gikre slipped away and Muftin settled on Cindy's shoulder. Sylvia began to rock slowly and move her hands in intricate symbols.

"What's she doing?" Tulco asked.

"Using signs," Cindy explained. "You don't have to say chants orally. Sylvia is thinking the spell through. Her finger movements are part of the incantation." She was closest to the tent flap and wriggled out. "You stay here with Sylvia. I'll go and help Gikre. He mentioned something about getting a hot toddy to drink."

Tulco nodded but was transfixed by Sylvia's movements. As the wizard's long fingers made circles, triangles and other seemingly random movements in the air, Tulco began to imitate them. Every sign was copied and when Sylvia spoke three words in a foreign tongue, Tulco mimicked them.

Finally, Sylvia jerked her eyes open and smiled. "It sort of came back," she said..."A bit like trying to remember an old poem taught at school."

"I know," Tulco replied. "We had to learn a three hundred line verse at school." She grinned. "It wasn't too bad though, as it told a story of an ancient dwarf warrior who saved his village from jealous gods. Mythology, Old Sniffy called it."

The flap being flung back as Cindy rushed in interrupted them. Her eyes looked excited. "You did it, Sylvia," she said. "Come and feel."

"Feel?" Tulco retorted.

"Well it's too dark to see," Cindy said. She reached out in the darkness, found the girl's hand and gave it a gentle tug.

Tulco scrambled out of her sleeping bag but found though still cold, it wasn't that freezing cutting temperature she expected. She followed Cindy and stood up. No snow hit her head.

"Reach up," Cindy said.

Tulco did and gasped. Her fingers touched something. It was soft like rubber and warm. She ran her hand along and risked stretching her fingers. The substance moved up with her fingers like when she once pushed in a balloon at a school fancy dress. The difference was that she was on the inside pushing out.

"The spell?" she gasped.

"Sure is," Cindy replied. "I'll soon be as warm as a summer's day in here. It keeps any snow away, too. It's called a cocoon spell. We're surrounded by a magical bubble that should last all night."

"Then what?" Tulco asked.

"It's a little like a fire going out. It slowly loses its strength so by morning we'll start to get cold again."

Tulco reached up again and ran her fingers along the slippery cover. "What would we see if it was light?"

"Blue fog," Cindy said. "From the outside, it is invisible. In fact the tent wouldn't be seen either. We would appear as a snow bank."

Tulco smiled and turned when she realized Sylvia was with them. "Sylvia, you did it," she said.

"Yeah, and suffer the consequences," Sylvia moaned. "Where's that toddy, Gikre talked about?"

"What do you mean?" Tulco blurted out.

Cindy laughed. "It's like waking up the morning after a night of drinking wine. Sylvia will have a terrible headache."

"Oh shoot," Tulco muttered. Her excitement turned to apprehension. "I've got a splitting headache, too. It started, just now."

"You're over tired," Gikre said and held out a steaming tin mug. "Have your toddy and get back to bed."

"You do that," Sylvia added. "That's what I'm doing. God, I'd forgotten about the after-effects."

She grinned, sipped from her own mug and crawled back in the tent.

CHAPTER THREE

Cindy awoke; gasping for breath to find morning had arrived. She was hot, covered in perspiration and the air was thick. She sat up and saw Sylvia and Tulco squeezed in beside her. Like herself, they were covered in perspiration and gasping for breath. In fact, they looked unconscious rather than just asleep. Both had red faces but their lips and fingernails were blue.

"Sylvia, Tulco!" Cindy yelled and shook the pair. It was to no avail. They didn't stir. She flung her covering jacket aside and stepped outside the tent. In front, Gikre lay on the ground. The snow had gone and was replaced by scorched earth.

"Oh hell!" She rushed to the dwarf's assistance but he could not be aroused.

Cindy looked up to see the bubble above was like thick opaque plastic. Light filtered through but it was seamless. She reached up and touched it. My God, it felt as solid as an airtight furnace. They were running out of oxygen!

Claws dug into her shoulder and a frightened voice squawked. "What's wrong, Cindy," Muftin cried. "I tried to wake you. It's so hot!"

"The spell went wrong."

"Fix it then."

"I'll try."

Cindy shut her eyes and attempted everything; thinking of their camp as it was the previous evening, imagining them walking through the firs, even Sylvia and herself on the lake at home. But it was useless. Nothing happened.

"Belt a hole in the wall," the bird suggested. His feathers were drenched from the humidity and his beak hung open as he, too, gulped for oxygen.

Cindy's felt groggy. Her vision became a cloud of purple as her lungs tightened. She staggered and sank to her knees.

"Get up," screamed the bird. He pecked her ear, chin and finally her lip before she opened her eyes. "Gikre had an axe to chop wood. Use it!"

"Yeah sure," Cindy muttered and staggered up. Her eyes couldn't focus and all she really wanted to do was to lie down and sleep. How peaceful it would be to just sleep.

"Cindy!" Muftin squawked and flapped his wings in her face.

It worked. She rose like a drunk and staggered three steps forward, banged her head on the solid bubble and swore.

The ax; she saw the ax.

Wasn't there something she was meant to do with the axe?

"Cindy!" screamed the bird. "Pick it up!"

She did. It was in her hand.

"Hit the wall, Cindy!"

Cindy blinked. God her head hurt. Why was she in a stinky hot mist?

In frustration Muftin landed on her hand and pecked it so hard, the woman yelled.

Blood spurted from the wound.

Suddenly, something surged through her mind and the young woman from Earth became an emerald eye wizard again. She grabbed the ax so tightly Muftin was flung aside, and swung! The power behind that swing was superhuman. The speed was such that her grip on the handle slipped and the ax headed to the roof.

There was a crackle of breaking glass and the balloon shattered. Freezing air blew in. but they could breath. My God they could breathe.

Sylvia was the first awake and stared at her sister, red in the face, covered in sweat but with snow tumbling around her. She was smiling.

"You got a bit carried away with your spell," Cindy said.

Quarter an hour later Muftin flew out into the winter sunshine to spy on the enemy. The four packed up and sat eating a cold breakfast while they tried to diagnose what went wrong.

"The spell wouldn't do that," Sylvia said as she stared at the circle of scorched ground. "It's fail safe. If anything goes wrong it just cancels itself.

"Maybe your magic is too powerful for this world," Gikre suggested.

"No," replied Sylvia. "It would either work correctly or not at all. Like electricity, it's either off or on, nothing in the middle."

"What's electricity?" the dwarf asked.

Sylvia stared at him, saw he was serious and gave a brief explanation. "... But that doesn't help explain this," she added.

Suddenly Tulco grabbed Sylvia's arm and stared at her. "It might have been me," she gasped.

It was Cindy who noticed the girl's eyes. They looked terrified.

"What do you think happened, Tulco?"

"I meant no harm," Tulco cried. Tears formed in her eyes. "But it must have been me."

"Why?" Sylvia said in a whisper.

"I copied every finger movement you made and even repeated those three words you muttered at the end. You were in a sort of trance and never noticed."

"Two wizards doing a simultaneous spell increases the power a hundred fold," Cindy said with her eyes firmly on Sylvia. "That could explain it."

"I'm sorry," Tulco howled. "I've never done a thing like this before. Never!" She stood and would have run away if Cindy didn't grab her.

"No," Sylvia said. "That's not possible."

"But it is," Gikre said. "I always knew it could happen."

As a way of explanation, the dwarf took an old tatty book from his backpack. It had a leather cover; black with age and a tarnished brass clamp to hold it shut. The words on the cover were written in a strange language, all squares and triangles with twisting lines through them.

"The dwarfish, alphabet," Gikre said. "This is *Divine Words*, our a sacred book." His stumpy fingers flicked through several pages, he read a little and searched on. "Here it is under prophecies for the thirteenth millennium," he finally said. "It is Year of our Deity 1213, this year."

"Go on," said Cindy.

"I'll read it," the dwarf said. He crouched down and placed the book on the damp grass just inside the tent flap.

"The number thirteen is significant. A human maiden of thirteen tender years with glowing eyes of the thirteenth color shall be thrust from obscurity to save the dwarf nations..."

Gikre frowned. "It waffles on a bit here." He stopped reading and traced his finger down the page "*She shall inherit the power of her ancestors on the thirteenth day after her thirteenth birthday but will need guidance...*"

"That's not me then," Tulco interjected. "I'm not thirteen for four months."

. And what does the thirteenth color mean?" Sylvia added.

"Hold it," grumbled the dwarf. "One question at a time." He turned to the inside back cover. There, faded but still visible, was a triangle of colors, all triangles within the main triangle. "Our color alphabet," he said. "Don't you have one on Earth."

"No," said Cindy. "What's its significance?"

"Everything," Gikre replied. "Every color has a meaning. White is the light, black the darkness, blue the air above us, orange the warmth of fires and so forth. There are one hundred and sixty nine colors of the realm."

"Thirteen squared," Cindy whispered.

"That's right." the dwarf muttered and ran his finger down from the top apex of the triangle. "There it is," he said with a satisfied snort. "Look!"

They all did. The color beneath Gikre's finger was an emerald green, identical to the twins and Tulco's eyes.

"The color of mystic power," he said. "This book is over a thousand years old yet it explains everything."

"But I'm not thirteen," Tulco yelled. "You didn't listen."

Gikre turned. "Tulco," he said and held both her hands. "You could be. Twelve and a half years ago I was a fisherman who came across a life raft bobbing in the ocean. In it was a tiny human baby. I made up a birth date, took you home and you became part of my family."

"You never told me this," Tulco whispered.

"There was always more time," the dwarf answered. "Later I found out you were a wizard and told you that much."

"I thought that was only to cover up me being human," Tulco said. "We all know how depraved humans are."

"That was partly true," Gikre replied. "Being an emerald eye gave us respect in the village but I was proud of you but for what you were, a beautiful little girl who warmed the heart of a grumpy old dwarf."

"Oh Gikre," Tulco cried. She gathered her stepfather in her arms and clung on. "I love you, always have but I never wanted this. The truth is, I almost killed us all by trying to be smart."

"No," Cindy replied. "You tried to help and did. Now we know you have our powers they can be used to protect us all."

Sylvia stared and bit on her bottom lip. "There are three of us now. You know what that means don't you?"

"A bit like last time," Cindy gasped.

"It's in *Divine Words*," Gikre interrupted.

"What!" the twins said together.

"Your story was written down fourteen hundred years ago. Weren't you called the Emerald Mistress of World Destiny?" *

"Oh my God," Cindy gasped and grabbed the book.

It glowed in her hands the letters went fuzzy and reappeared in English characters.

"What's that?" gasped Tulco.

"Our written language," Sylvia said.

"But I can read it?" Tulco said. "The shapes are all wrong but I can read it."

"Magic," Sylvia said and glanced over Cindy's shoulder who had turned to a page of contents.

"It's here," Cindy gasped. She flicked the pages, found the chapter and began reading.

"Oh my God, Sylvia," she said and looked up. "You wrote this. They're your words."

"Rubbish," Sylvia retorted and grabbed the book.

"Remember, you spent weeks writing it all down last summer," Cindy said. "I helped you type it on the computer."

"Computer?" Tulco asked.

"A writing machine," Cindy said.

"But we did nothing with it." Sylvia gasped. "Just stored it on disk. It's still there in the filing cabinet."

Gikre stared at the twins then onto his adopted daughter. "I think I was meant to find that little baby girl that day," he said. "I believe a new prophecy is about to unfold."

"Perhaps the story is already written in your book," Sylvia said. "Could it be that our story here has already been told?"

"No," sighed the dwarf. "Only future generations will read about it. Whatever will happen has yet to be played out."

"Is that a quote from *Divine Words*?" Cindy asked.

"More or less," Gikre replied. He grinned and hugged Tulco. "Whatever happens, I'm so proud of you, my sweet. Remember that, won't you?"

"I will, Gikre," Tulco whispered. She turned to Sylvia. "And I promise I'll never copy your spells again."

Sylvia smiled. "I hope you do," she said. "But not at exactly the same time. Okay?"

"Okay!" Tulco laughed and stood up. "Be back in a minute. I need to go to the toilet."

Tulco walked away and, unnoticed by the others, wandered into the trees. It was silent and away from any snow. For a moment she walked on with a lethargic look on her face, kicked a pile of dead pine needles and sat down. She shook her head and frowned.

Why was she here? The memory had escaped her. Strangely, though, she never felt afraid or even worried. Everything was right but she never knew why. She shrugged, sat down and leaned back against a tree trunk. It was so peaceful here, a little cold perhaps but with the scent of the trees, soft needles to comfort her and peace...

Her head nodded and eyelids became heavy.

Tulco slipped into a dream quite unlike any she had experienced before. It was in three distinct parts but only the middle section familiar to her. In the first she was tiny, she could tell for a lady was cuddling her, a beautiful lady with long blonde hair and earrings that tingled in the breeze.

"Tulco, my love," this lady said. "These dwarfs want to ask me a few questions. I'll be back soon. Be a good girl and do everything Gikre asks, won't you?"

"Yes, Mommy," she replied.

The lady stood and handed her to Gikre. He looked angry but she knew it wasn't at her. It was the dwarfs standing in the room. Gikre cuddled her and glowered at them.

"Have you no compassion?" he asked. "My Sun God, Man, what harm have we done you?"

"It is the law of the land, Gikre. You know the law and chose to break it. The elders said she influenced you. You were under her spell so, for that reason, you shall not be punished."

"Me, not punished!" Gikre roared "You take my wife and tell me I'm not punished. You bastards..."

"Please Gikre," the woman said. "Look after Tulco. She's yours now and one day I shall return. That's a promise, my beloved and I always keep my promises."

The vision faded and Tulco found herself in the schoolhouse with old Sniffy. Her banishment to the woodshed and the escape with Muftin was replayed.

The third section was even stranger. She was riding a dragon but had changed. She was a woman as old as Cindy and Sylvia. For some reason they were chasing the mist, the red vapin, the enemy.

"Hang on, Tulco," roared the dragon. "We'll stop him."

"No don't," Tulco screamed and stood up. "We'll all be killed. There's too much power..."

She shook her head and woke up back under the pine trees. The scene was the same but things appeared different, sort of smaller and cramped up. Her dress pulled against her skin.

The damn thing must have got wet and shrunk. Tulco stood and brushed the pine needles off herself. Now where was she?

Of course, she'd been rescued from the bear trap and was with Gikre and her new friends, Cindy and Sylvia. She could hear their voices out of sight through the trees. She stretched, wriggled her shoulders and tugged her sweater down.

With the dream forgotten, she walked back to join them.

Muftin emerged above the snow clouds into freezing clear skies. Here, he could see that the clouds hugged the higher land and coastal areas were clear. It was a beautiful sight with the white snow covered hills and beaches lapped by a deep blue ocean. To the east the sun was still low in the sky with its pale light failing to create warmth.

But he had a job to do. The enemy would look like ants at this height so he would need to lose altitude. He soared on an updraft and scanned the coastline. The only smudge in the snow was brown smoke that hovered over Waymot, his only home since hatching from an egg. He squinted. There was too much smoke for just chimney fires.

He flew closer and squawked in alarm. Three large sailing ships were tied up at the jetty and the fields beyond the school was filled with tents, dozens and dozens of them in long lines. The smoke was coming from three enormous fires. Muftin flew closer and saw food being roasted on huge spittles. One looked like a hog and another, a gigantic fish. It was probably a shark

Muftin gasped in surprise. The humans cooking the food were women and children. He'd seen human warriors and sailors before in surrounding villages but never women. They could only mean this wasn't a raid for supplies or to hunt for wizards but a full-scale invasion. The humans had arrived in Waymot and intended to stay.

The little bird flew on around the familiar streets and his heart dropped. Where were all his friends? There was not one dwarf outside, the marketplace had no stalls set up and even the tavern sounded empty. No roars of laughter rolled out nor could he smell the rich malt smell of the strong ale the dwarfs loved to consume in huge quantities.

But was it?

Muftin flew down and landed in a tree branch outside a side door. This was a favorite landing spoke where he often waited for Gikre. It had the advantage of height and a direct view in through a little top window. Here he would see Gikre and his friends leaning on the long wooden bar, laughing joking and sipping ale. Today, though, the view was different. The room was full all right. It was packed with dwarfs but they were sitting on the floor. Nobody joked or laughed and there was no ale flowing. There weren't even any ale kegs poking from the shelf behind the counter.

Stranger still was that dwarf women and children were there, too. Women rarely drank in the main bar, preferring the ladies room off the side and children were not allowed beyond the veranda. Muftin ran along his branch until he came to the next window.

"Oh rotten eggs," he whispered to himself. So that was the reason. Four human sailors stood along the wall armed with those terrible muskets. All the villagers were being held in the tavern as prisoners.

The bird squawked in alarm. What harm did the simple villagers do to the invading humans? His bird friends must have away, of course but the dwarfs had no such option. He needed to go and help.

But no, he could do little. His priority was to help Tulco, Gikre and the two new wizards from that other world. He'd seen enough and had to fly back to warn his friends.

Dark clouds had rolled in and blocked the sun. The day had dimmed and the tiny bird shivered as he flapped his wings and headed inland.

That was when the voice entered this mind.

The soft male voice was without emotion. "I don't have the strength to continue the battle, Muftin. You must go back and warn our friends not to go through the mountains. Humans have landed on the other side and will trap them."

"Where do they go, then?" Muftin squawked out loud. He had no idea whether it was necessary to talk to communicate but this was no time to experiment.

"Stay in the foothills but follow the coast east."

"But the humans have occupied the dwarf villages in both directions."

"It's a week's journey. Find the castle on the White Sword Peninsular. Understand?"

"I've never heard of it," grumbled the bird.

"Understand!" The voice sounded almost angry.

"Yes, a castle on the White Sword Peninsular."

"It is imperative you all reach the castle."

"Why?" muttered Muftin but there was no reply.

The voice had gone and the clouds began to roll away. The sun peeped out and a little warmth returned to the air.

Muftin squawked in annoyance and called out but he was alone once more.

"I'm not surprised," Gikre said after Muftin reported back. "It happened along the coast so I guess arrival of the humans at Waymot in large numbers was inevitable."

"And this voice mentioned a peninsular?" Sylvia said.

"That's right. It has a castle on it."

"I've know my geography but have never heard of it," Gikre said. "It probably isn't even real."

"But we go there, Gikre," Tulco said from the back of the group. There was an authority in her voice the others had not heard before.

Gikre turned, blinked and an intensive frown crossed his brow.

"What's wrong?" Tulco retorted.

"Ask Cindy and Sylvia," the dwarf replied. He sounded embarrassed.

Cindy wondered what the dwarf was going on about until she, too, noticed the girl. "Tulco," she hissed. "Do you feel any different?"

"No."

It was Muftin who used the appropriate words. "Your hair hasn't grown, Tulco," he said. "Everything else has."

"Oh how silly," the girl replied in an annoyed voice. "If anyone's different, you all are. You look, what is it, smaller somehow." She glanced up. "Even that hill over there looks smaller." She flung an arm out and connected with Gikre who had found a mirror in his pack.

"You'll need a new dress, my sweet," he said tenderly.

Tulco grabbed the mirror, held it up and saw her reflection. She gasped, looked down at herself and gulped. The once flat dress front was bulging with curved breasts. Her body had grown so much the ankle length dress now only reached her calves and was so tight around her body the seams had begun to split. She ran both hands over herself in a state of shock before looking up with quivering lips.

"It can't be," she whispered. "What's wrong with me?"

"You've grown into a beautiful woman," Cindy said. "It's just that it happened instantly, not the several months that it takes most girls. It is nothing to be afraid of."

Tulco stared at Cindy then onto Sylvia. "Can you help me?" she said and burst into heart rendering tears. "I can't handle this alone."

With the surprising change to Tulco, Gikre took Cindy aside and suggested they should take a few moments to console her.

"I looked up and thought it was you," he confessed. "She's always been my little girl for so long and now this mature woman towers above me."

"I think she needs to be treated no different," Cindy replied. "I went through something similar and it was my friends that made it possible for me to cope."

The dwarf glanced up, nodded seriously and patted Cindy's arm. "I'll get the fire stoked, he said.

Tulco accepted the hot toddy from Gikre and listened as Cindy and Sylvia described their own experiences. Cindy's teenage years were on Earth where there was no magic and the knowledge of her magical powers came to her unexpectedly. In contrast, Sylvia had been brought up knowing of her abilities and had her peers to help.

"Things still went wrong," Sylvia said. "It is a little like a child playing with fire. If you are not careful, you can get burned."

"And hurt the creatures you love," Tulco added softly.

"You can," Cindy added. "Usually, though magic has its own limits imposed by a higher authority."

Tulco nodded. "But why did I change so quickly? From what you told me, this never happened to either of you."

"The thirteens," Gikre said. "I've never known any others of your kind, my sweet. If you knew it was coming it would not have been such a shock."

"I don't think so," Tulco said. "Am I being arrogant in thinking something special is planned for me?" She grabbed Gikre's book and turned to Cindy. "You became so powerful, yet here you are an ordinary person and friend."

Cindy smiled. "We chose to stay on Earth where there is no magic. In that way, I became normal again."

"So if we went to Earth. I could be my old self?"

"Probably not physically, Tulco. Nobody, even on Earth, can go back to being a child again. But you are yourself inside, you know. Nothing can change that."

"Okay," Tulco smiled. "But let's worry about our present problem. It's a major change of plan isn't it, Gikre."

The dwarf nodded. "Tulco's suggestion could have merit," he said.

"What did I say?" the girl asked.

"We can get Cindy to take us to Earth. We'd be safe there."

"But I'd be dumb and dwarfs are not exactly a well known species there," Muftin grumbled.

"It could be a way to escape," Cindy said.

Sylvia, though, was doubtful. "We'd never come back, at least not at this time," she said. "If we leave, we abandon this world. It will still be here and enslaved by the humans, perhaps forever. We could come back, find hundreds of years have gone by and the dwarfs have been wiped out." She glanced up at Muftin. "Talking birds, too."

"Anyhow," Sylvia added. "It wasn't Cindy that took Tulco back to the lake. It was that white mist. What did you call it?"

"Vapin," Gikre said.

"And they want us here," Muftin said. "The white one I spoke to did, anyway."

"So we head east," the dwarf pronounced. "Come on. Standing here gossiping won't help us."

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