



Dark Destiny

By M. J. Putney

Chapter 1

Lackland, England, Autumn 1940

A fighter plane roared menacingly over the farmhouse just as Tory bent to blow out the candles on her birthday cake. She froze—she would *never* get used to destructive flying machines!

But she could pretend to be brave. She drew a deep breath and blew. The seventeen candles for her years were easily extinguished, but the one added for luck flickered persistently before guttering out. She hoped that wasn't an omen.

Her friends around the table applauded. Those who'd come from 1804 with Tory were enjoying the twentieth century birthday customs. The five of them would return to their own time in the morning. She was glad to be heading home, but she'd miss her twentieth century friends.

“Did you make a wish?” Polly asked. The youngest Rainford, she belonged to this house and this time. Though she was still weak from a bout with blood poisoning that had almost killed her, her mischievous smile had returned.

“Indeed I did,” Tory replied. “And it was hard to decide what to wish for!”

Her life had changed so much since she turned sixteen a year ago. Then she had been the well brought up Lady Victoria Mansfield, youngest child of the Earl of Mansfield. Most of her thoughts had been turned toward her upcoming presentation to society where she would look for the best possible husband.

In the year since, she’d become a mageling, an exile, and one of Merlin’s Irregulars, sworn to use her magic to protect Britain. Not to mention being a traveler through time and an unsung heroine of Britain.

Best of all, she had fallen in love. Her gaze drifted to the young man who sat at her right, looking impossibly handsome. Justin Falkirk, Marquess of Allarde and her beloved. He gave her a smile full of the warmth and intimacy that had grown between them in the last months.

“Time to cut the cake!” Lady Cynthia Stanton, who was Tory’s roommate back at the Lackland Academy, was eyeing the dessert hungrily. “Mrs. R., if I come back for my birthday, will you make me a cake like this?”

“I will,” their hostess said cheerfully. “But give me some warning, please. This cake required almost a month’s worth of our sugar rations. I’ll need to save more coupons to create another cake this size.”

“You won’t want to take another beastly trip through the mirror just for a cake, Cynthia.” Tory got to her feet so she could cut properly. “But you can have the first piece of this one.”

The round cake had a thin layer of white icing and “Happy birthday, Tory!” was

spelled out in rather uneven red letters. The same red icing had been used to draw little red rockets exploding around the edges.

Tory could have done without the explosions, but Polly had been pleased with herself for coming up with the idea. After all, war had drawn together this group of magelings from two different eras, and had forged lasting friendships.

Mrs. Rainford was sitting on Tory's left, and she held out a small plate to receive the first slice. "Here you are, Cynthia," Tory said as she set the wedge of dark fruitcake on the plate. Mrs. Rainford handed it across the table.

"I'm going to have trouble waiting until everyone is served!" Cynthia exclaimed. "I still haven't recovered from burning so much magic in France."

"As the birthday girl, I give you permission to eat now rather than wait for the rest of us," Tory said grandly. "We all need to eat to build up our strength for the return journey through the mirror."

Cynthia didn't hesitate to dig in her fork. After the first bite, she smiled blissfully. "This is wonderful, Mrs. R. If I didn't hate traveling through the mirror so much, I really would come back for my birthday. I'd even bring sugar so you could make the cake without using up your rations."

"That's not a bad idea!" Nick Rainford exclaimed. "Sending sugar, I mean. How hard would it be for you to throw sugar through the mirror?"

"We could do that," Elspeth replied. "Our sugar comes in big loaves that have to be broken into smaller pieces, but they'd throw very nicely."

"Tea and butter and bacon and all kinds of other things are also rationed," Nick

said thoughtfully. “If you can send them through the mirror, we could....”

“I will not have a black market operation run from my house,” Mrs. Rainford said firmly. She handed another plate of cake to Rebecca Weiss, who was staying with the Rainfords to study magic. “But some sugar now and then would be nice.”

“We can arrange that,” Allarde said as he clasped Tory’s hand under the table. She could feel his amusement.

She bit her lip, thinking how much she would miss this freedom to be together when they returned to Lackland Abbey. Male and female students were strictly separated in the abbey. Only in the Labyrinth, the maze of tunnels below the abbey buildings, could they work together as they secretly studied magic. And only there could she and Allarde have the privacy they craved.

“What is a black market?” Tory asked as she cut more slices.

“Illegally selling rationed goods, and Nick would dive right in if I let him.” Mrs. Rainford said with a laugh.

She laid her hand on Tory’s, but before she could continue, magic blazed from Mrs. Rainford through Tory to Allarde, kindling another blaze of magic from him.

Allarde’s hand clamped hard on Tory’s and he exclaimed, “*No!*”

“Justin?” Tory said dizzily, shaking as she channeled power and shock between Allarde and her hostess. “What...what just happened?”

His gaze was unfocused. “I...I saw Napoleon invade England. Barges landing, soldiers pouring off. French soldiers marching past Westminster Abbey.”

The Irregulars gasped with horror. The threat of invasion had been hanging over

their heads for months as Napoleon Bonaparte assembled an army just across the English Channel from Lackland Abbey. Jack asked, “What makes you say that?”

Tory felt Allarde’s effort to collect himself. “Mrs. Rainford and I both have foreteller talent, and Tory’s ability to enhance magic seems to have triggered a vision of the future when the three of us were touching.” He glanced at their hostess. “Did you see images of invasion?”

“I...I saw Napoleon in Westminster Abbey,” Mrs. Rainford said unevenly. “But that was fear, not foretelling! We know from history that Napoleon never invaded.”

Allarde shook his head. He was still gripping Tory’s hand with bruising force. “I don’t know about your history books. What I saw was an event that may well happen if we don’t act. We need to return home immediately. If and when the invasion takes place, Lackland will be a major landing site.” He swallowed again. “I saw French barges landing in Lackland harbor and soldiers pouring off. The village was burning.”

Jack Rainford rose from his chair. “My family!”

“The French are *not* going to invade!” Mrs. Rainford repeated. “I’ll get a history book and show you.” She left the room, her steps quick.

Tory took a swallow of tea for her dry throat. Mrs. Rainford was a schoolteacher and well educated, but Allarde’s magic was powerful. “Foretelling is what *might* happen, not necessarily what *will* happen, isn’t it?”

Allarde eased his grip, though he still held her hand. “This felt very, very likely.”

Mrs. Rainford returned with a textbook. As she thumbed through the pages, she said, “There’s a chapter about how close Napoleon came to invading, but he didn’t.” She

found the chapter she was looking for and caught her breath, her face turning white.

Tory peered at the book and saw that the letters on the page were twisting and flickering like live things. The words couldn't be read.

Mrs. Rainford said in a choked voice, "I remember what this chapter said, but...it doesn't say that anymore."

"The text being in flux here suggests that the history isn't set," Allarde said grimly. "Perhaps Napoleon just made the decision to launch and that's why we had the visions. If the Irregulars can do something to prevent the invasion, that might be why history records that it didn't happen."

"If the past has changed, wouldn't the present also be different?" Rebecca, raised by two scientists, frowned as she tried to puzzle it out.

"Time travel is a mystery, and I don't pretend to understand how it works," Jack said, as grim as Allarde. "But there is danger at home and to my family. I can feel it like a gathering storm."

Elspeth rose. "We need to leave right away. We haven't much to pack."

Ever practical, not to mention hungry, Cynthia said, "We should take the rest of the cake. It will help us recover from the mirror passage."

Knowing that was true, Tory tried to eat her slice, but it tasted like straw. She and the other Irregulars had faced the dangers of war here in 1940, but her own time, her home and family, had not been threatened. Not until now.

"I'll pack the cake and some cheese," Polly said briskly.

As the party dissolved, Nick caught Tory's gaze and said with deadly seriousness,

“You’ve done so much for England in my time. If there is anything, *anything*, that I can do to help, send a message through the mirror and I’ll come instantly.”

“You saved my whole family,” Rebecca said in her soft French accent. “I have only just discovered that I have magic, and I don’t know how to use it. But I pledge everything within my power to your service.”

Tory thanked them, but she realized with cold foreboding that even if all the Irregulars and their 1940 friends worked together, they were few and the French were many. The Irregulars might not be able to save England.