



Dark Passage Excerpt

Prologue

France, Autumn 1940

Tory had almost reached her destination when a machine gun blasted crazily from the farmhouse ahead. As Lady Victoria Mansfield in her own time, she'd been taught to dance and manage a household and embroider, rather badly. As a mageling and a member of Merlin's Irregulars, she'd learned to dive for cover when she heard gunfire.

She hit the ground hard and took refuge under the hedge on her left, grateful for the darkness. Clamping down on her fear, she peered out from under the hedge.

The machine gun was being fired in bursts. Sparks spat from the muzzle that stuck from a window on the upper floor. The weapon wasn't aimed in her direction, which was good. But damnably, it was aimed at the small barn that sheltered the people she'd promised to protect.

Another thing she'd learned in 1940 was swearing. She muttered some words that would have shocked her parents, the Earl and Countess of Fairmount, speechless.

She had to stop that rain of death, and quickly. But how? She was no warrior. She was an undersized sixteen-year-old girl dressed to look even younger. She wouldn't know what to do with a gun if it was handed to her fully loaded.

But she was a mageling, and she could draw on the magical power and talent of her friends. She studied the small stone house. It was old and simply constructed, two stories high. Probably just two rooms downstairs and two on the upper floor.

The building was dark except for the room where the machine gun was placed. Likely the inhabitants of the place had fled when their home had been commandeered.

If she was able to get into the house and come up behind the men with the machine gun, she should be able to do—something. Exactly what would depend on what she had to work with.

Cautiously she worked her way around the house, glad she was carrying her stealth stone. It didn't make her invisible, but it would make the men less likely to notice her. Bullets were brainless and harder to mislead.

Like most old houses, the windows were few and small. She tested the back door. Locked. On the floor above was a casement window that looked large enough for her to climb through. Since it might also be locked, she selected a rock the size of a large man's fist from the stone border around a flower bed. Then she turned her mind inward to focus her special magic.

Click! She began to rise, skimming her left hand along the stone wall until she hovered next to the window. She tried unsuccessfully to open it.

Could magic muffle the sound of breaking glass? She hadn't tried that before, but it might work. Doing magic was mostly a matter of focusing magical power on the desired result—and Tory had a great deal of power.

She concentrated on silencing the sound, and for good measure she waited for the next burst of machine gun fire. Smashing the rock into the right hand casement sent shards of glass flying, nicking her wrist.

The breaking glass made very little sound, but even so, she waited to hear if she'd been noticed. Coarse laughter came from the front of the house. A man spoke. French, not German. Collaborators of some sort, perhaps police working with the Nazis. Their raucousness suggested that they were drunk and amusing themselves by shooting up the flimsy barn that sheltered helpless people.

One of them made a sneering remark about killing filthy Jews. For a red-rage moment, Tory wished she had a gun and knew how to use it.

But magic was her weapon. She felt inside for the window latch. It was badly stuck, so she gave it a little blast of magic. The lock opened but her hovering bobbed as she diverted energy. She was using up power at an alarming rate.

She wrenched the casements open and glided into the dark room. After catching her breath, she cautiously created the dimmest possible mage light. The room was a simply furnished bedroom. The bed looked ruffled, as if the sleepers had left in a hurry. That would also explain why the door had been left ajar, enabling Tory to hear the voices.

As she'd guessed from outside, the primitive cottage would have been old in her own time. Gnarled beams ran across the ceiling. Good.

The door opened to a short corridor that led to the stairs and the other bedroom at

the front of the house. The door to the other room was open, revealing three men in French police uniforms, the machine gun, and bottles of wine or spirits.

With only the barest of plans, she walked softly toward the front room. She had just reached the doorway when one of the men turned and looked right at her. He blinked uncertainly, but the stealth stone wasn't enough to conceal a direct stare.

He lurched to his feet. "It's a little girl! Must have hidden here when the rest of the family ran."

A second man turn, then smiled nastily. "Old enough that we can use her."

He lurched toward Tory. Even six feet away she smell the alcohol on his breath. Her rage flared again. These men shot at the innocent and were ready to ravish a female they thought to be a child. Drawing her focus to blazing intensity, she drew masses of power from her friends, most of all Allarde's special talent.

When she'd gathered her strength, she made a furious sweeping gesture with one arm at the beams. "*Enough!*" she cried as she pulled down the front half of the roof.

The massive beams smashed into the men and their horrible gun. Tory threw herself out the door in a rolling tumble as the male shouts abruptly cut off. The remaining roof beams began to groan ominously.

Devil take it! The whole cottage was collapsing!

She scrambled to her feet and raced to the back bedroom, diving out the open window before the roof could crush her. Something hard crunched into her left arm and she barely managed to catch herself before crashing into the ground.

With the last of her power, she managed to roll and turn her fall into a safe landing. She folded into an exhausted ball, panting. Her left arm hurt like Hades and

blood was saturating her sleeve, but at least she'd escaped. The three shooters hadn't.

She rested her head on her bent arms as she fought the pain and the horror of knowing that she'd just killed or seriously maimed three men. They were beasts, but she hadn't wanted their lives on her head.

She drew a shuddering breath. She had *sworn* that she would never return to the future again. Why the devil was she here?

Because she had no choice.

Chapter 1

England, June 1940

Traveling through time was not for the faint of heart. Lady Victoria Mansfield wiped damp palms on her skirt as she contemplated being torn into screaming pieces, dragged through a magic mirror, and dropped one hundred thirty seven years in the past, exhausted and ravenous. But this was the only way home.

She surveyed her friends. “Everyone ready to brave Merlin’s mirror again?”

There was a mutter of assent, with Lady Cynthia Stanton’s edgy, “I want to get this over!” the clearest comment.

Elspeth, flaxen haired and fey, said to Cynthia, “Since you had the most difficult time coming through the mirror to get here, take my hand and I’ll see if I can send you extra energy to make the trip easier.”

Cynthia nodded ungraciously—she was often ungracious—and took Elspeth’s hand on one side and Allarde’s on the other. Allarde, dark haired heir to a dukedom and a powerful mage, gave Cynthia an encouraging smile. Though he was jaw droppingly handsome, Tory loved his kindness even more than his looks.

He laced the fingers of his other hand through Tory’s. Energy sparked between them. She always felt calmer and stronger when they were together.

The last of her group, Jack Rainford, clasped Elspeth’s hand to complete the line of magelings. “Lead on, Tory!” He wiggled his blond brows at her. “But if you take us to the wrong century, I’m going to be very, very cross.”

She smiled innocently. “Do you want to lead us through the mirror, Jack? I’ll be happy to defer to you.”

He looked horrified. “I’ll stick to weather magic, thank you. You’re the expert on traveling through time.”

A wise choice on his part. Jack was surely the best weather mage in England in 1940, and quite possibly would be the best when they returned home to 1803. But Tory seemed to have the most talent for moving through the mirror portal to other times—and taking others with her.

Tory gave a last smile to the four twentieth century friends who had come to see them off. “Good luck and stay safe.”

“If you ever come back, we’ll find beds for you,” Nick Rainford said with a grin. His family was descended in some way from Jack’s family, and he and Jack shared similar blond good looks. They could easily pass as brothers.

Tory smiled, but they all knew it unlikely they’d ever see each other again.

She turned to the end of the chalk tunnel and raised her right hand. Though the time travel portal called Merlin’s mirror wasn’t yet visible, she could feel the burn of its magic. Summoning all her power, she visualized the time and place of their destination.

Take us back through time. Return us to Lackland Abbey in 1803 . Take us to just a few minutes after we left. Take us home...

Magic was mostly a matter of will, and she had plenty of stubbornness as well as a talent for invoking the time portal. As she concentrated, a tall silver mirror shimmered into view. For an instant she saw the five of them reflected, somber and dressed in the clothing of their own time rather than the strange garments of 1940.

Stepping forward, she laid her palm against the mirror. The silver surface turned black—and she pitched into the abyss, dragging her friends behind her.

Passing through time was getting a little easier with practice, though not by much. Tory still felt as if she were being torn into small pieces and reassembled. But for the first time her mind was clear enough that she sensed other pathways through the dark screaming chaos. Other portals leading to...different places? Different times?

Allarde's hand held hers in a death grip. Through him she felt the energy of the others, like notes of music.

Tory returned to normal space with wrenching abruptness. She collapsed on a cold chalk floor, the others crumpling down behind her. She almost passed out, but this time she managed to stay aware.

After a dozen gulping breaths, she sat up and surveyed her surroundings. Mage lights glowed on the ceiling. They seemed to be the same size and position as the ones they'd used to illuminate their passage forward in time earlier. She may actually have succeeded in bringing them home the same night they'd left.

"That is a really terrible way to travel," Jack groaned as he sat up.

"A massive understatement," Elspeth said raggedly. "Are you all right, Cynthia?"

There was no reply. "Cynthia? Cynthia!" Elspeth rolled to her knees and laid her hands on the other girl's forehead and midriff. "She's not breathing!"

Terrified, Tory scrambled to her feet. She was still dizzy from the transit and lurched toward the wall. Allarde caught her before she crashed into it. She drew a steadying breath, then moved to Cynthia's side.

For an instant, Tory had the horrible impression that Cynthia was melting, her features distorted by the difficult passage. She blinked and Cynthia was her normal

beautiful self, except for her corpse-like pallor.

As Elspeth poured in her powerful healing energy, Jack grabbed hard onto Cynthia's hand, resting his other hand on Elspeth's arm. Tory and Allarde gripped Elspeth's shoulders, each of them adding their power. Tory couldn't see the magic, but she could feel its fierce potency, like a river of white fire.

Learning how to combine their powers was a vital part of what they learned down here in the secret underground school known as the Labyrinth. The aristocratic outcasts of Lackland Abbey studied as equals with talented locals like Jack. Collectively, they were Merlin's Irregulars, sworn to use their magic to defend Britain.

Tory had a special gift for blending disparate magics, and she'd needed that as the five of them pooled their power and varied skills to control weather over the English Channel. They'd been aided by twentieth century Rainfords who were descendants of Jack's family. Together, they'd enabled the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of Allied troops desperate to escape the Nazis.

This time, their combined power was channeled through Elspeth, the best healer. After an agonizing moment, Cynthia choked, gasped, and breathed again. Opening dazed eyes, she snarled, "*I. Am. Never. Going. Through. That. Horrible. Mirror. Again!*"

Tory laughed and sat back on her heels. "You don't have to. None of us do. We're heroes and heroines of Britain, even if we can't tell anyone." Nor would anyone believe them if they did speak. "Now we settle back into our normal lives."

She tugged Cynthia's skirt down so the other girl's trim ankles weren't exposed. Probably it was silly to worry about that when all three girls had worn shockingly short skirts in the twentieth century. But here, it mattered.

“I’ve had enough adventure for now.” Jack slid an arm under Cynthia’s shoulders to help her sit up. As soon as she was sitting, Cynthia batted his hand away with a scowl. Jack grinned at her. “You’re recovering well, I see.” Which made her scowl even more.

Jack got to his feet, moving with less than his usual bounce. “The mage lights are the same as when we left, so I think you successfully brought us back to the same night, Tory. I’ll see if there’s anyone still in the hall.”

Elsbeth made a face. “If this isn’t the same night, we’ll have a lot of explaining to do to the Lackland masters.”

Allarde looked thoughtful. “What would happen if we returned before we left? Could we meet ourselves then?”

Cynthia looked horrified. “That would be awful!”

Tory frowned, wondering how she’d feel about meeting herself. The idea made her stomach queasy. “I’m not sure that could happen. It doesn’t feel possible.”

“I hope you’re right. The idea is just too strange,” Jack said, “I’ll report back as soon as I’ve checked out the hall.” He walked swiftly down the passage, conjuring up a mage light to illuminate his path as he turned the corner.

Cynthia attempted to stand and made it up with the aid of Allarde’s hand. She’d always had her eyes on him. Even though she grudgingly recognized that it was Tory Allarde wanted, she still looked for excuses to touch him. Tory was confident enough of the bond between her and Allarde that she didn’t mind. Much.

As Cynthia leaned against a wall, a small object came flying through the mirror. They all jumped, then stared as it clattered along the passage and stopped near Allarde. He scooped it up. “It’s a stone with a piece of paper tied around it.”

Tory blinked. "A message?"

Allarde undid the paper and grinned. "It's for you, Tory."

She took the paper and called down a mage light from the ceiling to help her read. "It's a message from Nick," she said with surprise. "He wanted to see if it's possible to send messages through the portal."

"Apparently it is," Elspeth said. "And much easier than traveling in person!"

The rock and paper looked perfectly normal, unchanged by their journey through time. Tory asked, "Does anyone have a pencil?"

Allarde pulled one from inside his coat. "As my lady wishes."

She gave him a private smile before scrawling, "*It worked! We all got back safely and never want to travel through the mirror again! Tory.*"

After neatly retrying the paper around the rock, she faced the mirror and concentrated on the destination she wanted to reach. *1940, Nick Rainford...*

When the goal was crystal clear in her mind, she tossed the rock through the mirror. The missile touched the surface of the shining energy and vanished. "We'll have to check here regularly in case he sends more messages."

Elspeth frowned. "With such a huge war going on, there will be other crises where someone will think our magic is useful. They might want us to come back."

"They can ask," Cynthia said tartly. "We don't have agree."

"I don't intend to. But I'm glad we can communicate with our friends," Elspeth said softly. "We all became so close when we worked together. I feel like all of the Rainfords are family."

"So do I," Allarde agreed. "But I'm another who is in no hurry to travel through

Merlin's mirror again!"

Cynthia straightened up from the wall, looking frail but noble. "I still feel weak, but I want to get back to my own bed." She glanced hopefully at Allarde.

"Let me help you," Elspeth said, taking the other girl's arm. "I can add some healing energy if you need more." The mischievous spark in her pale green eyes showed that she knew what Cynthia had hoped for.

Cynthia accepted the other girl's arm with a martyred air and the two of them headed toward the main hall. Allarde offered Tory his arm. "My lady?"

She took a firm hold of his arm with a mixture of pleasure and wistfulness. "I'm going to miss the freedom to be together that we had in 1940."

"So will I." The two girls ahead were out of sight, so he paused and cupped her face with his free hand. "But the Lackland authorities can't keep us here forever. At twenty-one, we'll be free to leave." He bent into a kiss.

His lips were warm and full of longing. Tory had to blink back tears or risk disgracing herself. Four long years to wait before she could leave...

Chaos!

The passageway dissolved into darkness and gunfire. She was in some high, frightening place with a vicious wind tearing at her clothes and deadly peril threatening her. She cried out with terror, "Justin!"

"Dear God, Tory! What just happened?" In the space of a heartbeat she was back in the Labyrinth, shaking in Allarde's arms while he stared at her, his gray eyes shocked.

Using his Christian name instead of his title was a mark of how upset she was. She struggled for composure. "I had a...a vision, I guess."

“I saw it, too,” he said grimly “It was night and you were in a high place with bullets blazing around you. I think I was near, but not with you.”

“Nick’s war again.” She swallowed hard. “You’re better at foretelling than I am. Is that a glimpse of the future?”

He closed his eyes, his face smoothing into detachment. After a dozen heartbeats, he said, “As you know, the future usually appears as possibility, not certainty. I think that scene has a strong chance of coming to pass. But not certain.”

Her mouth twisted. “Do I live to tell the tale?”

“I didn’t feel your death.” He opened haunted eyes and smoothed back her hair with a warm hand. “But that might be too great a horror for me to see.”

She gave a choke of near-hysterical laughter. “Justin, sometimes I wish you were a little less honest and honorable. What I really want right now is for you to pat my back and say, “Don’t worry, Tory, that’s just a faint possibility, or maybe a memory of Dunkirk. You don’t ever have to go back to 1940 again.””

“Don’t worry, Tory, that’s just a faint possibility,” he said promptly as he began stroking her back. “Maybe a memory of Dunkirk. You don’t ever have to go back to 1940 again.”

“That’s *much* better.” She managed a smile. “I prefer to think that wasn’t a vision, just a memory.”

His arms tightened around her. “No one can force you through the mirror without your cooperation.”

“It’s hard to imagine what circumstances might change my mind.” She rested her head on his shoulder, feeling tired. “But I suspect that I should never say never.”

“You’re probably right. But for tonight, we’re home and happy, and we were part of a very great deed.” He kissed her forehead, then resumed walking, this time with his arm around her shoulders.

Tory wrapped her arm around his waist so they were as close as humanly possible while still able to walk. She’d nearly lost him, but she hadn’t. There was no point to worrying about the future so much that she couldn’t enjoy now.

“Do you hear those voices?” Allarde asked, his voice threaded with excitement.

“Yes!” Tory exclaimed.

They quickened their pace. The heart of the Labyrinth was a wide hall furnished like a shabby but comfortable drawing room. Here the Lackland students and the locals studied and mingled. Now it sparkled with mage lights and happy chatter.

They’d arrived back only minutes after leaving because the people who had seen them off at the mirror hadn’t gone home yet. Jack was in a three way hug with his mother and his younger sister Rachel, all of them talking and laughing at the same time.

Cynthia and Elspeth were talking excitedly with Miss Wheaton and Mr. Stephens. The teachers were both powerful mages, and they risked their jobs by tutoring students secretly in this mass of ancient tunnels that ran below the abbey. They looked fascinated and deeply relieved to have their students back safely.

Tory sighed happily and leaned into Allarde. They’d had the adventure of a lifetime and made it home. She hoped she never had such an adventure again.

But as she thought back to her chaotic vision, she felt dark certainty that Merlin’s mirror wasn’t done with her.