THE EMERALD SORCERESS

By Sherry Bessette

Chapter One

Fierce winds rampaged the dark forest, viciously whipping each naked branch. Ancient trees bent and contorted, defending themselves against the gale. Casting grotesque shadows high into the raging sky, they danced in rhythm with the violent lightening.

Blinded by the stinging rain, a woman ran through the storm. She cast a fearful glance behind her, but saw nothing in the blackness of the night. Pausing to catch her breath, she heard the sound of a horse crashing through the forest in pursuit. In her panic, she stumbled to the ground. With a cry, the woman placed a protective hand on her swollen belly and pushed herself to her feet, urging them on.

A blinding flash of emerald fire split the night. For one fleeting moment, hope flared in the woman's breast as the Emerald Sorceress suddenly appeared beside the great stone arch ahead of her. Raising her arms to the heavens, the sorceress spoke the words of power, and the space inside the arch shimmered, bathing the night in a rainbow of color. The woman moved faster, concentrating on reaching the safety of the arch. Only a few more paces . . .

Out of the blackness, triumphant laughter reverberated around her, cutting through a roll of thunder as if the boom were nothing but a whisper. Her blood ran cold as she felt the hot breath of the animal on her neck. A bolt of green fire exploded behind her as the Emerald Sorceress sought to give her time. The scream of the horse spurred her forward. With her last ounce of strength, the woman reached the arch.

Breathless, she placed one hand on the cold, wet stones, holding her heaving belly with the other as her lungs hungrily drank in the damp air. She looked up at the beautiful sorceress standing between her and certain death. A smile passed between them.

"Go," the sorceress urged.

Without a second thought, the woman stepped through the arch, into the rainbow of light. As she vanished from sight, the colors shattered like a mirror, leaving only the black night and the storm.

The Emerald Sorceress slowly lifted her eyes to the wizard towering above her on his black stallion, his thin face blazed with anger. He was too late. A calm satisfaction crept over her as she gazed at the raven blazoned across his chest. "You've lost, Jozef. This one, you shall not have."

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Kacie Miller bolted straight up from the mattress, eyes wide. Her heart hammered in her chest as she clutched at her blankets, still seeing the terrifying images of the nightmare flash before her. She forced her hands to relax their death grip on the medallion around her neck as her eyes traveled around the familiar bedroom. She focused on the thin line of daylight seeping around the edges of the heavy linen curtains on the far side of the room and drew a ragged breath. Letting it out slowly, Kacie tried to dispel the dream's terror with the comforting sight of light.

She reached up to wipe the perspiration from her face and frowned at her shaking hands. It was just a dream, she told herself.

A disturbingly real dream.

She shuddered, once again hearing the howling wind and feeling the rain sting her cheeks as she ran through the dark forest. Kacie frowned. No, she realized, it wasn't her cheeks that stung. She wasn't the woman in the dream. The woman looked like her, but something was different. She bit her lip. If it wasn't herself she was seeing, then who was it? But, the woman eluded her, just as she had the man on horseback.

Kacie shook her head, sending her long black hair cascading around her shoulders. *Jeez, Miller, get a grip. It's only a dream*, she admonished herself. "But, it's a very scary one," she argued back. *You're twenty-two, for goodness sake*, the logical part of her insisted. *Are you gonna let a little nightmare turn you to jelly?* She made a rude sound to silence her inner voice as she tried to calm her jangled nerves and collect her wits.

Stretching to release knotted muscles, Kacie glanced at the clock beside the bed. The display glared 9:30 am. She did a double take.

"Crimeny! I'm late!"

The dream and her fears were pushed aside as she jammed her feet into black and white cow slippers and waved a hand in the general direction of the curtains. Not even a thread stirred. So much for my powers of telekinesis.

She snorted and padded to the windows, oblivious to the moos coming from her feet with every step. "You don't have time for fantasies today, Miller. You have to be at work in twenty minutes."

She flung open the dark red curtains, relieved that for once there was no coastal marine layer shrouding the sun as bright morning light flooded the room. Kacie raced into the tiny kitchen and pulled open the fridge. Grabbing the remains of a double pepperoni pizza, she tossed it into the microwave. She slammed the door shut and started to point at the oven, caught herself and keyed in 2:00 and hit the start button. Today was not the day to play makebelieve.

As a child, Kacie was convinced that buried deep within her was the ability to do things others couldn't. A wave of her hand should turn on lights or pick her clothes up from the floor and put them away. Of course, none of these things ever happened, but that never stopped her from trying. As she grew older, the habit became a game she continued to play. Usually, she just laughed at her private childhood joke. Today, it was a nuisance.

Kacie frowned at the microwave and raced back to her bedroom. She grabbed the first hanger she laid her hands on and slipped the blouse over her head, half hopping, half stumbling into the bathroom while she stepped into her long skirt and pulled it up.

Kacie put in her contacts, pulled her thick hair into a quick ponytail and slid several golden bangles up her arm. She gave herself one last look in the mirror and decided she looked semi-normal. In the other room, the microwave beeped. Kacie zipped in, grabbed her breakfast and headed for the door. *I wonder if pepperoni pizza before bed causes nightmares?* She shook her head at the thought. She'd only had pizza three of the five nights she'd had the reoccurring dream. With a sardonic laugh, Kacie rushed out of her apartment and waved the door closed as she charged down the wooden stairs.

The door stayed open.

Kacie threw her head back and let out a wordless cry of frustration. She stomped back up the stairs, yanked the door shut and raced down again.

Casting a guilty eye at the big Tudor house adjacent to her garage apartment, she grinned and hopped onto the polished wooden railing and slid the twelve steps to the driveway below. "Aunt Mary would kill me if she saw this." A peek up at the master bedroom confirmed her suspicions; her aunt was scowling down at her. "Oops." Kacie's grin widened. Unrepentant, she waved to her aunt.

Mary Miller shook her head and waved back, as Kacie blew her a kiss and jumped into her red convertible Jeep C.J. and peeled out of the driveway.

Oblivious to the residential quiet, she jammed the gearshift into drive, stomped on the gas and raced down the tree-shaded street. Two blocks down, a red light threatened to stop her progress. Kacie glared at it as she sped closer.

"Change," she commanded, snapping her fingers and pointing at the light. "Yes!" She pounded the steering wheel with delight when the light turned green. She down shifted and with tires squealing, made a quick right onto the freeway. The gas pedal went to the floor and the speedometer hit 80 mph just as she reached the end of the on-ramp. She pushed a strand of hair out of her face and cranked the stereo, directing slower moving cars out of her way with a wave of her pizza slice. Kacie pretended it was her powers of manipulation parting traffic like Moses at the Red Sea, not the fact that she was swerving in and out of lanes like a woman possessed by demons. Whatever the reason, traffic complied and she made the twenty-minute drive into downtown Santa Monica in ten.

Licking her fingers, Kacie found a parking spot behind The Dreaming Tree and patted the C.J.'s bright red fender for a job well done and headed into the metaphysical bookstore. "Now if I can just make it to the crystal room with out being seen," she told herself, as she snuck in the back door, past the incense counter and around the last bookshelf. With the door to the crystal room in sight, she was about to congratulate herself, when a voice stopped her in her tracks.

"Over sleep, Miller?"

Kacie swore under her breath. Pasting a saccharin-sweet smile on her lips, she turned to face her short, round, annoying co-worker. "Just pretend, Jon, my sweet, that the big hand is on the twelve and the little hand is on the ten." She cocked her head to the side and slowly drew an imaginary circle in the air as if moving the hands of time backwards.

Jon's eyes widened.

Kacie snickered and disappeared into the other room.

"Witch," Jon mumbled, not quite, under his breath and Kacie sent an evil cackle drifting through the store.

Like a perfect, conscientious – on time- employee, Kacie was dutifully dusting crystals when the store manager caught up with her five minutes later. Loren looked pointedly at his watch. Kacie shrugged.

"What happened to you this morning?"

Loren's light tenor voice would never match his muscular, 6'4" frame, but for once Kacie didn't notice the incongruence. "I had that dream again last night." She focused on the crystal in her hand. "It was so real, Loren. I honestly thought I was there." She glanced up at her friend, the night's terror still churning in her stomach.

Loren threw a sympathetic arm around her shoulders. "Kacie, you have got to get yourself another job." He waved a hand around the room full of crystals and other metaphysical objects. "This place is gettin' to you, Girlfriend," he teased. "Maybe you should lay off the pizza before bed."

"Thanks." Kacie made a face at him.

"And turn some lights on. You're gonna turn into a mole."

Kacie waved a hand at the lights. Nothing.

Loren pulled his glasses down his long nose, and looked over the rims at Kacie. Without a word, he withdrew.

From behind a bookshelf, Jon piped up. "Use the switch, Miller, it works better."

"There are such things as sensor switches, you know," Kacie retorted.

"Not at The Dreaming Tree. Not in the entire year you've worked here, Miller. You have to switch the lights on and off by hand in this place."

"I'd like to switch you off," she grumbled and picked up a large crystal, gently wiping off the needle-like points.

"Oh, by the way," Loren popped back in. "Mr. Weatherby's back." Kacie gave him a blank look and he added, "You know, the guy that owns the store."

"I know who Mr. Weatherby is. I've just never met him, is all."

"Well, this is your lucky day." And, he was gone again.

"Great." Kacie threw down her dust rag and settled the crystal back in its place on the display shelf. "Why today? I'm a basket case today."

A shimmer of light in the corner of the room caught her eye and Kacie crossed the room to stand before a large antique mirror. "Just my luck, isn't it, Gueran?" she asked the dragon carved into the wooden frame. "A Suit. And I look like a holdover from a hippie convention."

Kacie twirled back and forth looking at the reflection of her long, tie-dyed, gauze skirt and low cut, muslin shirt. She smiled at herself and shrugged. "Oh well, you still love me don't you, Gueran?" She patted the dragon's head and could have sworn he winked his one eye at her. Kacie shook her head and laughed at her own foolishness.

She began to dust the intricately carved frame, running her hands over the exquisite sculpture. The mirror felt magical under her fingers, almost alive, as she admired the incredible craftsmanship that went into making this work of art. She loved the way the dragon draped itself over the top and down one side, while he curled his tail around the blade of the sword etched into the other side. She touched the large wooden gem in the hilt and imagined it to be real. "What an incredible thing you'd be," she whispered, leaning forward enough for the gold medallion around her neck to swing loose from her blouse and hit the mirror. A spark arced from the mirror into the necklace, giving Kacie a slight shock.

"Ow." She rubbed her tingling chest. "Okay, since when can you get a shock from glass?"

"Kacie."

Kacie heard Loren call her name, but she stood transfixed by the rainbow of colors that swirled across the mirror's surface. *Wow.* She tore her eyes from the kaleidoscope long enough to see if the display of crystals across the room were prisming in the mirror. No, their colors were dormant, shrouded in the morning shadows. Kacie frowned and turned back to the mirror.

"Kacie," Loren called her again.

"Loren, check this out." Kacie swiveled her head toward her friend as she moved, giving Loren an unobstructed view of the Dragon Mirror.

"Check what out?" Loren scratched his bald head as he inspected the mirror and then Kacie.

Kacie glanced back at the now clear, reflective surface. "How weird. There were these gorgeous colors dancing in the mirror. It was awesome." She looked up at Loren again and shrugged. "Oh well. What's up?"

Loren just shook his head. "I need you to inventory that shipment of books that came in yesterday. I'd like Mr. Weatherby to think we do work around here once in a while."

"Sure." She gave the Dragon Mirror a final look and then dismissed the whole incident as just another in the growing list of weirdness in her life and headed for the back room.

Checking inventory wasn't her favorite job, but at least it should keep her safe from the Twilight Zone for a little while. Kacie turned on the radio – remembering to use the knob this time – and let the back-beat of the rhythm take her. She danced around the room, emptying boxes and applying price tags in time with the music. Very shortly a teetering tower of books sprang up in the center of her dance floor. She eyed them for a moment. "I think you should go over there." She directed her finger to a spot on the floor out of the way. The books didn't move. Kacie sighed. "Okay, fine." She made a face, grabbed an armload and walked them to where she wanted them. She flicked her fingers at the uncooperative books, she began to sing with the radio.

She was dancing around a mountain of empty boxes when an elderly gentleman invaded her sanctuary. Kacie stopped singing. "Excuse me, Sir, customers aren't allowed back here. Can I help you with something?" She watched him wander around the room, obviously lost.

What a strange old guy. She eyed the snow-white ponytail hanging half way down his back. It was a perfect match for the short white beard he was stroking as he gazed about the room. Kacie raised an eyebrow at the bright, flowered shirt tucked into banana yellow Bermuda shorts, held around his bony hips by a woven tan belt.

Check out that buckle. Her gaze riveted to the golden, three pointed sunburst radiating out from a huge emerald. That has to be the biggest emerald I've ever seen. I wonder if it's real? No way, it can't be. She shook her head in awe as she continued to survey the strange little guy. But, I tell you what, if he's wearing shoes and socks, I'm gonna die. Kacie suppressed a laugh and snuck a peek at his feet. Huaraches. She sighed with relief. He was wearing sandals—without socks. Well, that's a step in the right direction. She wrinkled her nose and groaned at the pun.

He had to be seventy, if he was a day, and he looked like the poster boy for a Fijian travel guide. She let her gaze wander back up, and found herself staring into twinkling gray eyes.

The man smiled, waiting for her to finish her inspection and Kacie's face reddened. "I'm looking for my desk," he told her.

"Excuse me?" His desk? The poor man's off his Twinkie. He shouldn't be out on his own like this. Kacie gave him her best reassuring smile. "I don't think we have your desk, Sir. Um . . . is someone looking for you . . . maybe?"

Understanding flashed in the old man's eyes and he reached out and patted her hand. "It's all right, child. I'm Mr. Weatherby. Loren said my desk was back here somewhere," he shrugged. "Every time I leave, Loren moves things around so that I can't find a thing when I return."

"Mr. Weatherby?" Kacie jumped, snatching her hand away. *Terrific.* She stepped back into the stack of empty boxes and lost her balance. Boxes tumbled all around her as she fell into the middle of the avalanche.

From underneath the rubble she heard Mr. Weatherby's barely contained laughter. "Are you all right, child?"

I will be if I don't die of embarrassment first. This was not how to impress your boss. Kacie groaned. Oh, I certainly impressed him all right. I'll be lucky if I don't get fired. She buried her face in her hands. Who else would imply to their boss' face that he was senile?

Above her, Kacie heard boxes being shifted and then a hand reached down to help her up. "Are you all right, child?" Mr. Weatherby repeated and her yes was so rueful he began to laugh. His laughter was infectious and in spite of her embarrassment, Kacie found herself laughing with him.

"What in the world . . ." The concern on Loren's mobile features as he rushed into the room changed to shock and then understanding as he saw Kacie standing hip deep in empty boxes.

Mr. Weatherby winked at Kacie. "We were just introducing ourselves when this poor child was attacked by that pile of boxes," he explained, sober faced. "It's lucky I was here or she might have been killed."

Loren looked at Kacie, who shrugged and held out her hand. "I'm Kacie Miller, Mr. Weatherby," she grinned and he winked at her again, clasping her hand in both of his warm ones. Kacie excused herself and slipped out of the room.

Okay, so he's a little eccentric. What's wrong with that? She looked down at herself. The world needs a few more eccentrics.

A bolt of lightning split a thick wet oak, spooking the great war horse, causing him to dance sideways. The Raven Wizard took a firmer grip on the reins, controlling his frightened mount. Jozef regarded the woman standing before him, taking in her deep chestnut hair and the tall frame, slender and straight under the sodden green velvet cloak.

"You are as beautiful as ever, Lady Emerald." Jozef bobbed his head to her. "Even after all this time." She continued to stare up at him, and a lazy smile touched his thin lips. "What, Reyna, have you nothing to say to your King?"

The emerald eyes locked defiantly onto his pale blue ones. "I see no king, only a murderer."

Jozef ignored the slur. She was tired. He could see it in the pinched look around the beautiful eyes, and the set of her full mouth. It took considerable power to activate and then destroy a portal in such short succession. Even for the Emerald Sorceress. Jozef began to relax. She was weak. He hid a satisfied smirk. He had waited a long time for this opportunity. Let Maya go. The child she carried no longer mattered. He had the Emerald Sorceress, herself. Without Reyna to teach her, the child was just another child. She was no threat to him. And, with Reyna under his power, he would soon have the Dragon Sword with its coveted ruby.

Old anger flared momentarily. It had been so easy to rip the Power from the Raven Wizard, leaving nothing behind of his mentor except a shriveled shell. But, Mykal had suspected him. Jozef ground his teeth.

With the help of the Emerald Sorceress, the old wizard exchanged the ruby of power from the Raven's signet ring with the inert ruby in the Dragon Sword of Medora. By the time Jozef realized the deception, Mykal was a lifeless heap and the sword was nowhere to be found. The Emerald Sorceress had hidden the sword denying him the full adaptation of his usurped Raven magic. But now, Reyna stood before him, vulnerable. Jozef almost laughed.

Yes, with the Emerald Sorceress under his control it would be a simple matter to strip her power and retrieve the Dragon Sword from its hiding place. Jozef's cold, ice blue eyes glittered with visions of unlimited power.

Never taking his eyes from hers, the man eased himself in the saddle, sliding a gloved hand under his cloak, and into the pouch hidden at his waist.

With a lightening quick movement, he pulled his hand from the pouch and threw a handful of crystalline powder at the woman, murmuring the words of a spell.

Too late, Reyna realized her danger. Even as she threw up her arms to protect herself, she was crumpling to the ground.

The Raven wizard slid to the ground and easily lifted the Lady onto his horse. "All too easy."

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Kacie woke sweating, her heart pounding - again. Groaning, she sat up in bed. "This is getting to be a habit. A bad one," she groused, pushing her dark hair out of her face. "Oh No!" She froze then smashed her pillow into her face as she realized this dream continued where the first one left off.

"I'm trapped in a 'B' movie and I can't get out!" she wailed into the pillow, "Well," she put down the pillow and drummed her fingers on the blankets. "At least it was different. Hummm. . . Maybe I should go back to sleep and see what happens next." Kacie pounded her pillow into shape, snuggled back into the bed and closed her eyes. "Then again, do I really want to know what happens next?" She threw off the covers and sat up.

"No."

Kacie waved a hand at the light. The room stayed dark. She dropped her head to her chest and sighed. "Maybe someday . . . if I live long enough." She slipped her feet into her slippers, mooing along with them as she shuffled her way into the kitchen, to make herself a cup of hot blackberry spice tea.

Teacup in hand, Kacie curled up on the couch under a warm afghan and flipped on the TV, surfing through the channels until she found an old black and white Tyrone Power movie. Half way through Tyrone's swashbuckling she drifted into an uneasy sleep.

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Kacie... From the depths of darkness, she heard her name being called. Kacie threw an arm over her face, trying to ignore the voice, but the summons came again and again, each time more urgent than the one before.

Kacie opened her eyes and found herself standing in a void engulfed in a blinding fog. She stretched her arms as wide as she could and felt nothing around her.

Kacie... The disembodied summons drew her forward, deeper into the mist. She spun in a tight, unseeing circle. "I can't see. Where are you?" Why on earth did I ask that? How about asking how you get out of here, Miller? Her hands groped, trying to feel her way through the swirling white vapor. Pushing down the panic growing inside her, she took a deep breath, wiped her sweaty palms on her over-sized T-shirt and then shook her arms loose.

Kacie... The faint voice called again. Kacie tuned everything else out and focused on the sound. It seemed to be coming from all around her. As hard as she tried, she couldn't zero in on the point of origin. This is getting me nowhere. She squinted into the fog and concentrated on willing it away. Maybe then the fog in her brain would piffle away too. Several moments later, she realized she could just make out a dark silhouette through the thinning mist.

That's more like it.

Kacie moved cautiously forward until she stood in front of a massive wooden door. Heavy iron hinges held it securely to a stone wall. She placed a hand on the door to push it open and a flash of blue fire sparked along her arm, shocking her. Kacie yelped and jerked back, cradling her numb arm as she watched the blue fire crackle over the door's surface before it faded away. "Oh, don't even go there with me." She set her jaw and stretched her hands toward the door, being careful not to touch it. "I want on the other side of this door."

Kacie shook her tingling arm. "And no little blue whatsit is gonna stop me. So, open up." She closed her eyes and pictured the door opening. As she concentrated, in her mind's eye, she saw a deep emerald green aura begin to gather around her, growing ever stronger in the stark haze. Kacie swayed, her hands hitting the protected door. There was a brilliant flash as the blue and green energies briefly clashed then the door swung open under her touch.

Kacie opened her eyes and found herself in a musty stone room. She shivered and rubbed her arms, wishing she had on more than just the hockey T-shirt she slept in. *Okay, so where exactly am I?* She looked around and noticed a faint blue glow radiating through the shadows in the room. Searching for the source, Kacie took a step forward and saw the woman, Reyna, lying on a bed of white satin, in the middle of the room. Her chestnut hair spilled over a gown of deep gold velvet. Her slender white hands lay across her stomach. A dome of clear crystal encased her body and the now vary familiar blue aura of power crackled along the glass. Kacie absently rubbed her arm.

"So that's what he did with her. Is she dead?" Kacie inched closer.

Suddenly, the woman's eyes flew open. *Help me*. The mental plea reverberated in Kacie's mind. She tried to scream. She wanted to run, but the emerald eyes rooted her and held her silent. *Help me*.

"How?" Kacie heard herself ask. Why do I keep asking questions? She mentally kicked herself.

Use your crest.

"My what?"

The Trion crest. Use it to free me. Hurry, girl, before Jozef catches us.

Kacie took another step closer to the crystal dome, shaking her head. "I'm sorry, I don't understand. What crest?"

Kacie felt, rather than heard the woman's sigh of desperation. _Just do as I say. Quickly. Around your neck, you wear a small medallion of a phoenix -

"How did you know that?"

The woman ignored her. Take it off and place it on the seal in the crystal. Then strike the dome with your fist.

Reaching inside her T-shirt, Kacie pulled out the golden phoenix, rising displayed from a crown of flames. Delicate scroll work framed the piece, forming it into a miniature shield. She hesitated for just a moment before removing the necklace from around her neck. It was the only inheritance she had from the mother she never knew, and she was reluctant to part with it even for a second.

Holding the pendent tightly to her, Kacie took a closer look at the crystal dome, and for the first time, noticed a tiny circle of gold with a raven etched in the center. Remembering her last bout with the jumping blue energy, Kacie took a deep breath for courage and plunged her hand into the blue aura. To her surprise, it only felt cold and a little tingly as her arm passed through it. She laid the necklace on the seal and watched in fascination as a green glow began to radiate around the pendent, pushing the blue away. Soon, only the green aura remained.

Hurry Girl! Reyna's emerald eyes blazed, urging her to move.

The words brought Kacie out of her reverie. She made a fist and struck the crystal with all her might. A burst of Emerald power flashed around the dome shattering it into a thousand glowing pieces that vanished into nothingness.

Out of nowhere, a ball of blue fire appeared in the far corner of the room. Before the Emerald Sorceress could move to protect her, it slammed into Kacie's solar plexus, hurtling her through the air. She crashed against the stone wall and slid, unmoving, to the floor.

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Reyna swore. Jozef knew the girl was there. He couldn't have missed the raw power she unleashed to counter his magic spells. The child would be a formidable sorceress – if she lived.

The Emerald Sorceress compressed her lips into a thin, determined line and forced herself to stand. How many years did she lie captive in Jozef's crystal coffin? It seemed like a lifetime. It was a lifetime. Maya's unborn babe was now a young woman. Reyna moved unsteadily to the unconscious girl and felt her neck for a pulse. It was strong and steady. Thank goodness. Reyna let out a sigh of relief and looked nervously around the room, expecting Jozef to appear any second. The girl must be sent back before Jozef could reach her. Without training, Kacie was vulnerable and Reyna was too weak to protect her.

"You must go back, my child. It isn't safe for you here within the Raven Wizard's reach. You are not ready to face him." Reyna took one last quick look around, gathered her long dormant powers about her like a cloak and spoke the words of the spell that would send Kacie back.

"Return to your world of protection and light, beyond the mists of darkness that await you here." On the last word, she touched Kacie's forehead. A brilliant green aura surrounded the girl and then she was gone. Reyna took a ragged breath and wearily stood.

Now it was time for her to leave. As she turned toward the far wall, she spied the tiny golden Trion crest lying on the floor beside the bed. Reyna slipped it around her neck and moved to stand at the center of the wall. She counted six stones over and three up. Running her hand over the rough surface, she felt the familiar, almost imperceptible swell of power radiate from the tiny depression in the bottom corner of the stone. "How convenient." Reyna smiled. "A secret Jozef hasn't found yet." She pressed and a small section of the wall slid open revealing a tiny closet sized room that held a dusty, standing mirror. As the wall slid back in place, Reyna stepped through the mirror and vanished.