

PREVIEW CHAPTER

The Wrong Wizard

Jess Worthy stood alongside the forest path and watched the wizard. The wizard looked in Jess's direction, right through him, in fact.

Being invisible is cool. Anyway, I wouldn't visit a weird primitive planet any other way. This dude doesn't know that a kid from another world is watching him. His people don't even know what another planet is. They probably think theirs is flat and that the stars are just lights.

Jess was invisible, inaudible, untouchable, even unsmellable, if that's a word. The 14-year-old human boy could stand, walk, even talk to his nearby starship while he was next to the wizard or any person or animal on this planet. The breeze could blow leaves through him. The wizard could wave his hand through Jess's body, if the alien were close enough to reach out to the human boy, and if he knew that Jess was there.

But the wizard couldn't know that.

The trip to this planet gave Jess his first opportunity to hide within his biovox's camouflage function – one tool among many cool technologies that the Oregon boy used on assignments throughout the galaxy. With it, he could watch history unfold on an iron-age world like this, witness an epic battle, observe a planet's most ferocious predator up close. Camouflage also could make Jess appear and even speak like a planet's people, like this wizard. But invisibility would do for now.

Man, I wish I could use this back home. First, Dustin Sandler would find his clothes soaking wet after P.E. Then... Oh, I'd better not even think about stuff like that. I'd lose the space-travel deal if I broke the rules. I'm here to study and learn. Well, this isn't the wizard I'm looking for, but maybe there's something to learn by watching this guy for a minute or two.

The wizard stood in the middle of the path, in the middle of the dense forest, watching, as if he were waiting for something. Something in Jess's direction. The boy looked over his own shoulder into the lush stand of tall trees, fern-like plants and

other growth to see what the wizard might be staring at, whether someone or something was stirring in the trees and brush.

It can't be me he's looking at, of course.

Nothing but red, green and brown vegetation lay behind Jess.

Still, the wizard stared. And Jess watched the wizard.

This definitely isn't the wizard I'm looking for. This dude's wearing orange and lime-green robes. What a pukey combination. But maybe to these people, those colors go together. I don't know. I didn't read much about this planet before coming here.

A minute passed. Then another. The wizard stood like a statue, fixated on Jess's direction. The boy stared back, waiting for the alien's next move. It might take only a moment to find out what the wizard was waiting for. Jess wasn't in a big hurry today. But he didn't want to wait all day either.

The wizard stood and stared. And stood and stared. The 14-year-old took a long, deep breath and glanced at his watch.

I'll give him another minute. Then I'm out of here.

Finally, the wizard stepped forward and cocked his head. He took two more steps, but not down the middle of the path. He walked toward Jess with careful, gentle steps, like a cat stalking a mouse. He stopped about 10 feet away from the invisible boy.

This dude's starting to freak me out. If he takes one more step in my direction, I'm getting out of his way.

The wizard leaned on his staff of polished black, gnarly wood topped by a dark green crystal about the size of Jess's fist. The wizard raised a brittle old hand to brush aside long, blue-gray hair and cocked a giant ear toward Jess. He sniffed the air and squinted in the boy's direction. Jess's spine stiffened, and he held his breath.

This guy's acting like he knows I'm here, like he can smell me or hear me. But that's impossible. Or is it? Maybe this guy can sense me somehow, like mind-reading or some alien sense that I don't know about. I should have read more about this planet.

The wizard dropped his hand, letting his long hair fall back over his ear, and leaned forward against his staff. Again, he stood and stared like an angry vice principal awaiting a student's explanation for why he'd been sent to the office.

OK, this is getting old. And weird. I'd better get going.

Anyway, this isn't the wizard I'm looking for.

Jess lifted his left foot and took one step backward. The wizard's eyes bulged. He raised his staff, grabbed it by the lower end and whirled it with the speed of a major league batter even though the staff was longer than Jess was tall. The green crystal at the top whooshed inches in front of Jess's nose – so close that he felt the air whip by. He gasped and reeled backward a few steps, but the wizard lunged closer and swung the staff with a backhand whoosh. The crystal passed through Jess's midsection, just as it should, but the crystal blazed neon green and screamed like fingernails on a chalkboard through a roaring car stereo.

What was that?

"Hah!" the wizard shouted as he lunged, thrusting his staff toward Jess, who scrambled down the path toward his ship.

He knows I'm here! There's something about that crystal...

As the wizard charged, he swung the staff from side to side. *Whoosh-screech. Whoosh-screech.* The crystal glowed and wailed each time it whipped near Jess, leading the wizard like a metal detector that whined as it passed over a penny in a sandy beach. Jess ran as fast as he could, and the *whoosh-screech* of the crystal shrieked at his heels. Jess glanced over his shoulder and gasped. The wizard was catching up.

How can he run so fast? This old guy's in better shape than I am. What should I do? Zig-zag?

Jess swerved to the right side of the path, then to the left. The wizard slowed to a jog, still swinging his staff from side to side.

It's working! He's confused.

Jess kept up the zig-zag, but within a few seconds, the wizard cackled a dark laugh and charged toward the boy again.

"That won't save you, demon!" the wizard yelled, laughing.

He knew I was zig-zagging? How? Where did he get that thing? What do I do now?

Jess threw himself into the quickest stride he could manage, running toward the little stone and wood bridge over the creek. That's where he'd started down the path after landing his tiny starship a few yards into the woods. But the wizard kept up with Jess.

I've got to get off this path, take a chance in the woods! Lose him. Or else I'll lead him to my ship. If he can find me, he can

find my ship. I'll go into the woods on the other side of the path, then circle back across to my ship.

Jess veered into the forest, closing his eyes and wincing each time he passed through bushes, low dead tree limbs and giant ferns. Thanks to his biovox's camouflage, he felt nothing slap his face or scratch his arms, and he ran effortlessly through the underbrush. But he couldn't help but distrust the technology. He still reflexively thrust his hands forward to block his face.

As soon as he opened his eyes after passing through a large fern, a bus-sized tree trunk appeared. He gasped, turned his head and extended his hands to block the impact with the tree. But he passed through the massive trunk and stumbled onto the ground on the other side.

I'll never get used to running through trees and stuff! What happens if I run into a rock wall? Would I get lost inside? Oh, I've got to keep running.

Jess scrambled back onto his feet, but he paused when he heard thrashing brush and an angry voice far behind him. The racket was at least 100 feet away.

It worked! The forest slowed him down. He has to whack his way through the bushes.

The voice barked in short angry bursts, which Jess could barely understand. "Boar-like beast excrement!" ... "Illegitimate offspring of a scavenger!" ... "Flightless fowl's droppings!" ...

He's swearing! Ha. He's swearing in his language, and I'm hearing the straight translations! That's hilarious.

Jess laughed between gasps for breath.

He can't keep up with me now because he can't run through solid objects like I can. I'll just circle around back to the path, run to my ship and pick a different landing site, far away from this dude.

Jess closed his eyes and thought about the location of his ship. The navigation tool was one of the first functions he'd learned to use through his biovox – the network of microscopic devices embedded throughout his body, providing him a hospitable environment and communication, as well as the camouflage. The biovox could draw a line only he could see, leading back to his ship. Well, it *should* have. But it didn't. Jess looked all around for the faint blue line, but he didn't see anything. He

closed his eyes and concentrated on the location of the spacecraft. Nothing.

Am I doing this right? Is something wrong with my biovox?

“Nexus?” Jess hailed mentally to his ship’s computer. “Hello? Are you there?”

Nothing.

Whack, whack, smash. The swearing wizard with the Jess-detecting crystal chopped and swore his way closer to the boy.

He knows where I am. How? And why can’t I talk to my ship? I need a minute to think.

Jess looked in the opposite direction of the wizard, deeper into the forest. The land rose gradually in that direction, leaning against an immense snow-capped mountain range to the east.

I’ll go a little further that way, then circle back. I’ll hit either the path or the creek, then follow it to my ship. No problem.

Jess jogged deeper into the woods, passing through the lighter vegetation but around the tree trunks, even though the biovox would allow him to pass through those too.

“Biovox check,” he said mentally. He immediately “heard” the familiar voice in his mind telling him that the diagnostic had begun. Jess was relieved at that much, knowing that the system protecting him from the alien air and germs still was with him.

“Biovox functioning normally.”

“Then why can’t I reach the nexus?”

“No nexus within network range.”

“What?” the boy said aloud.

“No nexus within network range.”

But that’s impossible. It’s supposed to have a range of hundreds of miles. I can’t be more than a mile or two from the ship. Something must be wrong with the nexus. Or maybe there’s something blocking the network. Or... that wizard’s crystal thing is blocking the signal..? I’m going back to the ship now!

Jess knew he was southeast of his landing site, more or less. He had put down near a stone and wood foot bridge over a creek that ran westward from the mountains, and he had walked southward down the path. Finding north, south, east and west would be easy on this planet because, unlike Earth, it rotated on an axis exactly perpendicular to its orbit around its star, and Jess was near the equator. From here, the sun would rise directly to

the east and set directly in the west every day. Only at midday would the sun's position be useless for navigation.

All I need to do is go roughly northwest. I'll hit either the path or the creek, then follow that to the bridge and find my ship.

Jess hustled through the forest, still hearing the swearing and whacking in the distance to his left. Yet he quickly left his noisy pursuer behind. Or did he? Something thrashed the brush directly ahead of the boy. He stopped and watched a thicket part less than 100 feet ahead. The wizard emerged, with the green crystal glowing at the end of his staff. No, it was a *different* wizard – taller, thinner, with turquoise-colored hair, though wearing a similar orange and lime-green robe.

Oh, great, he has a friend helping him. But how did he tell his friend where to find me? Do they have ESP or something? Man, I should have read more about this planet before coming here.

Jess turned northeast again to circle around the new pursuer. He ran for a minute, then resumed his course toward the northwest. This time he found *two* wizards, also armed with the mysterious crystals that glowed brighter the nearer they got to the human boy. When the two new wizards' crystals blazed at Jess's proximity, they cackled to each other and moved toward him, whacking the branches and vines out of their way.

What's going on here? Is there an army of these dudes?

Jess ran hard toward the northeast, hoping that his speed through the brush would allow him to get around all these weird wizards. This time he ignored the tree trunks, blazing through the woods as fast as he could. Although he slowed to a jog when the vegetation grew thick, he nearly leaped into the creek on the other side of a massive, leafy bush. He skidded to a stop.

Yes! I made it to the creek!

Bent over with his hands on his knees, Jess gasped to catch his breath. Then another noise startled him – whacking and splashing coming from his left, downstream. Another wizard, less than 50 feet away, splashed through the water, hacking away at the vegetation hanging over the creek. Jess jumped across the stream and slipped through the heavy brush lining the bank. He emerged in a grassy plain that stretched for miles.

Oh, my God! There IS an army of these guys! How could I

have missed all this before landing? I don't get it.

More wizards in orange and lime-green robes, carrying staffs with glowing green crystals, led legions of creatures wearing iron armor and bearing swords, axes, maces, chains and other vicious-looking weapons. Jess couldn't tell whether these soldiers were a short, stocky variation of the wizards' species, or some other native sentient species. Whatever they were, they formed a massive, well-organized army. Lines of infantry by the thousands stretched into the distance. Elephant-sized armadillos with triceratops-like horns pulled wheeled iron-clad towers, catapults and giant crossbows. The army was marching southwest, probably to the little bridge and path that led through this forest – to where? An opposing army? An ill-fated city?

I've got to get out of here. "Nexus? Nexus?"

Still nothing.

The army's officer wizards, noticing their crystals glowing, turned toward the creek, toward Jess. Three of them formed a line to the boy's left, again blocking the way to his ship. The wizard splashing up the creek started hacking his way out of the bushy banks toward the clearing where Jess stood. The boy looked to the massive peaks to the east and started shuffling in that direction, then skidded to a stop.

Wait! They keep trying to chase me this way – scare me away from my ship – or into a trap. That means they know where my ship is too! Oh no! I've got to make a run for it, get past them!

Jess ran back into the forest and leaped across the creek just as the soaking wet wizard burst out of the underbrush. Jess heard him swear and start smashing his way back after the boy. Jess ran into the forest, avoiding the creek, then turned west. He ran headlong into two more wizards, but he didn't slow down. He charged toward a thicket between the pair and plunged through. As he passed between them, they thrust their staffs toward each other, sparking a green lightning bolt linking the crystals and igniting the bushes into flames. Jess passed through the green spark and blue flames, giving him a mild tingling sensation.

What was that? Who are these guys?

The wizards swore and laughed loudly.

Jess kept running and dodging more wizards, who seemed less aggressive now in their pursuit. He burst out of the vegeta-

tion onto the path, where an endless line of soldiers marched four abreast. He held his breath and closed his eyes as he passed through them. But this time Jess felt resistance, like walking through water, and a tingling sensation. Where he passed through iron armor, sparks erupted, startling the soldiers and terrifying Jess.

Something's wrong with my camouflage! Those wizards zapped it somehow. Got to get to my ship NOW!

He turned northward toward the creek and ran only yards from the soldiers marching down the path. When he reached the creek and saw the bridge to his right, he dashed to the left toward a small clearing under a massive tree – his landing site.

"Nexus! Nexus! Can you hear me?"

Jess trotted toward his starship. Once within a few feet, he would be able to see it, although no one else on this planet could. He moved closer and closer. It didn't appear. Halfway through the clearing, it still didn't appear.

Oh, no. It can't be...

Jess darted back and forth across the grassy clearing. It was the right spot, but there was no ship. Then Jess saw the wheel ruts from a primitive but heavily laden wagon.

No, no, no. That's impossible!

Deep impressions at least a foot wide cut into the grassy soil, leading to the roadway where the alien army marched.

How could they find it? How could they lift it on a wagon? I can't believe it! I landed only like half an hour ago. How could they have found my ship and taken it away?

I'll follow the wagon! I'll just... No! They'll expect me to do that. It could be a trap. What should I do? I told my android substitute I'd be gone a week, so no one on Panforum will even notice I'm missing for at least a week! Now what do I do?