

Luminaria



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PROLOGUE

THERE WAS A FAINT, constant thrumming sound that was always present in the sanctum. It helped mask the slight sound the black-clad figure made when it dropped from above into the centre of the small circle in the chamber.

Every couple of metres along the circumference was a pedestal housing a cushion. There were four altogether. On each sat a different coloured crystal. The target was the white one.

It had been an extremely risky venture thus far. Many obstacles had to be overcome and the thief's energy was almost completely tapped, but it had been worth it. The crystal's possessor would be all-powerful. One quick incantation would result in complete control of this world.

Creeping on tiptoe, the crook moved around the circle, facing the brilliant white gem. A hand shot out quickly and grabbed the crystal from its perch.

“Ego sum vinco.”

There was a huge flare of light, and then the figure vanished.

In the same second the chamber doors flew open and four very large guards ran in brandishing swords.

They spread out and carefully checked the entire room, although it didn't take long. The only things in it were the pedestals and it was impossible to hide behind them because they were each only a half metre wide.

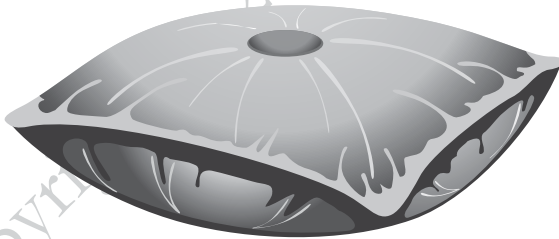
Once it was determined the chamber was empty, one of the guards motioned to somebody at the door. A very old, small, frail-looking man slowly crossed the threshold. His long purple robe dragged along behind him as he made his way to the centre of the room.

His eye landed on the empty cushion. He moved over to it and reached his hand out, touching the dent that was left in the plush surface. His eyes narrowed slightly but he remained quiet.

Slowly moving from pedestal to pedestal, he peered into each crystal, nodding at whatever he saw there. The guards exchanged puzzled glances but stayed at attention, their swords held straight up at their sides.

The old man turned and started to walk towards the door. As he reached the guards he flicked his right index finger. Once to the right, then once to the left.

All four guards instantly burst into flames, their screams of agony echoing throughout the chamber. The heat was so intense that there was nothing left but four piles of ash even before the old man had exited the room. He never looked back.



CHAPTER 1

“OOF!” LOGAN LANDED ON the ground with a thud.

Alex couldn't help but laugh out loud. “Aha! Finally got you.”

Logan glared up at Alex but the corner of his mouth turned up at the expression he saw there. “Yeah. Cheating doesn't count, though.”

Logan hoisted himself up and brushed off a few errant leaves.

“Hey, I didn't cheat. You've always told me that anything goes out there in the real world,” Alex smirked.

“Too true, but you still have a lot to learn. You can only take somebody by surprise once,” Logan warned.

Alex shrugged, collected her things and started walking down the path towards home. “My lesson starts soon. I need to get changed. Can we continue this tomorrow? Same time?”

“I have to go into town with Father tomorrow but should be back in the early afternoon. I'll come and get you when I return.” Logan moved up beside Alex and matched strides.

“I'll tell Catherine to expect you.”

They continued in silence for several minutes until the path branched off into a fork, one leading to the castle, the other towards the cottage where Logan and his father lived. Logan clapped his hand on Alex's shoulder as he turned. “Take care, friend.”

“I always do,” Alex smiled back.

Alex thought of Logan as a brother. His father's family was the third generation to care for the grounds. Alex and Logan had been together since before either of them could remember. Life was changing, though, as Alex's sixteenth birthday approached. Logan had already turned sixteen a month before but nothing much changed for

him. He would eventually take over from his father and that would be it.

Alex's life was going to take a huge shift, though, and not in any positive way. Her thoughts went to the conversation she'd had with her mother only that morning. A shiver ran through her at the memory. She would need to figure some way to get out of the arrangement her parents had made with Duke Reginald Pleasance. There was no way she would go through with what they'd planned for her. Just because she was a princess didn't mean she had to marry the likes of his son, Lord Jonathan Pleasance! Not only was he twenty-eight years old but he was fat, ugly and smelled like old cheese! Why couldn't they understand that arranged marriages were so old-fashioned.

She deserved better than to have her betrothed chosen for her. She was attractive enough, and 163 cm was a pretty good height. She preferred to wear her long, auburn hair loose because she liked the slight wave, although she was often forced to wear it in complicated updos bound with ribbon. She also liked the way her hazel eyes seemed to deepen in colour with her hair around her face.

Alex slowed her pace as the castle came into view. She had to be careful not to be seen coming out of the woods. She couldn't afford to give away her activities.

She heard a carriage coming down the path leading to the castle. It turned in at the gates. Thankfully, its windows were covered with curtains, so it hid her from view as she ran across the roadway behind it.

Crouching behind the back wheel, Alex crab-walked along until the carriage reached the front of the house, then slipped off to one side, keeping close to the wall of the castle. Staying low, she made her way to the servants' entrance and slid inside.

Sneaking through the kitchen, she exited into the hall that led to the main stairway. Halfway up she heard footsteps on the landing above.

"Not again!" Catherine stood with her arms crossed and lips

pursed staring down at Alex. “You’re filthy.”

“I’ll be ready for my lesson quickly and nobody will need to know,” Alex assured her, rushing up the rest of the stairs, then lightly pushing past to continue down the long hall to her room.

Catherine was the head house-keeper and kept a close watch on everything in the castle. She followed Alex, her skirts rustling with the push of her legs. “I can’t imagine what comes over you, wearing men’s clothing, disappearing for hours, only to return soiled and scratched.”

“I’m more comfortable in men’s clothing. Skirts, corsets and panniers are too restrictive,” Alex argued.

“I’ll call Heather to help you get ready. Your singing teacher has already arrived.” Catherine turned and hurried down the stairs.

“Honestly. I don’t know what the problem is. What difference should it make what clothing I wear when walking? You’d think she’d be happy I’m not soiling my skirts!” Alex reasoned.

She rushed over to the bed and started removing the hose, breeches and waistcoat. It was an outfit Logan had given her when he’d grown out of it. He’d put in some hard work in these clothes and they were threadbare in spots, but they definitely served her purpose.

Just as she was unravelling her hair from the cap, there was a knock on the door. Without waiting for a response, Heather walked in. “You need to be more careful. Mother’s livid! At least she doesn’t know what you’re doing when you go out.” She hurried over to help Alex with her hair. “So, how did things go today? How was Logan?”

Heather was Alex’s lady’s maid and the daughter of the excitable Catherine. She was only one year Alex’s junior and had been assigned to assist her only six months ago. They’d always been close friends before that, which made it somewhat awkward to have Heather serving her. She was more like a sister than a servant.

She was about the same height as Alex, but a bit slimmer. Her strawberry blonde hair was always tied up and into a bonnet when working but, like Alex, Heather preferred to wear it down, its long

tresses holding a slight wave. Her eyes were hazel like Alex's but her lashes were much longer. Alex had always envied her that trait. Heather had a very pretty face but didn't seem to realize it. She just blushed whenever Alex said anything about her looks.

Heather also had a major crush on Logan, although he seemed quite oblivious to the whole situation. She used every excuse to go out to the gardens or to walk along the paths on the grounds in the hopes that she might accidentally run into him. She envied Alex her time with him and often suggested that she should accompany Alex on her "training" exercises. Alex, however, felt it was more beneficial for Heather to cover for her while she was away.

Alex did, however, make sure that Heather was provided with details about what went on after each meeting. The poor girl was wretched otherwise.

"Logan was in fine shape but I finally bested him!", Alex boasted as she was helped into her stay.

"Oh my. He must have been quite surprised." Heather blushed.

"Yes. I dare say, although it served to show that I could hold my own if needed." Alex held still while Heather began to lace her up. "He tried to laugh it off, saying that I would only ever get one move in before my foe would be wise to my abilities, but I think I could do far better than that."

Heather stopped lacing for a second. "You know, I still can't make much sense out of your desire to learn to fight to begin with. It's not as if you have anything to worry about in the castle, and there are always guards around you when you leave the grounds for any reason."

"Hurry, Heather. I mustn't be late for my lesson. We can talk later." Heather's fingers began to fly back and forth, throwing the laces into the eyelets and pulling tightly.

Once her clothing was adjusted, the two of them worked quickly to arrange her hair, the long, dark tresses holding a gentle curl. "Thanks, Heather. Although it's difficult for me to get used to your help, it *is*

welcome. Your mother's hand was often quite a lot firmer. Some days I could barely breathe in my stay!"

"I'm happy to help, Alex, and always glad to hear about Logan, of course." Heather's cheeks began to redden again.

"I'll come and find you after my singing lesson. I hope Monsieur Beaubien hasn't been eating onions this time. His breath wafts right under my nose when he sings with me. It's quite vile." Alex wrinkled her nose at the memory.

"That's horrible. Perhaps I'll offer him some tea made from peppermint leaves when he arrives. That might help a bit." Heather smiled at her own cleverness.

"What a wonderful idea. Whatever would I do without you." Alex gave Heather a quick hug and then they both moved towards the door.

"I'll go and boil some water." Heather hurried ahead down the stairs.

"How lucky I am to have a friend like her." Alex descended the stairs and entered the music room.



CHAPTER 2

RICHARD KICKED A ROCK hard down the path in front of him. *Who do they think they are? Lady Evelyn Hutching? She looks like my horse! No. My horse's arse. Non, that Gwendolyn Spencer is much better looking but she's as stupid as a horse!* He reached up, tore a branch off a tree and brandished it like a sword. *Father and Mother have lost their minds if they think I would be interested in either of them.*

Richard had a reputation of being a troublemaker and it had been extremely difficult for his parents to pair him up with anybody at all. At the age of twelve he had “accidentally” set fire to the local church. By the time he was thirteen he had been arrested for stealing a horse and sword fighting in a local market.

Then, just last year, he had been charged with duelling against a visiting prince. The only reason the Spencers and Hutchings were considering letting their daughters attend the party was because the two families had come into hard times and they desperately needed money to maintain a reasonable profit.

Richard had been schooled in the castle and not until his recent eighteenth birthday did they allow him to go into town unsupervised.

As he shuffled along muttering to himself, he heard footfalls behind him. He turned to see Andrew.

“Hey there, Richard.” Andrew ran up and clapped him on the back. “Where are you off to so quickly?”

“The stables. I need to get away. Mother and Father are planning a dance and they want me to entertain some stupid cows.” Richard banged the stick on the ground in emphasis.

“Oh. That sounds about as fun as mucking stalls.” Andrew shook

his head. "Want some company?"

"Sure." They strode quickly, Richard determined to get as far away from his home as possible.

Andrew was Richard's best friend. Andrew was two years younger than Richard's eighteen but they didn't notice the difference. Andrew's father was the local smithy. Richard's family had kept him very busy over the years and Richard's keen interest in sword-making found him hanging around the shop as often as he could. Andrew was also fascinated by metalworking and swords, and as a youngster, could often be found working with his father or playing with the swords. As a result, the two boys had been sparring together for years and had become excellent swordsmen and very close friends.

They entered the stables and were greeted by the stable hand, Gerald. The stooped old man grinned when he saw them, displaying several blank spots where teeth should have been. Richard wasn't sure how old he was, but his face looked like a dried apple and it seemed his bones were going to break with every step. Richard didn't know how Gerald managed to control the horses or perform the heavy tasks required of his job, but the horses were always well cared for and the stable clean, so he didn't put very much thought into it.

"Good day, young fellas." Gerald had already started over to the side of the barn to fetch Richard's saddle. The two boys followed him, Andrew veering off to get his own equipment.

"How are you today, Gerald?" Richard asked conversationally.

"Oh, can't complain, thanks," said the old man as he hefted the saddle with little trouble, "although the cold weather's coming soon and that usually makes my bones ache." He rubbed his hip in anticipation.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I'll hope for a mild winter," Richard said, patting the old man's shoulder. He took the saddle and moved over to the stall where his horse stood excitedly awaiting its rider. The animal pawed the ground, eager to get underway.

Richard's mount, Zeus, was a black stallion, 16 hands high and

heavily muscled. He'd broken the horse himself only a year before. He was a high-spirited, lively ride and very smart. Richard had the bruises to prove his reluctance to succumb. He doubted Zeus would ever be totally broken, but they seemed to have come to some kind of agreement and both enjoyed their outings for their own reasons.

Andrew rode a dark brown thoroughbred standing about 15 hands high. His father had got him for a good price from one of his regular clients. He was strong, fast and loved to run.

The two of them quickly adjusted their gear, mounted up and kicked their horses into a quick trot.



CHAPTER 3

THANK GOD THAT'S FINALLY OVER. I don't know what Bach was thinking with all those high notes! Alex climbed the stairs. *The mint tea Heather prepared was just the remedy for M. Beaubien's foul breath, though. He seemed to quite enjoy it, too.*

She entered her room, moved towards the mirror and picked up her brush. Looking closely, she realized she was getting a blemish on her chin. "Great! Just what I need!" She checked her nose and cheeks, happy to see that they were clear, at least.

She evaluated herself in the mirror, turning this way, then that. Her dress was so tight she felt like she would explode. *Boy's clothing is so much more comfortable. Not every male seems to mind how I dress, either. Logan certainly doesn't care. A pity I don't feel more for him. He's certainly cute enough, but he just seems too much like a brother.*

Heather, of course, loved every detail about Logan. She was nearly drooling the other day when she described him as "...so handsome and muscular with his dark blue eyes, wavy brown hair and cute dimples." Poor thing! She was totally gone over him.

As Alex's mind wandered, her eye caught movement in the mirror. She swung her head around but saw nothing behind her. She shook her head and continued brushing her hair.

Then it happened again. A flash of something or someone moving quickly along the bookshelf on the back wall. She turned around completely and held her breath. Slowly she crept across the room, moving her head from side to side. When she arrived at the bookshelf she turned around quickly, trying to catch whoever it was. "Heather? Is that you?" There was no response.

Alex stood up straight and strode back to the mirror. “Perhaps I’m going insane. I remember mother telling me Aunt Elsie went quite mad in her early twenties. Claimed to have been visited by fairies or some such nonsense.”

She decided it was time for some tea herself. Maybe it would help with her hallucinations. Just as she was about to cross the threshold of her room, her eye went to the bookshelf once again. Something wasn’t right but she couldn’t quite figure it out.

On one of the shelves there was a collection of dolls. She really didn’t care much for them but her relatives seemed to insist that she maintain a sizable quantity of them.

As she moved in for a closer look, she realized what was wrong. Normally the dolls lay strewn, leaning on each other, lying down or even facing backwards. However, now they were all aligned in a neat row. All were seated properly upright, their clothing adjusted precisely, their heads facing forward.

Alex reached out her hand to touch one, disbelief flooding her thoughts. What’s going on? Who did this? Heather wouldn’t have anything to do with dolls. She backed up slowly, her mind trying to find a reasonable explanation for the mystery.

“Alex, will you be wanting some...”

“Aaaaahhhh!!!” Alex screamed, completely startled by Heather, who had come into the room noiselessly behind her.

“What’s wrong, Alex? You look like you’ve seen a ghost!” Heather immediately led Alex to the bed.

“You scared me, that’s all.” Alex sat looking down at her hands, which were trembling slightly.

Heather knew Alex better than anyone else did and could tell there was something more going on with her good friend. She usually didn’t scare easily. “No. There’s more to it than that. What’s going on?”

Alex looked up at Heather and studied her face. There was nothing more than concern and curiosity there. “Did you touch the dolls on the

shelf?”

“No. But I had noticed them moved, of course. I thought you’d got bored and done that yourself.”

Heather had always had extraordinary powers of observation and incredibly acute eyesight. It was uncanny how well she could see the smallest specks or things so far out in a field that they weren’t visible to anyone else. Heather stepped away from the bed and moved over to the shelf where the dolls sat in a neat row.

Like Alex, she reached out tentatively and touched one of them lightly. “This is very strange. Maybe Momma came in and straightened up?”

“Your mother doesn’t have time to worry about the state of my room,” Alex countered.

“You’re right.” Heather lifted up one of the dolls and turned it over. “Who else, then?”

“Well...” Alex faltered.

Heather turned to look over at Alex. “Well, what?”

“Well, I was brushing my hair by the mirror earlier and I thought I saw something moving very quickly behind me by the bookshelf. Twice. Then I noticed the dolls like this.” Alex couldn’t meet Heather’s eyes in case she saw any sign of doubt in her sanity.

She could feel Heather looking at her. An eternity seemed to pass before Heather finally said, “You know, the same thing happened to me yesterday.”

Alex’s eyes widened and her head shot up to meet Heather’s gaze. “Really? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“To be truthful, I’d convinced myself I’d imagined it. There was nobody there, despite a thorough search of my room.”

Alex stood up and walked over to Heather. “What did it look like in the mirror? Could you tell a shape or size or anything?”

“I couldn’t really say. It happened so fast.” Heather looked up to think. “However, if forced, I would say it was a small person, like a

young child.”

Alex nodded, “Yes, yes, that’s what I felt, too. It would make sense because it had to do with dolls. But who? And why? And how do they move so extraordinarily fast?”

They both turned to the mirror at the same time. Rushing over, they placed their heads beside each other and peered into the room behind them, eyes scanning eagerly from corner to corner.

They turned simultaneously to look at each other. “Let’s go check out some other mirrors in the house,” Alex suggested.

“Yes, let’s,” Heather agreed.

Alex felt so much more confident in her sighting now that Heather had also had the same experience. If Heather had also seen something, then surely she wasn’t imagining things.

The two girls ran out of the room and down the hall. Just before the staircase Alex stopped and put her arm out in front of Heather. “Wait. Which room?”

“My bedroom. I saw something there already. Maybe they’re in my room again.”

“Good idea.”

They headed to the end of the hall and turned left. There was a stairway down to the servants’ rooms. It was poorly lit and well worn. They tried to step carefully but they were so excited, Alex almost slipped on the third stair. “Be careful, Alex. That one’s a bit sloped.”

“Huh. I noticed!” Alex slowed just a little bit. No good breaking her neck before this mystery could be solved.

They came to the bottom of the stairs and turned right. Heather’s room was in the corner at the end of the hall.

They reached the room and rushed in, quickly closing the door behind them. There was very little natural light in the lower rooms, so they went in search of extra candles. They found several large ones and carried them close to the mirror above the small dressing table.

“This is where I saw the movement,” Heather said as she ignited a

spark from the fireplace embers.

Once the candles were lit, the two of them looked intently into the mirror. Everything seemed to move in the flicker of the candlelight. Shadows rose and fell everywhere behind them. "This is usel..." Alex froze in mid-sentence. She'd seen something moving quickly from one side of the room to the other.

Their heads snapped in towards each other. "Did you see that!" they both exclaimed.

They spun around simultaneously. "There!" Heather's eyes widened as she pointed excitedly to the right-hand corner of room. "Behind that large chest!"

Both girls rushed to the chest and peered behind it. There was nothing there. "Impossible! We both saw something. Where could they have gone? Things or people don't just disappear." Alex tried pulling the chest out from the wall but it was too heavy. "Help me with this, will you?"

Heather moved to the other side and grabbed the handle. The chest slowly started to edge away. When it was about a metre out from the wall, Heather held up a finger. "Wait."

She ran back to the dressing table and grabbed one of the large candles. Wary of the hot wax, she walked as quickly as she could back to where Alex was frantically looking for some kind of false passage in the wall.

Heather held the candle up for Alex. "I don't see anything... wait a minute, what's this?" Heather moved closer and lowered the candle to see what Alex was looking at on the floor.

Something sparkled in the light. Alex reached down with her finger and lifted up some of the shining dust. "I've never seen anything like this. What do you think it is?"

Heather held the flame so close to Alex's finger there was danger of it being burned. "Incredible!"

Heather put the candle down on top of the chest and pulled out

a cotton rag from her skirts. Alex squatted, staring at the twinkling dust. The two girls were transfixed by the small pile of crystals. “Here,” Heather bent down and scooped the rest of the dust off the floor and into the rag, then tied the top carefully so the dust wouldn’t spill out.

“Let’s keep it safe for now while we find out more about this.” Heather carefully tucked the rag into a pocket of her apron.

“Let’s go check the other rooms.” Alex grabbed Heather by the arm and dragged her through the door.

