HIDDEN MAGIC

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All Rights ReservedChapter 1: An Unpleasant Proposition

Alena sat alone in her room while multi-colored lights flowed through her fingers. Creating the colored lights was her Talent. Most people in Morania had some sort of magical Talent; and like hers, most Talents were of little or no use. Alena played with her lights whenever she was bored or angry. Today she was both. She was bored because her aunt and uncle, with whom she had lived since age five, were both gone for the day. She was angry because she had received an invitation to her cousin’s birthday party.

The invitation reminded her that her cousin, Devlin, would someday be king—ruler over Morania. Alena believed that the position rightfully belonged to her, but tradition prevented Alena from being the king because of her gender. Her father had been king until his death ten years ago as had her grandfather and great-grandfather, and so on as far as she could trace the family tree. One of her three older brothers should have been in line to be king but they had all died in the same tragic accident that had claimed the life of her father.

And it wasn’t that she really wanted to be the ruler of Morania; it was just that she honestly cared for the people. Her spoiled brat of a cousin would run things according to his own selfish agenda.

There had been another cousin, Darwin, who might have ascended to the ruling position; but two years after her father’s death, fate had also ended his life.

Alena had been seven years of age when Darwin had died. He had been two years her senior and her constant companion. Eight years later it still pained Alena to think about Darwin. Alena’s Uncle Trent (technically her second cousin) had taken her in after her father’s death. Darwin had been thrilled to have a little *sister* to take care of. She had just lost her father and three brothers and she clung to this new *brother* tenaciously. And when, just two years later he was gone, she felt that her world had come to an end. (The colored lights poured furiously through her fingers as a tear slid down her cheek.) Now, in a few years, the people of Morania would be treated to the horror of being ruled by Devlin. And there was nothing that Alena could do about it.

Alena looked longingly out of her window at the castle in the distance. It had been unoccupied these past ten years since her father’s death. Her two uncles, Trent and Baldric (Devlin’s father) had become Regents until the new king came of age to rule (arbitrarily set at 25 years by tradition.) Both uncles lived on the castle grounds, but neither would agree to let the other take up residence in the castle proper.

Alena’s toes tickled. A dust-bunny was trying to scrape something from under her foot. She nudged it with her toe until it curled into a ball, armadillo-style. Then she gently rolled it into a corner.

Dust-bunnies were a creation of her late great-grandfather. His Talent had been the transformation of animals. Her Uncle Trent said that all the creatures that he had created were in some way useful, but Alena thought that the dust-bunnies must be the most useful of all. They were about the length of a house cat, but their eight legs were so short that they appeared to be gliding along the floor. They ate dust, lint and food crumbs; they excreted floor wax. Their furry undersides kept the floors polished. The colored lights continued to flow through Alena’s fingers as she watched the bunny uncurl and continued searching for more dust to consume.

There was a rap-rap at her door. “Miss Alena?”

“Come in, Bart,” she replied.

The balding gray head of the old servant poked through the doorway. “Begging your pardon, Lady. Your uncle Baldric has sent a carriage. He desires your company at his estate.”

“Please tell the driver that I have no desire to go visiting today.”

“Begging your pardon, Lady…”

“Bart, is the driver in the hall with you?”

“No, Miss Alena.”

“Then stop *begging my pardon* and just talk to me.”

Bart relaxed visibly. “Miss Alena, the driver says that your uncle wishes to speak to you on an urgent matter of state. He says it concerns the succession of the new king.” Bart had been the family servant for over forty years. He had served Trent’s father. And his father had served the great king, Golan who had created so many wonderful animals. He was happy to serve because he was treated more like a member of the family than a servant. He was always stiff and formal in public because it would never do for outsiders to think he pretended to be above his station in life.

Alena’s interest was sparked by the mention of succession to the seat of power. Was there a chance that Devlin would not be the next king? She accompanied Bart to the front door. As they stepped out into the sunlight she saw Bart stiffen; he would never appear informal where others might see.

The carriage ride was short, only about a quarter of a mile. Her Uncle Baldric’s estate was much larger than the one where she lived and many more servants tended it. In comparison, only Bart served on Trent’s estate. Inside this large estate there was a cool breeze constantly stirring. That was her Uncle Baldric’s Talent; he could control the wind. His son’s Talent was similar to his own (as was often the case in families); he could create whirlwinds at will. Because he could only produce whirlwinds about six or seven feet in height, they weren’t of any real use. Unfortunately, Devlin amused himself with tossing dust into the servant’s eyes and tangling their hair. Alena had once told him that he shouldn’t treat the servants so badly but Devlin had just laughed and replied that *they were only servants*.

Alena followed the servant to her uncle’s study where he rapped on the door. “Enter,” commanded a voice from within.

When Alena had entered the room, the servant closed the door behind her. Her uncle Baldric motioned to a chair. “I hope you are well, Alena.”

“I am fine, Uncle. And you?” Alena sat.

“I am well.” Then after a pause, “I would like to discuss a matter of great importance. I would like to begin by pointing out a trend that I find very disturbing. The Talents of the royal family are being *watered-down*. Take me, for instance. I can control air movement to just about any degree that I desire. I keep my estate cool by a constant flow of air; but I could just as easily knock down an invading army with a powerful gust. Unfortunately, my wife has almost no Talent.”

Alena knew of her Aunt Belinda’s Talent. She could change red flowers to blue and blue flowers to yellow. She could do nothing with the yellow flowers and so there was an overabundance of yellow flowers on their estate.

Baldric continued, “Talent is inherited. Because I married someone with nearly no Talent, Devlin can only stir up a little dust. Your father was able to invoke lightning from the sky. Your mother had no Talent at all. As a result, your Talent is negligible. Once, the royal family could perform magic most awesome. But now all we have is a little dust and a flash of pretty colors. But I believe that there is something that we can do to restore the power to our family.”

“What is that, Uncle?”

“We can merge what remains of the family. What I am trying to say is that I would like for you to consider marrying Devlin. The combination could result in very Talented offspring.”

Alena asked in disbelief, “You want me to marry that brat?”

“He is not a *brat*. He is just young and impetuous; he will grow to be more disciplined. And besides the likelihood of restoring magic to our family, this will also consolidate the family removing any doubt about who should ascend to the throne.”

“I was under the impression that there was no doubt already.”

“Well, there have been some very distant relatives that claim that they should rule Morania. Their claims have no merit, but a union between the two leading families would silence even the most adamant troublemakers.”

“Maybe we should hear their claims.”

“No! Their claims are not legitimate!”

“But I don’t want to marry Devlin.”

“You should consider what is best for Morania. Your Uncle Trent and I have discussed this matter at length. We would like to make the announcement at Devlin’s birthday celebration.”

“I can’t believe that Uncle Trent would want me to marry Devlin!”

“He wants what is best for Morania, just as I do.”

“I won’t do it!”

“Just think about it. There are four weeks remaining before Devlin’s birthday. If you consider your responsibility to the people of Morania, I am sure you see that this is the best solution.”

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When Alena returned to her own home, there were tears tracing paths down her cheeks. She couldn’t believe that her Uncle Trent would want her to marry Devlin. That is, unless he really believed that it would benefit the state. Her Uncle Baldric would want the marriage for selfish reasons, but her Uncle Trent might actually ask her to marry Devlin for the good of Morania. And she feared that if the evidence were compelling enough then she wouldn’t be able to refuse.

Bart met her at the door. “Miss Alena, are you crying?”

“I’m okay, Bart,” Alena replied with an unsteady voice.

“No, Miss. You are not okay. Tell me what is wrong; maybe old Bart can help.”

 “I don’t think there is anything anyone can do.” She came to a decision. “Bart, I’m going away for a while.”

“Mister Trent didn’t say anything about you going away.”

“Uncle Trent doesn’t know I’m leaving. I’ve got to get away and decide what I am to do about my future.”

“Where will you go, Miss Alena?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll follow the one-ways and find out where they go.” *One-ways*, another of her great-grandfather’s creations, were tiny creatures that always traveled in the same direction, always toward the north. There was speculation about where they went, but no one had ever followed them to find out.

“Before you go off and do something crazy, I think you should go and visit my sister, Kendra.”

 “I’ve met Kendra, haven’t I? Doesn’t she predict the future?”

“That’s her, except that she doesn’t predict the future. She just Knows things. Sometimes she can tell a part of the future, or sometimes she can tell you things about yourself that you may not know. Sometimes she can answer questions about what you should do. Sometimes she doesn’t have any information for you at all, but maybe she could help you. I’ll ask Mister Trent if it is okay to take you to see her.”

“No, Bart. I’m not going to wait for Uncle Trent to return. Please tell me where your sister lives and I’ll go visit her.”

“If you insist on leaving, I’ll take you to see Kendra. It’s about a four-hour ride, and you can’t get there before nightfall.”

“Thank you, Bart. And you will let my uncle know that I’m alright, won’t you?”

“I’ll tell him. I hope that it will be alright with Mister Trent for you to go see my sister.”

“Why wouldn’t it be alright?”

“Well, it just might not be what he wants. But, if we are going to go, we had best get started.”

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Bart saddled the horses. His own was a chestnut gelding; Alena’s was a mare of midnight black. For the most part they rode in silence. Several times Bart asked why Alena felt it necessary to leave but Alena refused to explain.

After they had been riding for about two hours, Alena and Bart heard the sound of horses ahead. Bart pointed to a thick grove of trees a distance from the path. “Miss Alena, go and hide among those trees until those riders pass.”

“Why should I hide?”

“Uh, well, It might be someone who knows your uncle and…”

“But you’re going to tell Uncle Trent that I’ve gone to visit your sister.”

“Yes. But… Oh, It might be someone that I know and…uh…”

“It might be a lady friend? And you don’t want her to see you with me?”

“Yeah… that’s right. Please go and hide among those trees.”

Alena guided her mount to the trees. The trees were distant enough that with darkness beginning to envelop Alena could not discern the features of the riders that met Bart on the path. She could see that there were two of them and she was fairly certain that one was a woman. She couldn’t hear their voices, but they spoke at length with Bart before riding on. When they were out of sight, Alena returned to the path.

Bart was smiling. “Good friends of mine. They say everything’s okay.”

“What’s okay?”

“Everything.” Bart would explain no further.

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Toward the end of their journey, Bart and Alena entered a forest. Darkness had already overtaken them and, with the clouds obscuring the moon, there was just barely enough light to show the path before them. No carriage could have traveled this road; it was just barely wide enough for their horses to walk one before the other. About thirty minutes into the forest, a clearing opened before them. In the center of the clearing was a small cottage, lights spilled from its windows.

Bart knocked at the door and a woman apparently in her fifties swung it wide. “Come in, Bart. And who do you have with you?”

“This is Miss Alena,” Bart answered. “She wishes to travel and she would like your advice.”

Kendra looked at Alena. “She’s running away from something, you know.”

Bart nodded.

Kendra continued to stare. “She has a very strong Talent.”

Alena produced the colored lights. “I don’t know how strong my talent is, but it can’t be of much use.”

“Wasn’t talking about *that* Talent. Some people have more than one. Your *other* Talent is very strong.”

“What is my other Talent?”

“Don’t know. I just Know that it will be there when you need it.” She reached over and touched Alena on the head. “Someday, you will be married to the king.”

Alena frowned. “I hope that you are wrong. I have no desire to marry the king.”

Kendra shook her head. “When I Know something, I am never wrong. And maybe what you think you desire now will not be what you desire in the future.”

“Is there anything else that you know about me?”

“Nothing else except that you shouldn’t go following the one-ways alone.”

Bart asked Kendra, “Is Perrin not here?”

“No,” she replied, “He left when my other visitors did. Said that he was going to ride with them as far as the path to Luka’s house.”

“He’s playing cards at Luka’s tonight? I wonder if they would mind if I sat in on a few games of Scratch.”

“If you have money with you, they won’t mind taking it.”

“Then I’ll be seeing you, sister. Take good care of Alena here.” He and Alena embraced and he started out the door. “I’m sure that Perrin will be home late. It usually takes Luka several hours to separate Perrin from his money.”

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After Bart had gone Kendra said, “You can stay with me as long as you like. It will be good to have another woman in the house. Bart will make sure that your uncle knows that you are here.”

“Thank you for offering to share your home; I’ll stay the night, but tomorrow I intend to travel.”

“Travel if you wish, but please don’t travel alone. Maybe Perrin would like to travel with you. He has been awfully restless as of late.”

“Perrin? Is he your son?”

“No, Perrin is a young man who stays with me and helps take care of my house and garden. Son of a friend and sort of an orphan.”

“Sort of an orphan?”

“No good way to explain that, I suppose. He’s a good boy. You’ll like him.” As the old woman said this, she began to set the table. The food was plain, but Alena wasn’t used to fancy dishes such as were served at her Uncle Baldric’s estate. The repast was tasty and filling.

Filled and relaxed, Alena needed very little prompting to explain that she intended to travel to escape the fact that she would be expected to marry her horrid cousin, Devlin. When she came to the part about her Uncle Trent being involved in the plot, Kendra shook her head. “I think you are wrong about your Uncle Trent.”

“Do you know Uncle Trent?”

“I’ve seen him on occasion. He travels this way often and I have spoken with him. He doesn’t seem the sort that would ask you to marry anyone against your will.”

“But even you said that I would someday be married to the king.”

“True. But I didn’t say that you would marry against your will.”

“Then, how?”

“No more questions, child. I must be off to bed.” Kendra pointed to a door. “You can have that room for as long as you wish to stay with me.”

“Would it be okay if I stayed up to meet Perrin?”

“Stay up if you like, but he will probably be late. Card games at Luka’s sometimes go on all night.”

When Kendra had gone off to bed, Alena settled in a comfortable chair before the fireplace. Even though it was summer most homes kept a fire going for cooking. Also with the windows open, the fire drew cool air into the homes as the heat rose up and was expelled from the chimney. Alena loved to watch the fire as it burned. The flames would dance before her eyes, until… And her eyelids closed.

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When Alena awoke, the light of dawn was just beginning to creep through the eastern windows. But it wasn’t the light that had caused her to stir; instead, it was the sound of the front door opening. A young man entered and closed the latch very quietly. When he turned and saw Alena, he whispered, “Hello.”

Not wishing to awaken Kendra, Alena whispered back, “Hello. I’m just staying the night. My name is Alena. You must be Perrin?”

“That is what people call me.”

“Is Perrin not your name?”

“Maybe yes and maybe no. But Perrin is what I am called.” He moved closer to Alena to get a better look at her face. “Bart said that you were here. But he didn’t say how pretty you were.”

Alena felt the color rising to her cheeks. There was something very familiar about Perrin. “Have we met before?” she asked.

“Maybe yes and maybe no.”

“Do you always avoid answering questions about yourself?”

At this, Perrin laughed, “Maybe yes and maybe no.” Alena laughed, too. She was beginning to like Perrin.

“I see that two of you have met,” Kendra said as she opened her bedroom door.

“I’m sorry, Kendra,” said Perrin. “We didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Nonsense,” she snorted. “I don’t intend to sleep all day. Besides, I heard you when you came in the front door. Did Luka take all your money?”

“Almost all of it. But I made him work for it.”

“And did Bart leave with anything in his pockets?”

“No, his money ran out before midnight. Then Luka spotted him a few coins in exchange for some chores. When I left, Bart was just going out to weed Luka’s garden.”

“Perrin,” Kendra said, “Alena wishes to travel. I wish we could talk her into staying with us, but I know that she won’t. I believe that you should go with her.”

“I would very much like to travel with her, but who will help you take care of this place.”

“This place needs little enough tending. Besides, when people come and ask me what I Know, they leave understanding that they owe me a favor. I’ll have more than enough help when I need it.”

“Then I will go with her, if she will allow it.”

“I don’t…” Alena began.

Kendra interrupted with, “Believe me, Perrin is an honorable and kind young man. He would never hurt you or allow you to come to harm. He will take care of you just like he would a sister. But, before you decide, we should discuss your journey over breakfast. Perrin, please bring in some eggs and fresh fruit. And, Alena, if you will set the table, I’ll prepare the meal.”

As Alena placed the dishes on the table, her thoughts would not stray from Perrin. Normally, she wouldn’t think of having a strange man along for a companion, but Kendra Knew things, and she was the one who had suggested that Alena and Perrin travel together. And there was something about Perrin—something familiar. Alena trusted him even though she wasn’t sure why. By the time the meal was prepared, she had decided to accept Perrin as her traveling companion.

At the breakfast table Perrin asked, “And, Miss Alena, where is it that you intend to travel?”

“I think I’ll follow the one-ways to their destination. And please drop the *Miss*. If I decide to have you as a traveling companion, constantly being called *Miss Alena* would become very tiresome.”

“Very well, Alena. What if the one-ways have no destination?”

“Well, they must go somewhere.”

“The world is round—maybe they just travel in circles.”

“If so, then I’m curious to know how they cross the ocean.”

“It’s a long distance to the ocean in the direction that the one-ways travel. It could take many weeks to complete your journey.”

“I’m in no hurry, but if you don’t have time for a long journey…”

“No, I have the time. I, too, have always been curious about the one-ways. I will accompany you as far as the ocean and beyond, if you will accept my company. But we must have provisions.”

“I’ve brought money to pay for lodging. I hadn’t planned on a traveling companion but, as long as we don’t insist on the best rooms, I am sure that I have enough.”

“Then you are not very well prepared for this journey. Maybe you should find a quest that better suits you.”

“What do you mean?”

“As you travel north, you head toward wilderness. I know of only three inns that you will pass near enough to spend the night. After that, you will have to sleep on the ground. There should be plenty of fruit and berries along the way, but you’ll not have bread. We can carry salted and dried meat, and I am fair with the bow, but you can’t expect the meals that compare to those which you are accustomed. Do you still wish to travel?”

“I have been on hunting trips with my uncle. I can sleep on the ground and eat trail provisions. I still intend to follow the one-ways. And I *will* accept the offer of a traveling companion. When can you be ready to leave?”

“I can be ready by noon—unless that’s too soon?”

“No. Noon is good. Where can I go to purchase our provisions?”

“For now, we should only take what we need to get us to the first inn. Our supplies will be freshest if we wait to buy them just before entering the wilderness. If we leave at noon we should reach the Unicorn Inn by nightfall. If we eat before we leave, then we won’t need anything before we reach the inn.”

“I’ve heard of the Unicorn Inn. It is said that people sometimes actually see a unicorn near there.”

“Well, they serve strong wine at the Unicorn. People have seen many strange things after drinking those spirits. I’m not saying that there isn’t a unicorn there, but I’ve never spoken to anyone who actually saw one while they were sober.”