

Servant of the Crown



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*For Jacob,
because it's your favorite*

PART ONE

Chapter One

Alison alighted from the carriage, accepting the coachman's hand with a smile and a nod. It was a tradition dating to an era when all women of rank wore huge skirts, never trousers, but the man seemed to take pleasure in doing this small service for his Countess, and she was pleased to let him. She entered Quinn Press with another smile for the receptionist, who waved her over. "Mister Quinn left this for you this morning," Molly said, handing Alison a sheet of paper.

Alison scanned the page and scowled a bit. "Coward," she muttered. "He didn't want to tell me this to my face, Molly."

"I thought he was trying to maintain a professional relationship with you," Molly said.

"He is. I'm just not sure why he thought this would be better than telling me in person. He's totally wrong—it's going to make a terrific book. Thanks, Molly."

She bounded up the stairs, dancing from side to side to make them creak musically. She was having a wonderful day, this message aside. The weather was clear, the first hunt of the season was coming up, and she wasn't even dreading the Harvest Ball that accompanied it. Quinn Press was going to almost double its publications this year, from 250 to 480, making it the biggest publisher in Kingsport thanks to adopting the new printing Devices that were so much faster than engravings. This little message was nothing by comparison.

She passed her own office and went all the way to the end of the hall. The sign on the scuffed, unvarnished door read MARTIN QUINN, EDITOR. Not "editor in chief" or "publisher," just "editor," as if he alone hadn't built this business from nothing. She wondered again why he'd never moved the offices to a nicer part of the city, one where the sounds and smells of horses pulling wagons to and from the port didn't remind you forcibly of how modern Kingsport wasn't. Someone should invent a Device to clean the streets.

Alison pushed the door open without knocking. The office beyond was painfully tidy, the walls lined with portraits of men and women whose faces the amateur artist Martin Quinn had found interesting, the drapes pulled back from the single window to let in the autumn sunlight as well as the noise from the street below. She waved the sheet of paper in her father's face. "You're not even giving it a chance," she said.

Father took his feet off the desk and kicked an inkwell that Alison, moving quickly, caught before it could splash more than a few drops onto her hand and the floor. "Sorry," he said.

"Not even a chance," Alison repeated. She flipped the cap closed and set the inkwell precisely in the middle of the worn oak desk that was older than she was. "I'm telling you, a history of the Consorts of the Kings and Queens of Tremontane will do very well now Zara North is on the verge of marriage again."

"The key word being 'again,'" Father said, pushing his thick gray hair back from his face with both hands. "This is, what, the third time since she came to the throne? I think it's just rumor. Queen Zara is a canny woman. I don't see her as someone who will share power easily."

“Choosing a Consort isn’t sharing power. You didn’t become a Count when you married Mother, did you? And you’re changing the subject.”

Father spread his hands in acquiescence. “Convince me.”

She reached back to shut the door. “Thurford’s a new – oh, excuse me!” She’d managed to nearly shut the door on the post boy, who let out a grunt of pain and staggered a little. Alison caught the parcels and the black scroll case that slid off the sack of mail, revealing the boy’s face; he was the only person on Quinn Press’s staff shorter than she was. “Sorry about that,” she said, and set the parcels and case on her father’s desk. The post boy blushed and rather hurriedly and forcefully dropped the sack beside them, then muttered an apology and rushed out the door.

“I think he’s in love with you,” Father remarked. He opened the mail sack and began taking out letters.

“I think I just intimidate him,” Alison said. “Let me have your knife.” She began cutting the strings of the first package. “I think these are the new self-inking pen Devices you ordered from Aurilien. I can’t wait to try them out. Their motive forces are supposed to be the size of a pea and last for over a year.”

“Trust you to get excited about pen Devices,” Father said, picking up the scroll case and twirling it absently like a baton in his thick fingers. “I only have bills. There are always too many of those.” He took the address tag of the case in one hand and went very still. “Alison,” he said.

“What?”

He held the scroll case out toward her. “Read it.”

Puzzled at his odd reaction, she took the tag rather than the case. Her full name and title were printed on it in block lettering: ALISON QUINN, COUNTESS OF WAXWOLD. She looked at her father, then took the case from him and examined it closely. It was sealed at both ends in dark blue wax with an imprint she knew well, that everyone in Tremontane knew well: the rampant panther sign and shield of the royal house of North.

Alison looked at her father. Her fingers had begun to tingle in apprehension. “You’d better open it,” he said.

She used her father’s knife to pry the seal off one end, then tipped the case on end and shook it to make the roll of buff parchment – actual parchment, no one used parchment now that clean white paper was readily available – fall out onto the desk top. Parchment meant serious business. Setting the case aside, she picked up the parchment and unrolled it, holding it open, and began to read. The first few lines were her full name and title, and then –

“What under heaven is she *thinking!*” she exclaimed. She tossed the parchment with some force onto the desk, where it curled up on itself and rolled a few inches. “It’s ridiculous,” she said. “I can’t possibly be expected to comply.” She prodded the scroll with her fingertip, making it roll further. “I’ve been summoned to Aurilien,” she said. “To serve the Dowager Consort. As a lady-in-waiting. For six months. How do they expect me to give up my life for *six months* to sit around in an uncomfortable dress and keep the former Consort company? I tell you, it’s unbelievable!”

Father picked up the scroll and furrowed his bushy eyebrows at it, as if its contents might somehow have changed since Alison threw it down. "Dear heaven," he said. "Why would they pick you?"

"If I weren't so furious, I'd take issue with that statement."

"You know what I mean. Do you suppose the Norths have a list somewhere of all the gently-born unmarried women in Tremontane from which they pick Rowenna North's companions?"

"I neither know nor care. How can I get out of it, Father?"

He shook his head. "Did you see anything in that language that suggested this was something you could decline?"

"I was hoping you'd noticed something I hadn't."

Father glanced over it again. "I can't think of anything Zara North wouldn't see through. And I don't want to insult the Queen. And neither, I think, do you."

Alison covered her face with her hands. She could feel a headache coming on, one of those skull-throbbing monsters she only ever got when a deadline was thundering down upon her. "I don't." She pushed a curly lock of her pale blond hair behind her ear. "I have to hold court in two days, and there's the Harvest Hunt, and I've already put Patrick off for a week about the land grants. That's before I even get to my Quinn Press responsibilities. I'm a Countess, for heaven's sake!" She couldn't quite bring herself to say *The Queen is out of her mind*, but she could certainly think it.

"You'd have the same problem if this were a summons to serve your turn on the Queen's Council," her father pointed out.

"Council duties don't demand every waking hour of your life, and you can at least travel to and from your county when you have to."

"I'm sure the Queen knows that. And it's not as if your cousin Patrick isn't capable of taking over for a few months. He's your heir; he ought to gain some experience."

Alison rubbed her temples. "It's only six months, right? I can endure anything for six months?" she pleaded.

His blue eyes softened with compassion, and he put his hand over hers. "Of course." He paused, shifted a few letters with the fingers of his left hand. "You will behave yourself, won't you?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"You don't like society, and you're not shy about showing it. That's all very well here in Kingsport, in your county seat. In the capital, you will—I'm not saying this well."

"You don't appear to be saying it at all."

He sighed and picked up a stack of letters, tapped them on the desktop to square them. "I'm saying you've grown prickly, these last few years. Heaven forbid a man should try to approach you—"

"We've had this conversation before," said Alison irritably. "I don't see the point in dealing with someone who's only interested in my money, or my title, or how beautiful I'd look hanging on his arm."

"You know not all men are like that —"

"No, only the ones who want to single me out for their attention. And those are the only ones I meet."

"That's not true either. You just never take the time to learn what kind of men they are."

"Because when I do take the time, they turn out to be fortune-hunters or never raise their eyes higher than my chest. Better just to skip the whole process."

Father sighed again. "Let's not argue, all right? I just want you to show the world the face I see, not that prickly protective shell you've developed. Will you promise me to at least pretend to be civil?"

"I know how to behave myself," Alison said, but inside, the reproach burned. Was she really so...so detached? (She refused to describe herself as *prickly*.) It wasn't her fault the only men who wanted to befriend her turned out to have ulterior motives, or that she'd learned to defend herself against them. *Only six months*, she reminded herself, *and you can come back to your own life*.

"It won't be as bad as you think," Father said. "From what I've heard, the Dowager doesn't require much of her ladies. You should have plenty of time to pursue your own interests. And —" he wagged his index finger in her direction — "think of the Library."

"The Library," breathed Alison. "I'll be able to visit the Royal Library. Think of all those books. You know they have first editions of everything Landrik Howes ever wrote?"

"So it will be all right," her father said cheerfully. "And I'll hold your job for you until you return."

"As if you could replace me," she scoffed, smiling fondly to take away the sting.



Ten days later Alison sat with her feet up on the opposite seat of her carriage and watched Aurilien grow up around her. Outlying farms became tiny settlements that turned into villages and then to extensions of the capital itself, as if the city's golden walls could not contain its people and let them spill out like water slopping over the side of an overfull glass. Past those walls, hundred-year-old buildings, their wooden frames softened by time, sat beside construction sites; neighborhoods of wattle-and-daub gave way to stores and houses made of the same golden stone as the city wall. Unlike Kingsport, which treasured its status as the oldest city in Tremontane and maintained its construction accordingly, Aurilien seemed determined to embrace change, and as rapidly as possible.

Alison wiped her palms on her trousers, then pushed her hair back from her face. It was almost certainly frizzy in this heat. Frizzy, sweaty, exhausted, and on edge: she would make a grand impression on her new...employer? Mistress? Liege lady? There didn't seem to be a good

word to describe what Rowenna North would be to her, but Alison had already made up her mind to be polite and demure to the woman.

She knew very little about the royal family. The popular Rowenna North was King Sylvester's widow and mother of his children, Zara and Anthony. Queen Zara was twenty-six and had been Queen for six years. Her brother and heir Anthony was three years younger, nearly Alison's age, and had a reputation for being a man about town, including having had a number of affairs. Alison was a little appalled by that; the bonds that joined Tremontanan families together were severely strained by sex outside marriage, and a Prince ought to respect his family bond better than that. That was the extent of Alison's knowledge. She cracked open a window and breathed in fresh air that only smelled a little of the manure of hundreds, possibly thousands of horses. She would probably learn a great deal more about them in the coming six months.

The carriage turned to make its way up the curving palace drive, and Alison caught glimpses of the palace, glinting in the sunlight. It had grown up with the city and had a patchwork appearance, like a quilt of stone and metal and glass. Left of center stood the oldest tower, a skinny black stone finger pointing at ungoverned heaven as if issuing a challenge. If you looked at it the right way, the gesture was a rude one. Domes and shorter towers and ells spread out from that tower in defiance of any known theories of architecture. It might be a metaphor for Tremontane itself, patched together centuries ago from tribes who came together for mutual protection and stayed together because of the lines of power that crisscrossed the land and bound its people to ungoverned heaven and to each other. But it was more likely just the end result of generations of rulers who didn't know how to stop building once they'd started.

The carriage came to a halt at the foot of the black marble steps, and a man liveried in navy blue and silver, North colors, opened the door and offered Alison his hand. "Welcome to Aurilien, milady Countess," he said.

"Thank you," Alison replied. "I don't suppose you know where I should go?"

"The Dowager is expecting you in her apartment," he said. "I'll have someone escort you there, and your luggage will be sent on after you." He turned and gave some kind of imperceptible signal, because a woman in the same livery trotted down the steps and bowed to Alison.

Calling the palace a maze was a little like calling the ocean a collection of water drops. After they passed through the entry and made a few dozen turns, Alison lost track of where she was and hoped she wouldn't be expected to find her own way back to the front door. Eventually the woman led Alison down a short corridor to a small white door outside which stood another pair of armed guards, knocked, and waited. The guards ignored them both. After a minute, a woman wearing something Alison would have called a uniform if it hadn't been a soft pink opened the door. "The Countess of Waxwold," Alison's escort said, and the pink woman opened the door more fully and bowed Alison in.

Alison took two steps and was afraid to take any more, for fear of leaving smudges on the brilliantly white plush carpet. This room contained only a pair of sofas facing one another, upholstered in white velvet with gilded legs, and a long, low table painted white and gilt that bore a floral arrangement taller than Alison was. Gilt-framed paintings of fanciful landscapes lined the white walls between white doors with brass knobs and gilt trim. There were seven doors – eight, if you included the one Alison had entered by – and between the doors, the pictures, the sofas, and the table, the room contained more gilding than Alison had ever thought to see in one place. It was a style that had been old-fashioned fifty years earlier. Alison began to form a picture of the Dowager in her head: lots of white, lots of lace, lots of ribbons on her gown and on the lace cap she wore on her iron-gray hair, pulled back into a severe bun. She probably liked sentimental poetry, too. This might turn out to be a very long six months.

The door at the opposite end of the room opened, admitting a lovely young woman with sleek black hair coiled at the back of her head and shining ringlets hanging down the sides of her face. Alison resisted the urge to touch her own hair, which felt even frizzier now by comparison and was almost certainly free of her hairband on one side. The woman was dressed in an elegant day gown and her feet made no noise on the white carpet as she approached. “Good afternoon,” she said, her voice surprisingly deep. “I am Elisabeth Vandenhout.” She paused as if expecting Alison to react to this. Alison had never heard of the Vandenhouts, so she merely smiled and nodded. “Milady has asked me to see you settled in before joining her and her ladies. You have no luggage?”

“They’re bringing it in,” Alison said.

“I see,” Elisabeth said, in a tone of voice that suggested she thought Alison low-class enough to have arrived only in the clothes she was standing up in. “Well, your maid can help you freshen up a little. I’m sure Milady will understand your...condition. Where is your maid?”

Alison mentally kicked herself. How had she expected to get into a corset by herself? “I, ah, had to let my last maid go before I left Kingsport,” she said. “I intend to hire someone here.”

“I see,” Elisabeth said again. “Well, that’s unfortunate. I suppose you’ll just have to do your best.” She indicated a door and added, “That will be your suite while you’re with us. Feel free to...well, refresh yourself.” There was a sneer lurking somewhere behind her words. Alison smiled again and reminded herself, *Polite. Demure. But wouldn’t it be nice to smack her across the face?*

There was a tiny sitting room just inside the door, less ornate than the antechamber, but drenched in the scent of fresh flowers on the table on the far side of the room. Another door led to a dressing room with two wardrobes stained dark walnut and a matching marble-topped vanity table. Alison looked in the mirror and shuddered. Her hair *was* falling down on one side, and somehow she’d acquired a smudge high on her left cheek. She scrubbed at it with her sleeve and quickly turned away. Beyond the windowless dressing room was a small bedroom, its four-poster bed dominating the space with its white and gold quilt and pillows. Two tall, narrow windows flanked a fireplace with a mantel of ivory marble, on which was another display of fresh flowers.

Under each of the windows were brass boxes about the size of a shoebox that contained some complicated Devices, gears and wires that hummed with energy and, with the push of a button, would generate heat. The fireplace was either an artifact of an earlier time, or for added comfort when the snows fell. Alison felt her resentment turn into guilt. The Dowager had clearly made an effort to welcome her, and she could at least add “gracious” to “polite and demure.”

The bathing chamber was completely modern and had a very large tub of white porcelain, whiter even than the carpet, with shining brass fittings. She took a few minutes to admire the self-cleaning toilet—some of the facilities at Waxwold Manor still had chamber pots—and to wash her hands and face. Her skin was still clear and unblemished despite the journey—she’d never needed cosmetics, not like Elisabeth, whose careful use of them hadn’t entirely been able to hide a few blotches on her nose and forehead. Alison patted her face dry and went back to the dressing room, which thankfully had been furnished with a full set of brushes and combs. Alison tidied her hair, tied it back again at the nape of her neck, and pinched her cheeks to give herself some color, then returned to the antechamber, where Elisabeth wasn’t bothering to conceal her impatience. “Don’t you look nicer,” she said. “Considering what you had to work with, that is.”

“Why, thank you, Elisabeth,” Alison said with her brightest smile. “I would like to meet...Milady...now, if you don’t mind?”

Elisabeth smiled that almost-sneer again. “This way,” she said.

The room beyond that farthest door was a smaller, rounder version of the antechamber. Seven or eight chairs, gilded and upholstered in white, stood in a loose circle around the room, their cushions heavily embroidered with fanciful floral wreaths in dark purples and golds. The afternoon light filtering through gauzy curtains cast a soft glow over the furnishings, and Alison had a sudden powerful memory of herself as a child reading at her mother’s feet, leaning against the rich velvet of her skirt and rubbing it against her cheek while the light from her mother’s study window flowed over them both.

Five women looked up at Alison’s entrance, one of them lowering a book to her lap. Four of them were young, the oldest possibly in her late twenties. The fifth was an attractive older woman, her graying chestnut hair cut short and framing her face like a cap. She wore a matron’s dark gown, much plainer than what the other women were wearing, and several rings adorned the fingers of her right hand, including her wedding band on her middle finger. “You must be Alison Quinn,” she said in a lovely fluting voice, and stood, shifting her embroidery frame to one side and coming forward to kiss Alison gently on both cheeks. “I am so glad to meet you. Will you join us? I know you have no work to do, but reading time is almost over and perhaps you will enjoy listening.”

Alison took a seat, horribly conscious of her travel-worn state and her probably filthy trousers that would leave a mark on the white velvet. She perched on the edge of the chair, leaned forward so as to bring as little of herself into contact with it as possible, and listened with half her attention to the monotone of the young woman reading a volume of poetry by Shereen Wilson

that Alison herself had edited. She felt a little ashamed of the assumptions she'd made about the Dowager, and watched the woman covertly through her downcast lashes.

Rowenna North's needle flew in and out of the cloth, deftly sketching out shapes Alison could only barely see; she seemed to be monogramming a napkin set, something prosaic Alison would not have expected the widow of a king to be engaged in. The other women pretended to be engaged in their own needlework, but she could feel their eyes on her. Alison was uncomfortable around other women of her social class, most of whom were so conscious of her rank they were stiff and overly formal. She hadn't had a close friend since she left the Scholia, four years earlier, when her best friend Tessa and her husband Henry Catherton had moved east to Barony Daxtry. Henry had been one of Alison's professors, not Tessa's, but he had lost his position at the Scholia anyway when it came out he and Tessa were involved. It had been completely unjust, and the memory made Alison burn a little inside with remembered anger. She didn't regret her time at that institution, had learned so much there, but Henry's ouster was just another example of how rotten the Scholia was in far too many ways. Perhaps one or more of these young women might become her friends – well, probably not Elisabeth – but Alison wasn't here to make friends; she was here to do her service to the Crown and then return to her real life.

"Thank you, ladies, that will be all. Supper will be served in one hour, and then you are free to amuse yourselves as I have no engagements this evening. Alison, dear, if you wouldn't mind staying?" The Dowager gestured to Alison to take the chair just vacated by the reader, and Alison again perched on its edge while the young women carried their embroidery frames to concealed cabinets in the walls and then left the room, all but Elisabeth Vandenhout casting curious glances in Alison's direction.

"I hope your journey wasn't too taxing," the Dowager said. "It's two days from here to Kingsport, isn't it? I should have allowed you to rest immediately on arrival, but I was so eager to meet you I simply couldn't help myself."

Alison chewed and swallowed. "Eager, your – I mean, Milady?"

"Because of your work, dear. I do love reading, and I'm eager to hear what it's like to be an editor." The Dowager clasped Alison's left hand in both of hers, her eyes shining. "I am so happy you accepted Zara's invitation," she said. "I look forward to hearing your insights into the books we read, particularly if any of them are books you've worked on! And you have such a lovely voice, dear, it will be a genuine pleasure to hear you read to us."

Zara's invitation? More like a royal command. "I...it's an honor to serve you, Milady," Alison stammered. "I hope I'll be satisfactory." The Dowager clearly had no idea the Queen was strong-arming the young noblewomen of the country to entertain her mother, and Alison guessed it would break Milady's heart to learn the truth. From her greeting, Alison felt the Dowager really was as sweet and guileless as she appeared. Telling her how much Alison had had to give up to be her companion would simply hurt her, and Alison had no intention of doing that.

“Oh, my dear, I don’t think of it as service,” the Dowager said, releasing Alison’s hand. “I simply enjoy the company of young people. It invigorates me. And I hope it will not be entirely unrewarding for you. Now, let me tell you what I expect of my ladies. We breakfast at eight-thirty every morning, which I realize is early, but I no longer keep court hours with such exactness as I used to. Then three days a week I pay calls from ten until noon, and two of my ladies join me for those; you’ll be told when your turn is. I nap after dinner and then for two hours in the afternoon we do needlework while one of us reads aloud. I trust you do sew?”

“I do, Milady, but I rarely have time for it these days.”

“Well, you won’t be able to say that anymore!” The Dowager trilled a laugh. “You’ll be expected to take your turn as reader, but I suppose that will pose *you* no challenge. Then most evenings we will attend some sort of public event, dances or concerts or the opera. The rest of the time is yours to fill as you please.”

“That’s very generous of you, Milady.”

“Not at all. This is meant to be an honor, not a constraint. I simply expect you to behave like a lady in public. Your behavior reflects on me, naturally.”

“Of course, Milady,” Alison said. “Thank you for making me feel so welcome.” No, she certainly would not give this woman any indication she resented being there. *Polite, demure, gracious, and enthusiastic*, she thought. *I think I can manage three out of four of those at once.*

Chapter Two

The vaulted hallway looked as if it had been carved out of living rock rather than built. Even in her soft-soled shoes, Alison's footsteps echoed. Dark gray walls absorbed the light from the glass and bronze Devices that hung at ten-foot intervals from the ceiling, some twenty feet above. The dim lighting and the cavernous interior of the passage made Alison feel as if she were creeping along to some secret rendezvous, or traveling through enemy territory to bring critical information to the Queen. It was exactly the sort of hallway she would expect to lead to the Royal Library. She'd been walking for nearly fifteen minutes and hoped she would be able to find her way back to the Dowager's apartment later. Well, the palace might be a maze, but so far Alison had found it impossible to lose herself in it, because there was always someone around the next corner to tell her how to find her destination, or at least where to go next.

She passed a small door and had to back up because she glimpsed, as she went by, a bronze plaque the size of her two palms spread wide that said ROYAL LIBRARY on it in archaic script. It didn't look like the door to Tremontane's oldest repository of written knowledge. It looked like the door to a storage closet. It had a simple latch and no lock, and the bottom quarter of the door looked as if it had been kicked a hundred thousand times before. Alison pressed the latch down and pushed the door open gently without resorting to kicking it. It swung inward silently, which was another disappointment; it ought to groan on ancient hinges and need a hefty push to move it. On the other hand, groaning was probably counter-indicated, in a library, so the silence was just as well.

The room beyond was as cavernous as she'd hoped, and smelled deliciously of old paper and fresh ink, but there were no bookshelves and almost no books anywhere. The ceiling was so high shadows gathered like cobwebs in its furthest corners – at least, Alison hoped they were shadows and not actual cobwebs; she would hate to meet the arachnid that could produce webs of that size. Grimy windows high in the stony walls let very little light into the room; it was mostly illuminated by light Devices attached to the thirty or forty unadorned and very modern-looking desks lined up in three rows in the center of the room. So, not the Library; a scriptorium. At the far end of the chamber, a much longer desk with a modesty panel ran nearly the length of a foot-tall platform, seven or eight feet long. Cabinets painted a dull mustard yellow covered the wall behind the desk. There were two men behind the long desk, dressed in the robes of Scholia Masters, and half a dozen men and women sat at desks in the center of the room and read or took notes on the books spread out in front of them. One woman was standing at a lectern, flipping the pages of a large volume that was chained to it. A couple of young men in apprentices' tunics wandered between the desks, checking the inkwells. No one paid any attention to her arrival.

To her left was a door, iron-bound and enormous, probably ten feet wide and several more than that tall. It looked as if it had stood there since before Aurilien had been founded, as if it had waited for a city to grow up around it so it could fulfil its purpose as guardian of Tremontane's

greatest literary treasure. It looked exactly the way she'd imagined it. She crossed quickly to it and turned the knob at the center of the right-hand door and pulled. It didn't open. She pulled once more before realizing the door was locked. Yes, they would need security, but surely they wouldn't lock the Library during the day, when everyone was here?

"Is there something I can help you with?" A skeletal old man put his hand on hers and removed it from the knob. His eyes were a strange green that reflected the light as if they were made of glass and his slight smile had no good humor in it. He smelled strongly of a musky cologne and, more faintly, of the sour reek of an unwashed body. He spoke in a low voice, not quite a whisper.

"I came to see the Library," Alison replied at the same volume.

"I'm afraid that's impossible. No one sees the Library." He said it in the way someone might say the sun rises in the east.

"I wouldn't disturb anything. I just want to see it. I've come from Kingsport – my father is a publisher –"

The smile slipped away. "Being related to a merchant is nothing to recommend you." He thrust her hand from him as if she were contagious.

"I've also had four years at the Scholia, if that matters to you," Alison said, stung.

"It might, if you'd achieved the robe while you were there." The man put his hand on her elbow and steered her away from the door. "Feel free to use the catalog to request books," he added. He indicated the book on the lectern. "The Library is open to all."

Alison wrenched away from his grasp and went to the lectern, her face burning. Open to all indeed. She'd only wanted to see it. The Masters at the Scholia, most of them anyway, tended toward arrogance and territorialism, but she'd thought the Royal Library would be different, because...what had she expected? That they'd open their doors to her because she really, truly wanted them to? Putting her hand on the catalog's cover, worn from years of other hands touching it, she had to laugh at herself. Apparently Alison Quinn wasn't as important as she believed herself to be. Well, she was here, closer to the Library than she ever imagined she'd be, and she would take as much advantage of her six months' stay as she could.

She lifted the cover of the catalog and paged through the first section, breathing deeply to inhale the scents of paper and old leather, the smells of her childhood. She flipped back a few pages. By heaven, this was a stupid way to keep a catalog. It seemed they only wrote in the entries as they received books and didn't bother with indexing or grouping by subject. How anyone might find anything in this mess – but then, she knew from her years of study that Scholia-trained librarians developed their own organizational systems they wouldn't share with others. They claimed it was to teach reasoning and independence of thought, but Alison was certain they did it to make themselves the gatekeepers of knowledge; a library was worthless if you couldn't find what you needed to know. She turned a few more pages. They'd cut the spine and wedged in new pages at the back so the book was nearly five inches thick. She turned all the way to the back. They dated the new

entries – how strange, the final entry was nearly two years old. Surely the Royal Library hadn't stopped acquiring books?

"Excuse me," she said to the skeletal man, who was still hovering near the Library door as if he were afraid she might try to break it down, "I notice it's been a few years since the Library bought anything new. Why is that?"

He fixed her with his eerie green-glass eyes. "We only accept the highest quality literature," he said. "Much of what is being printed today is worthless, of no interest to the ages. We see no reason to clutter our shelves with such."

"But –"

"Your father is a...publisher, yes? You must know better than most the truth of what I say. Now excuse me. I have work to do." He didn't move, just stood there and stared her down until, a little unsettled, she turned and left the scriptorium, pretending she wasn't running away.

In the hallway, she stood for a moment and stared at the door. A dozen cutting remarks suddenly came to mind, now that it was too late to use them. It wouldn't have made a difference even if she had thought of them in time. She dug in her pocket for her watch Device; it was nearly time for afternoon reading, anyway. She'd come back, and perhaps next time the skeletal man wouldn't be there, or would be in a better mood, but at any rate she wasn't going to give up on her dream when she was close enough to touch it.



No gown was worth this amount of pain, but there was no help for it, so Alison braced herself against the footboard of her bed and tried not to breathe. Her maid Belle drew the strings of Alison's corset tighter another half inch. "Happen that's enough, milady," she said in her melodious northeastern accent, like the accompaniment to an invisible orchestra.

"I hope it's enough. One more pull and you would have cracked my ribs," Alison said. She released her grip on the footboard and stood erect – well, it was the only way she *could* stand, strapped into this cage of metal and bone and fabric, her breasts pushed up high and her waist almost small enough for her to circle it with her two hands. She let Belle dress her like a life-sized doll in the bodice of yellow satin the color of fallen linden leaves, sewn with tiny pearls along the neck and hem, and the matching skirt Belle tied tightly around her impossibly narrow waist. Alison kicked at the layers of the skirt, making it bell out around her, then slid her feet into golden dancing shoes and waited for Belle to fasten them. Pearl ear-drops and a double strand of larger pearls that hung to her navel completed her Equinox Ball costume.

She sat gingerly on the bench in front of her vanity table, lit softly by a dozen Devices the size of her pearls, while Belle arranged her long, tight curls into something elegant that would probably be frizzy before the night was over. It would be a long night. She knew no one in the capital except the Dowager and her ladies, none of whom could dance with her, and she felt herself begin to freeze up when she thought about dancing with strangers. *All those men who only think about one thing*, her inner voice said, and she tried to tell herself it wasn't true. It was possible the Dowager

would allow her to leave after only an hour or possibly two, and she could escape the ball and her corset and spend the rest of the evening reading.

"That's all, milady, and you look so beautiful," Belle sighed. She was young, sixteen or seventeen and fresh from some frontier town in Barony Steepridge Alison had never heard of, but she had come highly recommended and after two days of her service Alison could see why; she was bright, quick to anticipate Alison's needs, and had a cheerful disposition. Tonight she wore her brown hair parted in the middle and coiled in two knots at the base of her neck, and she'd done something to her pink uniform that made it look fashionable. Alison wasn't sure that was permitted, but Belle's initiative in doing so had impressed her so much she didn't want to chastise her.

"Thank you, Belle. Though most of my appearance is due to your care, so I think you're complimenting yourself," Alison teased, and the girl's cheeks went pink. "I'll wake you when I come in. I certainly can't get out of this getup on my own."

"Very well, milady. You're sure you don't mind if I borrow your books?"

"They're here to be read, and I'm so pleased you want to. Now, please check to see that my hem is straight, and then I suppose I'll have to join the others."

The other ladies were waiting in the antechamber for the Dowager, all of them as erect as Alison was. Elisabeth caught her eye, gave her a slow once-over, then smiled a nasty smile and turned away. Alison suppressed her laughter. She'd learned, finally, that the Vandenhouts were an old Tremontanan family, wealthy but not titled, and that Elisabeth was terribly proud of her lineage. She seemed to think, because of the state Alison had arrived in and despite her extensive wardrobe, that Alison was an impoverished noblewoman from the rough frontier, and Alison hadn't bothered to correct her. Only ignorance could prevent anyone from recognizing the name of one of Tremontane's eleven governing districts, let alone paint County Waxwold uncivilized, and Alison Quinn's personal fortune could no doubt buy the Vandenhouts several times over.

"Oh, Alison, you look incredible," Simone said, hurrying over to embrace her. The tall, dark-skinned woman wore shades of cream just barely acceptable as autumn colors; white made her skin glow. "Those pearls are just the perfect touch. I've never seen any so well matched."

"Yes, and I have to admit I'd never have guessed yellow would suit you so well, with that hair," Philippa said.

"Neither did I, but my couturier insisted, and she's always right," Alison said.

"Well, I'd try to steal her from you, but I doubt she'd be willing to move all the way to Barony Daxtry for me," Philippa said. She shook out her copper skirts, perfectly coordinated with her red hair, and added, "We all do look stunning, don't we?"

"Oh, my dears, that you do," said the Dowager. She entered the room and saluted each of her ladies with a light kiss on the cheek. She smelled of lilacs and powder and her lips brushed Alison's cheek like the softest rose petals imaginable. "Now, I hope you will all enjoy yourselves tonight. I will be returning at midnight, but you need not feel obligated to attend me. I simply want

to remind you we will all rise for our normal breakfast hours, and I expect you to exercise the good sense each of you has. Now, our carriage is ready, so if you don't mind?"

They left the Dowager's apartment and went, not to the ballroom, but to a door where two carriages waited to drive them the three hundred yards or so to the palace entrance. Alison wasn't sure whether that was to gratify the Dowager's fancy or to give her ladies a proper entrance, but the oversized white and gilt carriages certainly drew the attention of the other waiting guests. The palace glowed with thousands of fairy lights, making its patchwork construction look like the set of a play, something out of scale and not quite real. It made her feel a little disoriented, like an actor waiting for her cue, costumed and not quite sure what her lines were.

She followed the Dowager up the black granite steps that shone gold with reflected light and across the threshold, trying not to bump up against the other guests. There were so many people pressing forward across the marble entry Alison couldn't imagine the size of the ballroom that could hold them all. She passed through a gallery, half-paneled in dark walnut and painted an eggshell blue above, that was lined with pedestals bearing busts of famous dead Tremontanans, their blank eyes staring past her as if looking at something far more important than any of the people passing now. She glimpsed the bust of Landrik Howes, one of her favorite playwrights, and wished she could stop to ask what play she'd walked into and what her role was this evening. She would have welcomed a script and a director.

They came out of the gallery into the rotunda, four stories tall and capped with a dome depicting the great deeds of King Edmund Valant, last king before the North dynasty took the Crown. Willow North must have had a robust sense of humor to leave those paintings intact – or possibly she just knew most of King Edmund's deeds had been exaggerated or fabricated and therefore were no threat to her. The real power in those days had been the Ascendants, men and women with inborn magical abilities who used their magic to dominate Tremontane's government and society, and Willow had been the cause of their downfall. Alison had trouble picturing anyone capable of bringing an entire magical caste to its knees being afraid of anything. She realized she was lagging behind and hurried to catch up to the Dowager, who'd swept her party past the rotunda, down a sloping hall covered in a dark green woven carpet, and past a pair of golden grilles, currently open, to the top of a landing overlooking the ballroom.

Alison's imagination had fallen short of the reality; the room was easily one hundred feet wide and twice that in length. She blinked and turned her head to avoid being blinded by the chandelier of brass and crystal, lit by thousands of tiny Devices, that hung from the center of the ceiling and was level with the top of the stairs. Looking up and away from it, she saw the midnight blue ceiling was painted with constellations that resembled those of Midsummer Day, probably the exact configuration of stars that hung over Aurilien on that most important of holidays, when the lines of power drew heaven and earth closest together and family bonds were at their strongest. Music beckoned Alison to enter, and she turned her head, trying to discover where the music was coming from; it seemed to emerge from the air itself.

"The Countess of Waxwold," the herald at the top of the stairs said, and Alison jumped a little and stepped forward to descend to the ballroom floor. *This would be a perfect time for me to trip over my shoes and go tumbling down all these stairs*, she thought, and held her head high and stepped very carefully. A forest of trees had been sacrificed to make the shining surface where men and women danced. The highly waxed, almost black floorboards were parallel to the stairs and became paler the further they went from the staircase until they were almost white, then gradually darkened until at the far edge of the room they were nearly black again. It gave Alison the illusion that the couples dancing at the center of the room were turning and dipping in a valley, or possibly atop a ridge, and she had to look at the walls to keep from getting dizzy. Doors painted pale rose to match the walls stood at long intervals around the room; from her reading, Alison knew they opened on smaller rooms where business had once been conducted, long ago when this had been the throne room. She suspected they were now used for lovers' trysts, though how anyone could bear to conduct a courtship with so many people moving around just outside was difficult for her to understand.

She took a final step and was safely on the varnished floor that only looked like it was sloping away from her. She was the last of the Dowager's ladies to descend, and none of them had waited for her; she could see the Dowager moving away in the company of several other ladies her own age. Alison took a few more steps so as not to be in the way of whoever was coming down behind her. Then she stopped and clasped her hands in front of her, pretending she was enjoying the view of all those bright autumn colors darting about as if tossed like leaves, all those dark suits like trees doing the tossing. She felt a familiar iciness begin to spread across her body and descend over her face. She had not been introduced to any of these men and saw no way to gain an introduction, so how on earth was she to spend the evening dancing? Perhaps she should follow the Dowager and her knot of women...but how embarrassing, to go begging like that when she didn't much enjoy dancing anyway. She should sit down, accept a glass of wine and pretend it was what she wanted to do—

"Excuse me, milady Countess, but would you care to dance?"

Alison turned, startled, to look at the middle-aged man who'd spoken to her. He had a kind smile and his hand was outstretched to her. "I—we haven't been introduced, sir—that is, milord—"

"Just sir," he said, a friendly twinkle coming to his eye. "So many people come and go through Aurilien that we've dispensed with the need to be introduced to someone before you dance with him. Or her." He took her unresisting hand and bowed over it. "But if it makes you more comfortable, my name is Jackson Albright."

"I—yes, Mister Albright, I would be happy to dance with you," Alison said, still a little off guard, and allowed him to lead her to where the dancers were gathering. He'd looked at her with admiration, true, but he hadn't leered at her or made suggestive comments, and as they started into the first steps of the dance, he smiled at her with such friendliness that she smiled in return.

She hadn't realized until that evening that she really did enjoy dancing, when she had the right partners. Was it luck, or was it just Aurilien, that she never had to freeze up to protect herself from unwanted compliments or men trying to see down the front of her gown tonight, never had to turn down an invitation to dance with an unwanted partner? She stumbled once, was caught by her partner, and rather than feeling mortified she was able to laugh with him at her mistake. She felt for the first time in years as if she were not defined by those externalities of title and fortune that had nothing to do with who she really was. Part of her warned *Don't be so incautious*, and she found it easy to ignore that little voice.

Finally, her feet beginning to ache and her throat dry, she politely waved away more invitations to dance and went in search of a glass of wine. Small tables and chairs stood scattered near the walls, occupied by dancers in need of a rest or people carrying on boisterous conversations loudly enough to be heard over the music. Alison tried to sit, but her corset dug into her hips and thighs, so she stood well out of the way of the dancers and sipped her wine, which was a little fruitier than she liked but soothed her dry throat. She had no idea what time it was. Perhaps she wouldn't return with the Dowager at midnight, after all. She took a somewhat longer swallow and patted her lips with her fingers. She'd purchased several dozen pairs of gloves only to learn they were unfashionable in the capital for evening wear, and now her hands felt naked, as if the absence of gloves meant something more sensual than mere bare skin. It had felt a little scandalous to dance hand in hand, skin to skin, with her partners, scandalous and a little thrilling. She needed to get out in society more often if something that prosaic thrilled her.

"Alison, dear! Do join us!"

Alison turned and saw the Dowager waving at her from a nearby table. She was seated with a number of other women about her age and a dark-haired man who half-turned to see whom the Dowager was waving at. He was astonishingly good-looking, with a strong, smooth jawline, firm lips, shapely cheekbones, and a pair of vivid blue eyes that set off his fair skin. Alison approached and made her curtsy to the Dowager, then glanced back at the young man, who had those blue eyes fixed on her with an expression that was far too familiar. Alison felt herself begin to freeze up for the second time that evening. *So much for my good luck*. She ignored the man and gave all her attention to the Dowager, praying to ungoverned heaven she could extricate herself from the conversation quickly.

"Ladies, this is Alison Quinn, the Countess of Waxwold. She's my newest companion and I do so enjoy her company!" The Dowager reached up and laid a soft hand on Alison's wrist. "Alison, dear, I want you to meet my son, Anthony. Anthony, Alison Quinn."

The young man rose, a little unsteadily. "Milady Countess," he said, and his voice was a rich baritone every bit as handsome as the rest of him. Alison tried not to flinch at the smell of alcohol that came off his breath. She let him take his hand and kiss it, his lips lingering much longer than was socially acceptable, and kept herself from yanking it back when he was finished. She bowed her head and curtsied politely, murmuring, "Your Highness."

“Anthony’s just returned from the country and I’m so glad he was able to attend this ball,” the Dowager said. “Anthony, I wish you would dance with Alison. She seems quite without a partner. Alison, you’d like to dance with Anthony, wouldn’t you?”

Alison was certain the Dowager didn’t realize her son was drunk. She looked up at the Prince—he had to be almost a foot taller than she was—and froze a little more at his lazy smile and the light in his eyes that said he knew exactly how handsome he was and that his looks could get him anything he wanted, including, naturally, the Countess of Waxwold. He surveyed her body once again and said, “I’d *love* to dance with you, milady Countess,” and offered her his hand.

For half a second Alison considered rejecting him. But the Dowager was sitting right there, smiling with innocent pleasure at having arranged things so neatly, and it would offend her so much if Alison refused. So she took the Prince’s hand, smiled a frozen smile, said, “Thank you, your Highness,” and allowed him to lead her to the center of the floor.

Alison was conscious of being stared at for the first time all evening; she hoped it was actually her partner they were staring at, though she had a momentary wild thought of what a beautiful couple they must make despite the difference in their heights, her blond curls, his dark hair. Half the room was no doubt envying her right now; the other half was probably envying him. Alison caught a whiff of stale brandy again and breathed through her mouth until it passed. How fortunate the corset wouldn’t allow her to breathe any more deeply than that.

North stopped under the largest of the crystal chandeliers and rather abruptly took Alison in his arms. “No need to be tense,” he said, “this is a very simple dance.”

“I realize that, your Highness,” Alison replied. It was a familiar and popular dance, and it was also a very intimate one, requiring partners to dance close together, his arms around her waist, her arms around his shoulders. An old, painful memory of dancing like this with another man, one who’d said he loved her, flashed through her mind, and she focused on the shoulder of North’s frock coat to dispel it. He’d said so much more when she’d turned down his advances: *frigid, tease, haughty. Probably a terrible lay*. As if her current situation weren’t painful enough without reminders of her equally painful past.

She stumbled a little through the first steps, disliking the feeling of North’s strong arms drawing her close. North was a good dancer, despite being drunk, and Alison tried to focus on the steps and reminded herself it was only one dance, because two would mean they were interested in one another and two in a row would be a declaration of courtship. North would certainly not return later for another dance no matter how much he admired her body.

“How long have you been in Aurilien? Milady countess,” North said as they circled each other and then drew close again, clasping right hands.

“Nearly a week, your Highness.”

“Are you enjoying my mother’s company?”

“I am, your Highness.”

North leaned in until his mouth was even with her ear. "You can just call me Anthony, you know. Milady."

"I'd prefer not to be so informal when we've only just been introduced, your Highness."

North laughed. "Very well." He slid his hand from the base of her spine up to caress her back and the bare skin at the base of her neck, a swift stroke that probably no one noticed. Alison's cheeks went blotchy with anger and embarrassment. And to think she'd been having such a nice time. This always happened, always, she would let her guard down and some man would take advantage of that, as if she were nothing more than firm breasts and a well-rounded bottom. They were in the middle of the ballroom, spotlighted by a hundred thousand sparkling rainbows. She had nowhere to go. She felt ice fill her from deep within her chest, radiating out to the rest of her body. Frozen, where this arrogant Prince couldn't touch her.

They separated again, briefly, and North held her at a distance for several steps longer than he should have, his eyes caressing her as his hand had done. "You are *incredibly* beautiful," he said, his words a little slurred. "Do you realize how beautiful you are?"

A mask of ice descended over her face, her lips. "Modesty requires I not answer that, your Highness."

He laughed and drew her close again, finally, breaking the rhythm of the dance. "Oh, you're beautiful," he said, his breath hot on her ear. "But I'll wager you're even more beautiful with that dress off. I would *love* to see you without—"

Without thinking, Alison whipped her hand out of his grasp and brought it around hard to slap the Prince's face. The sound of her bare palm striking his cheek carried unnaturally far in the crowded, overfull ballroom. The dancers nearest them stopped to stare, and their stillness spread outward until half the floor was occupied by unmoving figures. The music went ragged and then stumbled to a halt. The Prince stood with his hand pressed to his cheek, his eyes wide and unblinking in surprise. Alison felt her breath coming in short, quick pants that left her dizzy. Her hand throbbed. "How *dare* you, sir," she snarled, and pushed past him at a near-run, shoving her way through the forest of observers without caring whom she bumped into. She lifted her skirts and fled up the stairs, feeling propelled by the attention of everyone in the ballroom as if their combined gazes were goading her to greater speed. By the time she reached the top of the steps, she was running as fast as her dancing shoes would allow.

With the help of a few liveried servants and a lieutenant on her way to a shift change at the east wing door, she eventually found the Dowager's apartment, flung the door open without knocking, to the surprise of the guards, and ran to her suite, where she began tearing at the knots securing the tapes of her skirt. They were too tight, Belle had tied them too well, there was a knife somewhere in the vanity table and she would cut the damn thing off.

"Milady, what's wrong? Let me do that for you," Belle said. Her eyes looked sleepy; Alison still didn't know what time it was, but if she'd left the ball an hour ago, none of this would have happened. She let Belle remove her bodice and corset and sucked in a great deep breath of flower-

scented air. She was never wearing a corset again, if only because the Dowager would probably send her home after this. Alison stripped out of her chemise and drawers and yanked her nightdress over her head, then realized her hair was still elaborately arranged on the top of her head. Blotchy again with fury, she yanked pins out while Belle watched, her eyes wide with astonishment. Good for Belle not to interfere. Alison needed something to destroy right now. She flung the last pin away as if throwing a spear at Anthony North's lecherous heart and dragged a comb roughly through her curls, not caring how it tugged.

Someone pounded on her suite door. "Alison Quinn!" the Dowager shouted. "How dare you enact such a scene? I have never been so humiliated in my entire life!"

She was humiliated? Alison flung the comb so hard at the vanity table that two of its teeth snapped off and went flying wherever the pins had gone. She stormed through the dressing room and the tiny sitting room, but in the sliver of time between throwing the comb and putting her hand on the doorknob, rationality reasserted itself. The Dowager was not at fault here. As guileless as she was, she might have no idea what her son was like. So Alison drew in another wonderfully deep breath and opened the door quietly. The Dowager was alone. She had her hand raised to knock again and looked a little surprised at Alison's appearance.

"Milady, I apologize," Alison said before the Dowager could do more than open her mouth. "My behavior was shameful and I deeply regret how it reflected so poorly on you, because you've been so kind to me. The Prince offered me such an insult that I reacted without thinking. I'll pack my things and leave in the morning."

The Dowager's eyes narrowed. "What insult?" she said.

"I'd rather not repeat it—"

"*What insult?*"

Alison dropped her gaze to look at the Dowager's right hand, with all its rings, that was now twisting the folds of her orange-gold gown. "He said he would like to see me with my clothes off, Milady."

The hand clenched. "My dear, I am so sorry," the Dowager said, her voice quiet and subdued. "Was he terribly drunk? I'm afraid I never notice, anymore."

"He was moderately drunk, I believe." Alison risked looking at the Dowager's face and saw only sadness there.

"Not that it's an excuse," the Dowager said. She moved past Alison and lowered herself into the sitting room's only chair. "You were completely right to take offense, much as I might wish it hadn't been so very public, for your sake."

"I'm leaving in the morning, so it won't matter what people think." The idea of going home, of being free from this sentence—not that it was all that onerous a requirement—made the ice in her chest melt away. No more corsets, no more Elisabeth Vandenhout, no more skeletal librarians...she could have her life back, and none too soon.

"Oh, no, please don't leave!" the Dowager exclaimed. "I would miss you terribly if you left."

“But, Milady, you can’t have a companion who’s known to be quick-tempered and violent!”

“Don’t worry about that, dear. True, it will be embarrassing for a time, but eventually it will be forgotten. And you were sorely provoked; I can hardly blame you for reacting as you did, even if Anthony is my son.”

Alison saw her untrammelled future begin to vanish into the distance and she made a last grasp at it. “But all anyone will know is that I slapped the Crown Prince in public! I really can’t allow your reputation to be so tarnished.”

The Dowager waved her ringed hand as if shooing a fly. “My reputation is more robust than that. Please, Alison, don’t leave. I know none of the other ladies would want you to either.”

I bet Elisabeth would pack my trunk for me, Alison thought, but said, “All right, Milady. I just hope neither of us regrets this.”

The Dowager rose and kissed Alison lightly on the cheek. “I’m sure it will all work out very well in the end. I’ll see you at breakfast, won’t I, dear?”

Alison shut the door behind her and leaned against it. Staying was a bad idea, but she’d agreed to it, and she would just have to weather the gossip until it died away or was supplanted by someone else’s scandal. She went to wash her face and then climbed into bed and pulled the white and gold counterpane over her ears. The memory of the Prince’s stunned face rose before her, and to her surprise she giggled at it. The throb and stinging pain in her palm had been worth it. Probably dozens of other women who’d been the objects of his lascivious attention were cheering her right now. She fell asleep cheerfully grasping that memory.

She woke a little late and hurried through her toilette, dressing in a white muslin day gown and asking Belle to arrange her hair in a simple style. The other ladies would no doubt want to know the details of her very public assault on the Crown Prince, and Alison wanted to be as comfortable as possible when they pressed her on the subject.

Someone knocked quietly on the suite door, and Belle left Alison with her hair pinned only on one side to answer it. She returned with a folded and sealed piece of paper which she handed to Alison. “It was someone in North blue,” she said, “and he didn’t say anything, just gave me that for you.”

The wax seal bore no imprint, just the mark of a thumb pressing into the hot wax. Alison broke the seal and unfolded the paper. She felt her fingers go numb with horror. “It’s from the Queen,” she said. “She wants me in her office in half an hour.”