

1. The Forgotten Book.

The old looking book was covered in the remains of several spiders, and a good deal of dust. The pages were fresh, and they stuck together, as if they had never revealed their contents before. Alenia fingered the printed words and began to read.

The senior prophetess looked from the window at the crowd swaggering noisily below. She watched as the townsfolk made merriment in the traditional clothes of their pirate ancestors. The comic costumes were customary for the festival, but she did not smile at the sight. In a few short hours, their colourful clothes would be ruined with rum or mud. Forgotten eye patches would litter the cobbled street, wasted like the warnings and guidance she gave, and ignored like the legacy their pirate ancestors blessed them with.

The gathering of the Anesian people signalled that her appearance drew close. She was the Carmarda, the latest in an ancient line of prophetesses, called to guide the peoples of Anesia. Many years ago the Carmarda had foreseen this day and knew that it was her final appointment.

She shook her head and moved from the window. The reflection in the mirror caught her eye. Her face cast the truth back at her too easily. She had held the position of Carmarda for eight-and-sixty years. No longer a youthful milkmaid, her hair had changed from brown to white in her time of service. On receiving the invitation to attend the Crown Prince's two-and-tenth day of birth she noticed how quickly time had progressed. Her time had run out.

Her final duty was the official ceremony of the Prince's day of birth celebrations. She was to share with Crown Prince Dylantian the customary prophecy and words of wisdom he would need to guide him through his life as a ruler. This year she brought an addition, a prophecy for the people too.

The Carmarda often replayed her final moments in her mind. Before the ceremony, the King and Queen greet her joyfully, oblivious to the cool feeling of treachery that lingered amongst their advisors. The two small Princes fidget as she speaks the prophecy, Dylantian in excitement on receiving his first shield more than hearing any words of wisdom. The younger, Mykael, sulks, upset that he is not old enough to bear his coat-of-arms. She cries a few tears; Mykael would receive his shield emblazed with his coat-of-arms soon enough – at his burial.

She wiped her tear-moistened cheeks with a handkerchief. She had watched Queen Carelle and her twin brother, Lord Ryn, from their birth. She was glad she would not live to watch the Queen be consumed by the sickness that was beginning to show in her body. Encouraging the family seemed useless, but the Carmarda would try anyway. She enjoyed this Royal Family, and she prayed that amidst their struggles they would recognise that there was hope. It saddened her that this prophecy should be proclaimed over the land and the people in their lifetime. However, the land would only put up with the lies and greed growing within it for a season, and the time had come for it to rebel.

She prayed that the people would note her words and warning. Until the land was purged of lies and pride, foresight would be silent and blind, and the land would act against the people. Without the blessing of prophetic foresight, war, death, hardship and pain were swiftly approaching those whom the Anesians loved most. The Island would accept no successor to the role of Carmarda until truth was known. When Anesia fought for it, truth would guide the way once more.

The Carmarda felt a tingle in her mind indicating the events she had once seen were now congruent with reality. She pulled some parchment and writing implements out of her desk in anticipation of the afternoon she would spend recording the giving of the prophecy for the history books. She hoped for enough time to finish writing before the mercenary came to seal the words with her blood.

The Carmarda looked around the small bare room one last time. Everything was already in order. Her belongings were packed, the final letters written, the plates clean and the rubbish burned. She gave a small sigh and stood, collecting her walking stick. It was time for her to go.

Alenia Myrian looked up from the Carmardic account when she heard another student enter the First Year Library. Relieved that it was no one she recognised, Alenia returned her attention to the pages and frowned, flicking past the next chapter. Winding her brown wavy hair around a finger, she turned the pages of parchment. She, like the rest of the populace, knew too well of the silence the Carmarda prophesied. Each countryman could speak of how the curse raged in their daily lives, the crops grew less every year, the weather became increasingly unpredictable, mysterious illnesses plagued them and unrest grew.

The Royal Family were not spared. Prince Mykael was killed in his bed, the Anesian diplomats stood accused of betraying their country to their rivals, and the Queen lay deathly ill from a mysterious sickness, in a castle to the north. Seven years had passed since the prophecies were given, and Anesia still waited for the Great Silence to be lifted and for the Prince's prophecy to be fulfilled. Alenia was glad the Carmarda had not witnessed how many had given up hope and faith in her assurance that healing and relief would come.

Alenia thought the final Carmardic recording odd, but reading it always gave her hope. She was a scholarship healing student at the Noble Eaker University and needed distractions with happy endings if she had any hope of navigating her first year. Biting her lip, Alenia tucked her hair behind her ear and read the Carmarda's final account.

"Ma is that her – the special lady?" The Carmarda heard the child's cry ring through the creaking of carriages, and villagers' muttering. The prophetess stiffened as the strange warm feeling of time slowing and familiarity came upon her.

Surprised by the ordained moment, she panicked, muttering in protest, "Not now, not now! No time!" She wanted to ignore the girl and continue walking but she could not refuse the calling of the Way when it took her. Reluctantly the Carmarda turned and searched for the owner of the voice amongst the busy vendors. She sighted a young girl of noble birth trotting calmly around each obstacle on the road in an effort to reach her. She looked about ten years and was followed closely by her parents. Sighing at the unexpected audience, the Carmarda lent down on her walking-stick to face the wide eyed girl. "Hello?"

"Hello," the brown haired, light-eyed girl responded, as she smiled enthusiastically.

"Who are you looking for, my dear?" The Carmarda smiled as the girl's father, a captain, bowed, and the girl's mother moved to respectfully pull their daughter away.

"I wanted to see if it was really you, the Calm-a-lah, the lady who gives people special powers." The girl shook her head as she fumbled over the pronunciation. "I saw you with the Prince; my father says everything you say comes true. Why did you say Anesia will be silent now? I do not understand; I can still hear things. Where are you going? We do not want you to go, ask anyone!" The young girl chattered at her furiously, the emotions on her face ranging from enthusiasm to concern.

The Carmarda tried hard not to laugh, grateful for small mercies and honest children. "Thank you, sweet," she replied. "Unfortunately, the choice is not up to me or you. These things have been decided. I am going away, and, yes, there will be a period of silence over the nation. It has already begun." She sighed. "The land will not converse with us as it once did. But do not get too sad – another Carmarda will come when the people have cleansed themselves from the lies they follow." The Carmarda shook her head at herself – still preaching in her final hour.

"But if whatever you say comes true, can you un-say it?" the girl asked.

"I'm a human like you, darling, a human who has been blessed with a gift of being able to read the times. Not everything everyone says about me is true." The Carmarda smiled sadly, thinking of the many stories which existed about her.

"Oh."

The girl's face fell; the Carmarda hated being the bearer of sad news to sweet children. "What do you want child?"

She watched the girl think hard before replying sadly, "I wanted to see you, see you were real. Father has read me all the stories. I do not want you to go. Who will bless the Queen's next baby?" The girl touched her hand softly as she spoke and the Carmarda closed her eyes in pain as a vision of knowledge flowed through her mind. The fate of the small girl became

apparent to her; the girl's father's betrayal and death, the Crown's pursuit of the girl and her mother, and their life of lies in order to live.

The Carmarda drew a sharp breath; there was still hope for healing. She opened her eyes and placed her hand on the girl's head, and pronounced her final blessing in faith. As the words left her lips, a sense of urgency filled her. She squeezed the girl's hand and smiled, "I need to go now, love. Be good, and let the Way guide you."

The Carmarda quickly departed, leaving behind the bewildered townspeople, the child's parents, and one delighted young girl looking after her. The moment was unexpected, but her last blessing was now bestowed. Her service was finished.

Alenia let the pages fall shut, and wiped at the tear on her cheek. She stood to return the book with a heavy sigh. The bell for class rang. Her respite was over.

2. The Dangerous Path.

The University of Eaker was the oldest university in Anesia. It was located a day's travel inland from the western coast. Eaker had grown popular with the nobility as a place to educate their children, as it was situated between forest and farmland, and there were no towns, ports or other distractions for miles.

In the years of prosperity before the Silence, the merchant class swelled, and bought their children places at Eaker too. Currently, students numbering over three thousand attended there, paying up to a thousand coin a year. Scholarships were offered, although rarely accepted. Alenia was the only scholarship student in her year, and the peasant-woman stood out painfully.

The first two weeks of the schooling year were always populated with commencement activities rather than classes. When Alenia's attendance was not required she retired to the library or the forest, relishing the peace and respite from the bustle and the stares.

Although she hid from the other students, Alenia couldn't hide from herself. She felt unhappy, insecure and fearful at Eaker, and was thankful for time to herself to gather her fortitude. She had hoped coming to this University would empower her, but to her misery she turned into a recluse. Currently Alenia's hope was that by the time classes began her fellow students would be accustomed to her presence and just ignore her.

Alenia had no hope of ever fitting in. It was uncommon enough that she was a scholarship student, but Alenia bore her mother's name and was viewed as a bastard.

If there were two things the Anesian's prided themselves on, it was their money and their family heritage. When the Queen had chosen to marry a foreign man of unknown origin, it had caused a yearlong scandal.

What Alenia wanted from her time there was a good education, in the hope she could earn enough to support herself and her mother through the years. Hopes of bettering their standing in society were a much desired bonus.

As she plodded, Alenia mourned the confident and proud woman she had been in her hometown, never too far away from mischief. She did not dare relax at Eaker for fear of losing her scholarship, or worse, attracting any attention from the Crown. Dylantian, the Crown Prince, attended Eaker, and for someone like Alenia, any attention from the Crown never ended well.

She desperately wished for the day when she could be proud of who she was born to be. She wished to live without fear, and not to settle for the restrictions of her birth status and name. She held on to the naive belief that her time would come, and told herself she just needed patience and focus.

As she walked further into the forest, a noise nearby caught her attention. Alenia peered through the aged trees hoping to find the source. She was relieved to see it was only a horse and rider, so she dismissed her fears of being caught out of bounds by a tutor.

The longer she walked, the more relaxed she became. As she wandered Alenia collected particularly beautiful harvest-coloured leaves. She delighted in the stillness of the air, and the feel of the bark beneath her fingers, as the trunks supported her step.

However, her peace was disturbed again a few moments later, when she heard the rider change direction. As the sound of his passage moved towards her, Alenia's heart rate accelerated. She hid behind the tree trunk waiting for him to pass, desperately hoping to stay out of sight. As she heard him draw closer, she focused on breathing calmly, urging herself not to do anything rash. To her relief the horse and rider continued, oblivious to her presence.

Alenia cursed herself for venturing so far into unknown woods. She peeked at their retreating backs, quickly deciding to end her walk and head back to the campus. As she moved quietly towards the clearing, her mind suddenly placed the pattern she had seen shorn on to the horse's rear. Unhappy with her eye for noting the detail, Alenia paused, unsure what to do. The horse was no longer unknown.

Alenia had seen a beautiful dark horse with the same pattern only days before. She had bolted into a stable stall to escape a parading squadron of soldiers. Alenia detested knights and soldiers, and walking around a corner into a whole parade of them had terrified her.

An hour later, Relle, her Gypsy roommate, had discovered Alenia crouched in the horse's stall, petting the occupant. Relle found Alenia muttering to herself, still trying to calm her furiously beating heart. Alenia had been extremely embarrassed to be found in such a way by Relle, a stable hand, and to have

displayed her fears so plainly. Alenia had been horrified to discover whose horse she had been petting. She had quickly vowed never to touch the animal again.

Alenia was thankful Relle had not accused her of wrong doing, and hoped for an opportunity to prove her honesty to her. The Gypsy people were renowned for many things – their loyalty, their beautiful black hair and olive skin, their intelligence, their ability with horses, and their strict observance of the Way of the Carmarda. Having a Gypsy for an enemy was a much bigger threat than the scorn of all the nobles at the college combined.

Alenia looked back at the empty path. She was sure it was the same horse, but the man riding the mare was not her owner. Alenia drew a rough breath. Relle had mentioned that many students tried to gain favour with the man through his horse. Alenia cared nothing for him or his favour, what she wanted was a friend. The best chance of friendship she had was with the Gypsies. Although they were the native inhabitants of Anesia and very wealthy, many of the pirate-descended Anesian's feared them. Alenia was sure they would give her a chance, but she knew she could never achieve friendship with them if she let a horse in their care be lost.

Biting her lip, Alenia started after the rider. Creeping as quietly as she could through the trees it took her several minutes to catch up with him. When she drew level with the horse, her sight confirmed her first impression; it was the same beast she had petted the week previously. Her mind whirred, pondering the risks if she proceeded. Deciding to gamble and think as she did best, in the moment, Alenia stepped out from behind the tree to meet with the curses of the rider.

“Oh goodness,” she pretended to be surprised, hoping she looked shocked to see them there. She quickly noted the man was dressed too finely to be a bandit, as his sword sheath was intricately decorated. He frowned down at her and steered the horse away.

“Please be more careful in future madam,” he scolded.

Alenia frowned in confusion, his manner did not seem urgent and his oiled back hair seemed an inefficient disguise. She beamed up at him and moved closer, “Isn't it a lovely afternoon for a ride?”

“Err yes, it is. Please be careful, and keep your distance. I do not want my horse to take fright and step on you,” he urged her. He reined the horse to a halt, and looked down at her worriedly.

Alenia moved swiftly towards the horse. “Oh, she is so pretty! She wouldn't hurt me. What is her name?”

To Alenia's relief, the horse recognized her scent and happily accepted a pat. She could see this irritated the man, and observed him intently as he composed his reply. Alenia tried to commit his details to memory lest he urge the horse to bolt. He wore his collar buttoned up, unlike the fashion at the time; his young face was clean-shaven, and his hair appeared to be dark brown under the oil he used on it. Like most nobles, his face appeared attractive. She was not sure whether he was naturally handsome or if his good looks came from money paid for the styling of hair and clothes to accentuate his handsomest features.

He sighed and replied unhappily, “Her name is Duchess, and I assure you she can be very dangerous. She is trained for war. Please be careful of your fingers.” He began to steer Duchess' head away from Alenia's grasp. “It has been a pleasure talking to you, madam, but I confess I need to be on my way now.”

The more he spoke the more suspicious Alenia became. It was clear he had a lot to hide, but she could not think why a noble would steal a horse. Instead of wasting time she decided to ask him directly, “Isn't Duchess the name of the Prince's horse?” She tried to keep her tone light and curious, “What are you doing with her?”

Alenia resolved to hold her judgment until he had responded. She would never have imagined that last week she had been legitimately associating with the Prince's horse, and was grateful that Relle had not accused her.

He grunted in frustration, “I am borrowing her while I am in town. Really, madam, it is nothing to concern yourself with.”

Alenia's frown deepened as she watched him. He barely looked at her when he spoke, his eyes darting around through the trees, as if spying unseen enemies. She narrowed her eyes at him, “Usually folks only say that when something suspicious is going on.” She hoped he would do something to prove his guilt, like bolt or even draw his sword, but to her astonishment he kept arguing.

“The Prince knows I have her, ma'am. I thank you for your kind attention.” He urged Duchess forward more firmly this time, but Alenia held fast to the bridle, defiant. “Monkey's tails! Could you please let me pass?” he exclaimed. He seemed shocked he had not been obeyed.

Alenia shook her head, now determined to get to the truth of the situation. “Why should I believe you? Your story seems very unlikely. How do I know you didn’t make off with her for a joyride when the Prince was competing in the Commencement Tournament? Your disguise might work from a long way off, but close up you barely have any likeness to the Prince. Who are you? What are you doing with Duchess in the woods?” She pursed her lips at him.

To her annoyance he laughed, and then sighed, “I am glad I do not look anything like him.” He ran his hand through his hair, messing it. “I am his cousin. Thank you for your concern for Duchess and my cousin. Now that is sorted, I will be on my way. I want to make a discrete entrance.”

Alenia pondered only a moment; she scowled, wondering how stupid he thought she was, “Second cousin?”

“First,” he maintained, looking offended.

Alenia raised her eyebrows, “Which side?”

“Mother’s,” he insisted impatiently.

Alenia shook her head and wondered if he was mad. It seemed like a highly elaborate tale to cover a horse heist. She wondered if she would ever hear his real story. “It is fairly common knowledge that Prince Dylantian doesn’t have a cousin. Lord Ryn abdicated leaving his twin sister Carelle the throne, and so denied his right to an heir. If the Prince had a cousin, I’m fairly certain he would have been made King while Carelle lies ill. A lot of powerful people do not like it that King Narturer was born a foreigner. I’m sure they would have found an excuse to replace him by now.” Alenia looked up at him expectantly, thinking that if he was the Royal Cousin, he should know this.

He narrowed his eyes, “What is your name, miss?”

“Myrian,” she replied. Alenia hated introductions, but she was amused at his attempt to change to subject.

“Miss Myrian?” She could see he was unsure he had understood correctly.

“Miss Alenia Myrian,” Alenia clarified, glaring up at him, daring him to mock her like the other noble students did. “And you?”

He fumbled; it appeared he was like the others, unfamiliar with polite conversations with someone born a bastard. “Wentylyn, Miss, err?”

Alenia sighed in frustration, “If you cannot get over your prejudice, Wentylyn, feel free to call me Alenia,” she replied with force.

She had never detested the nobility so much as she had begun to in her few weeks at the University. From her enrolment she had been accused of being the daughter of an escort, the mistress of a tutor, and the illegitimate child of a lord, among less savoury things which Alenia did not like to bring to mind. She wondered if Wentylyn would add something to her list.

“It does not bother you at all being known by your mother’s name?” Wentylyn seemed unsure about using her name so familiarly.

“Obviously not, if everyone called me Miss Myrian, I think my mother would start getting confused,” Alenia retorted with a pout.

“It is not very polite or proper for me to call you by your first name so soon,” Wentylyn declared.

Alenia resisted the urge to roll her eyes at him again. In her opinion, the unwritten code of the nobility had some strange rules of propriety. “Nothing relating to one born in my position is meant to be polite or proper,” she provoked him with a smirk.

The way she dressed should have been a clue to him of that. Her hair was tied back in a simple braid and she wore the brown clothes of a worker. They contrasted greatly with the proper gowns and hairstyles of her fellow students. “I prefer my mother’s name, and live in what you rubbish nobility call disgrace. Call me whatever helps your eyes to close at night.” Alenia grew tired of these discussions; after all, it was not as if she had chosen her situation any more than they had chosen theirs.

“You prefer your mother’s name? You refuse your father’s claim on you?” Wentylyn persisted further, obviously shocked. Alenia realized too late how careless she had been with her words. He was obviously more intelligent than he appeared, picking upon her choice of phrase.

“I would not refuse my father even if you threatened to kill me,” Alenia replied quietly, deciding an honest answer was best, looking earnestly at the leaf-carpeted earth. “It is less complicated this way.”

Wentylyn seemed anxious then, “Your father did not kill anyone did he?” he asked, oblivious of the offence he might cause.

Alenia wondered if there were rules for polite societal conversation dependent upon the birth class your conversation partner belonged to. Her scowl deepened, it would be a wonderful day when someone

accused her of disowning her father because she was embarrassed he had been so good-hearted. “My father did not rape, kill, steal, pillage, or commit fraud,” she said tightly.

Wentylyn sighed, “Well, at least you have that knowledge,” he said with pity.

Alenia did not appreciate his sympathy and snapped back. “Your father, if that’s really who your father is, has not publically acknowledged your mother, so I don’t understand why you are interrogating me about my parents,” Alenia glared up at him. “It sounds like a very similar story to me, except for the title.”

“You make a fair point,” he agreed. To her surprise, he remained unembarrassed and unmoved. Wentylyn continued after a pause, “Do you study here, Alenia, or work? Or do you live in the woods?” He gazed at her speculatively.

Alenia gave him a dirty look, enraged at his insinuation. Whoever he really was, he was incredibly rude. “Yes, I live in the woods,” she snarled. “No one lives in these woods but the animals. It is no wonder people think the nobility are prats when you ask questions like that! I study over there,” she pointed to the University. “I’m a first-year, and yes, I am on a scholarship.” She continued to glare up at him, unhappy to be giving away so much information so easily. “Do you live in the woods, Wentylyn? Do you work here, or study here?” she asked with a sneer.

Wentylyn pretended to laugh at himself, but it fell flat. “I apologize, I acted quite improperly. I do not live in the woods, or study here, but sometimes I work here doing audits for my uncle, the King.”

Alenia shrugged, stroking Duchess’s nose. The more he spoke the less she believed him. “Now we are introduced; although I am certain I have never seen Wentylyn on the Royal tapestry on the side of Queen Carelle. Are you going to give up the act and tell me what you are doing with Duchess?”

Wentylyn shook his head. “My story is the same; I am taking her for a ride. Dylan knows all about it,” he persisted. “I should be berating you about wandering alone in the forest! Are you not aware that it is dangerous?”

Alenia sighed in frustration; she did not need a lecture about safety. “I’m going for a walk, exploring nature, collecting pretty leaves.” She showed him her collection of harvest-coloured leaves she had stuffed in her pocket. “Don’t think you can distract me from the fact that your story isn’t very believable. I might be a peasant woman, but I do know about the way the world works. If you are the Prince’s cousin, surely you own your own horse, or even several. Why aren’t you using them?” she questioned. “Or maybe they need to rest. If so, why do you even need to take Duchess out if you have just finished a long journey? Shouldn’t you be resting or getting on with your visiting?” Alenia sighed, “Unless you only come here to visit Duchess. If that is the case, then I think your cousin may need to think about organizing a chaperone!” Alenia pursed her lips at him and clicked to Duchess in sympathy.

“I am going to ignore the last comment,” Wentylyn said levelly. “If I turn out to be exactly who I claim to be, I could charge you for this verbal assault.”

Alenia shrugged; if he was the Prince’s cousin then she definitely had bigger problems than his accusation of verbal harassment. “Charged for honesty? You should be paying me for it. Goodness knows the royals need to be told some truths.” Alenia grinned; she had not felt so happy in weeks.

Wentylyn sighed, “This is pointless, I do not even need to prove this to you, and my word should be enough.”

Alenia grasped Duchess’ bridle tightly in protest; he talked too high above his station. “Relle, one of the Gypsies who work at the stables, is my friend, and I am not letting anything happen to Duchess while she isn’t here to supervise.” It was more hope than truth.

Wentylyn scowled, his impatience flaring suddenly, “Are you sure you are not the one with the infatuation with the horse? How can I get you to let go of her?” He tried steering Duchess away again, but Alenia held fast.

“I’m not letting go until she is back where she belongs,” Alenia insisted stubbornly, wondering if he would try and bribe her.

“Fine, I will return her then,” Wentylyn continued to scowl down at her, obviously expecting her to let go.

“Excellent,” Alenia panned, unrelenting. “Let us go then.” She made to lead him and Duchess back towards the University.

“Can you not let go?” Wentylyn cried in frustration, unhappy with her solution, but seemed unwilling to use anything but argument to convince her.

“No, because then you could ride away with her,” Alenia explained as she led Duchess through the forest. “I know you won’t run and risk injuring Duchess’ mouth if I’m holding on to her.”

“You do not fancy my cousin, do you?” Wentyllyn asked cautiously, after a pause.

Alenia raised her eyebrows. Relle had asked the same thing when she had found her with Duchess, but Alenia did not care about the Prince. Many women saw him as their hope for a better life, but she believed the only life better than the one she lived, was one without royal persons in it. “Disgusting me, will not deter me,” she replied as a shudder made its way from her head down her spine; “I am not a fan of the Royal Family. I met him once when I was younger, but I liked Prince Mykael much better – may he rest in peace.”

“Oh. Yes. May he rest peacefully,” Wentyllyn murmured the blessing for his murdered cousin sadly. After a few moments he added, “How can you find the Prince and his family so repulsive when you do not even know them?”

Alenia grinned. “It is easy. The whole nation is waiting on Dylantian to save them, and he doesn’t seem to care. He’s always avoiding questions about his role in fulfilling the prophecy. He doesn’t seem to take responsibility for the task he’s been given and only seems to care about himself. It’s as if he’s an actor playing the part, telling us he does care, but he is not good enough at it to make it convincing.” She shrugged, “I have heard too many stories from those harmed by the Crown to care much for them.”

Wentyllyn seemed sceptical, “How can you claim to know all of that about him? How do you suggest Dylantian fulfil his ‘she who sets you free is she’ prophecy, putting himself in danger until some lass rescues him? How can you even know the stories about the Crown are true?”

Alenia looked back at him solemnly, “You won’t believe the things I have seen.” She sighed, shaking the bad memories from her mind. “Besides, I’m a Healer – well, when my test results come back. I hope I am going to be a Healer, and knowing things is what we do well. It’s our gift.” Alenia shrugged, confident her assessment was correct. “And the Prince, well, any attempt to fulfil the prophecy would be a morale boost; it would show the people that he cared.”

Wentyllyn scrunched his forehead and frowned at her as if trying to reconcile the information, “Huh.” They had reached the stables, and Wentyllyn dismounted. Alenia smiled and handed Duchess over to the confused stable-hand.

“I thought you’d need Duchess until evening, err Wentyllyn, Sir?”

Alenia’s hopes crumbled as Wentyllyn smiled and reassured the man, “Thank you, Sion, but I shall not need Duchess any longer. Miss Alenia has persuaded me my errands are more pressing than I realized, and so I must not waste my time spending it exercising Duchess. I need to get back to checking the University’s progress, in order to start my report for the King.”

“Certainly, Sir Wentyllyn.” Sion collected Duchess gladly.

Wentyllyn laughed wryly, “Who would know being fourth in line to the throne would involve so much work?”

“Indeed sir, the work load increases the closer to the throne you get, I’d wager,” Sion’s older companion remarked, as he shovelled manure.

Wentyllyn laughed, “That is not something I am aiming for anytime in the near future. I bid you good day, and say with all my heart, long live the King.”

Sion and his nameless workmate nodded, “Aye, Sir Wentyllyn, long live the King.”

“Until later, Alenia.” Wentyllyn quirked an eyebrow in victory, waving to the stable hands as he left. His confidence returning as Alenia’s faded.

Her chest tightened. Gypsies were not easily fooled. In trying to make a friend she had made a powerful enemy. She had made a terrible mistake.