

1st Day of Summer

*2,441st Year
of the Lorian Dynasty*

Chapter 1



“O you really think you are helping them?” the voice hisses, “Do you really think they are any better off? You don’t really believe they worship you out of joy and gladness? You are so naive. You are a fool. They would rather you die than spread your false piety among them. You make them sick.”

The voice’s monologue is broken by the pleading of a peasant. Wrapped in home spun rags, dirty and torn, the man cries out, “Your Majesty, please help my wife. She is sick, she is dying.”

Queen Alleloria’s robes flail in her determined stride, her staff clicking against the ground as she

walks. Ordained with rich fabrics, deep in purple and blue, the robes bring a presence of authority and energy to the dusty village, which only peasants and swine call home. “Of course,” the Queen’s voice carries at once both certainty and tenderness, “Bring me to her.”

The broken old man, weary from so many days plowing his field, bows shortly before Alleloria and rushes into a reed hut. Sunlight streams in through holes in the walls and roof. The floor is dry and cracked, and surely becomes muddy in the rain. The old man’s wife lays on a swath of brown fabric, moaning quietly to herself. She does not notice the old man hustle in, nor Alleloria stepping calmly behind him. “Please,” the old man begs, “help her. She is dying.”

The queen kneels carefully next to the woman. The wrinkles disrupt her dark skin, as a hammer shatters stone. Her days have been long, her life hard. “Better to let her die,” the voice hisses, “Then force her to live on in this hell you have ordained.”

Queen Alleloria stands, resting on her staff. Her wavy brown hair rests gently and perfectly across her smooth, chocolate colored face. A hint of jasmine seems to salt the air in the hut. Alleloria smiles, and brings her staff to bear. The wooden staff, worn from many, many years of service still gleams with the inscriptions placed upon it by Alleloria’s mother, the late Queen Alexis. A glowing jewel crowns the staff, the seat of Alleloria’s power and authority. For through it, she, as the Kings and Queens before her,

weilds control over the lands and the people.

She touches the old woman softly on the forehead with the glowing gem. “Be well, my child,” Alleloria whispers. The gem glows brighter, shades of green and yellow, and the woman’s eyes open. Alleloria withdraws her staff. “Today you are made well,” she commends, “Remember well the value of life.”

The old woman rises, silent, yet in awe. “Your Majesty,” she blurts, “Please stay and allow me to prepare dinner, an offering, something for you.”

“Friend,” the Queen smiles, “I ask for nothing more than you have already given me.”

The old man bustles up the Queen, “Thank you, Your Majesty, Thank you so much. I can’t express this,” he claps his hands, “I can’t express how glad I am to see her.”

Alleloria smiles, and steps out of the hut. The early summer sun shines down upon her, and the noise (and smell!) of villagers working and livestock filling the air. “This is the life,” Alleloria muses, “To be in the world but not of it.”

“The life indeed,” the voice hisses, “How many years of slavery have you condemned that old woman to? You are so just,” the voice bites sarcastically, “and kind. If only every soul had a Queen so great as you that they could not escape the pain and sorrow of this world even through death.”

Alleloria’s smile falters only a tad, not enough for the villagers to notice. They keep a respectful distance, bowing as she walks by. A breeze picks up,

casting her hair and robes about in a haphazard yet regal manner. Alleloria strides slowly past the village cemetery. "For generations now, thousands of years, this same village has been inhabited. Farms and huts handed down, from father to son. And even today," she glances around, "this village is not much bigger than it was when it first began." Ahead is the place she least likes to go. The slaughterhouse.

"The Queen is here!" A voice shouts. Alleloria walks with deliberate slowness, allowing the villagers time to clean up. Alleloria's dislike of bloodshed, even among the animals, is well known, and the villagers whose chores bring them to shed such blood always make a point to finish and clean up before the Queen enters.

"After all these years," she sighs into the wind, "to still be unable to stand before the sight and sound of death." The door to the slaughterhouse opens, and the butcher emerges. His apron is fresh and clean, the white cotton contrasting against the sun darkened skin. "Your Majesty," the butcher bows, "Welcome to this humble place."

Alleloria follows the butcher in. The tables are clean, freshly washed, and shiny knives hang on the walls. Alleloria knows what the knives are for, and her eyes linger not long on them. "Your Majesty," the butcher, a jolly and rotund man, continues, "much of my herd of swine have fallen ill to some disease. First it was a few here and there, becoming unnaturally thin and refusing to eat, but now much of the herd has become infected. I fear the townsfolk will

not have enough to fill their plates if this continues.” The butcher seems quite concerned. Yet even in this place Alleloria smiles to herself. The trials and tribulations of ruling an empire compared to a sickly herd of swine. Yet each person has their own concerns, real to themselves.

The rear door, a heavy wooden contraption, swings open and the smell of confined animals assaults Alleloria. She flinches, but the butcher seems unphased. Surely he is accustomed to it. Beyond the gate a number of pigs, Alleloria estimates nearly a hundred, are milling about. Many of them lay on the ground and are unnaturally thin. Raising her staff, Alleloria directs her healing power upon the herd.

“You would extend their torture just so they may be slaughtered in a fortnight? You really are sick,” the voice hisses.

“I will not argue with you,” Alleloria responds, silently and with at least a facade of calm, “except to say that I believe I am helping these people, my people. That is what matters to me.”

“Does it now? If you really cared, you would free them from this pitiful existence!”

Finishing her healing in stony silence, Alleloria departs from the slaughterhouse with only a curt nod to butcher, who wonders what he did to offend her. The sun begins to dip low in the sky, painting hues of purple and red. Alleloria walks quickly through the village with the sun to her back. Villagers greet her warmly, and she manages a prefunc-

tory smile and nod for most of them. "Yes," the voice hisses, "run away. If you can't see them, they don't exist. Just another failure of the great Queen Alleloria." She collects her horse, a strong and tall thoroughbred, from the stable.

"May your ride be well, Your Majesty," the young girl at the stable says with a smile as she hands Alleloria the reins. Alleloria pauses.

"Thank you," the Queen replies, meeting the girl's eyes. "Thank you."

With these meager words, short yet spoken from the heart, Alleloria spurs her horse and rides south, not far from her own home, her own bed, where she may weep away the sorrows of another day. The horse's hooves pound into the hard, dry soil like the voice which pounds in her head. Another day of trying. "Another day," she says, the wind whipping the words out of her mouth, "of failing."

As night falls, she passes the houses surrounding her home, her palace. Smoke rises from chimneys and dogs dart in and out of alleys, clearing the path for her horse to thunder down the cobblestone path toward the grand Palace of Loria. The township ends abruptly, as Alleloria passes into the Lorian Lawn, a semicircular field of blowing grass originating from the massive wooden and stone gate anchored into the ancient wall which protects the Palace of Loria.

It is here, or so the legend says, on this very lawn that the majestic and powerful Sorceress Loria battled the demon Ezrador for control of this land. It is

said that Ezrador had been given this land to raise slaves for the forces of evil, and the faces all across the land were marked with only darkness and pain. The Sorceress Loria, feeling compassion for the people, came to strike down the demon and grant the people of the land freedom. For four awesome days and nights she fought the demon, locked in battle so intense that fire and lightning filled all the air for kilometers in every direction. No mortal could approach, and all who tried were vaporized simply by such mighty presence.

Yet Loria was victorious, the legend goes, and she cast down the demon and declared the spot where she finally struck him down to forever be preserved as an open field, a testament and reminder of slavery and freedom. Here she built her palace, and ruled benevolently until her death; for even the greatest Sorceress must die someday.

In the center of the lawn, the road divides in half around a statue of Loria raising her staff above her head in a universal display of victory. Alleloria rides around the statue and continues to the gate, which is swung open for her palace attendants as she enters. "Good evening, Your Highness," several of her attendants say soothingly as they help her dismount from the horse. Several of them lead it away, while another group of young women remain with her. "Did Your Majesty have a nice ride?" one of the girls asks.

"She did," Alleloria responds confidently. To these, never a sign of weakness. Never.

Before her, the palace itself rises up in stone and

ivy. Far above the wall it rises, at its highest point a tower which overlooks the lands in all directions. Alleloria advances the ground stairs of the palace, her attendants now flanking. "I am tired," she lies, if only to rid herself of them, "and I must rest."

"You can't even stand to be with your closest attendants," the voice hisses, "How truly you hate them and despise them, and wish for their deaths."

Alleloria hesitates. An attendant looks to her, like a child waiting on its mother. "Something else, Your Highness?"

"Yes," Alleloria commands, "Inform the advisors I will meet with them at the break of dawn."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the attendant scuttles off. Alleloria walks, alone, through the castle to her room, rich in tapestries and carpets, colored blue, purple and green. On her soft bed she lays and stares into the carved wooden figures on the ceiling. For a moment, they seem to dance.

"Tomorrow," she muses, "I will rid myself of this great burden, too much for any mortal to bear."

"Or perhaps," the voice speaks as she slips toward her dreams, "only a sign of greater weakness and failure."

Chapter 2



“Do you know what this is all about?” Anastasia asks as a palace attendant ushers her into the room. “Queen Alleloria sure called this meeting on short order.”

“Indeed,” Alexander’s deep voice responds from his chair. He sits straight on one of the formal wooden chairs surrounding the table, his hands folded in his lap. His rich, dark eyes peer out from beneath his curly black hair. Anastasia smiles and blushes. So handsome, yet so aloof. He never seems to notice her. Alexander has always been somewhat of a mystery, she reflects. He lives at the palace and even wears the blue robes of a nobility, yet has no royal blood or pedigree. It appears that Alleloria uni-

laterally appointed him to such a position. These are things Queens are allowed to do, Anastasia muses. She smiles at Alexander and takes a seat next to him. "Perhaps one day," she wistfully thinks, "he will notice me."

Before Anastasia can make another attempt to start a conversation, the doors to the meeting hall open yet again. The colorfully arrayed Meldrawn raises his hands in greetings. "Well, hello! Anastasia," he nods, "Alexander," and nods again. "My dear Anastasia," he pulls out a chair next to her and slumps down. "It has been entirely too long since we chatted. Tell me, how is life for the Queen's sister?"

"Quite well," she responds, attempting to impart the maximum amount of annoyance into her voice. Meldrawn is just... such a clown. He's all talk, it seems, and no action. And he looks funny. Kind of pasty like someone who never goes outside. And those god-awful multi-colored robes. Doesn't he know that purple, red and orange do not go together? Ridiculous.

Meldrawn ignores her brush off. "And my good friend Alexander!" he leans forward to look past Anastasia. Alexander ignores him. "Well," Meldrawn continues to no one in particular, "sure a surly crowd here today. Hope the Queen has some good news to cheer you all up!"

Again, the door opens to reveal an attendant, and in walks a pair: a tall, strong man whose dark skin is calloused from heavy work and whose simple gray robes, somewhat tattered, show more concern for

function than for form. With him is a petite lady, arrayed in a fancy green dress. "Are we late? Are we late?" she asks quickly as they enter the room. "Oh, we're not. Good."

The man sits across from Alexander. Alexander nods deeply. "General Thomas, always an honor to see you."

"And an honor that I should be seated at a table with one as noble as you, Lord Alexander," the general nods back.

"Lord Alexander?" Anastasia quips in disbelief. "In case you forget, Thomas, Alexander has no royal blood to speak of. Think 'peasant'."

"Great," Meldrawn tosses up his arms, "Another straitjacket added to this party. What a hoot."

The lady sits across from Anastasia, and looks around nervously. "I was worried we would be late," she mutters into the air, "I didn't want to offend anyone."

"Elizabeth," Anastasia smiles at her, "no one would be offended. We're all friends here."

"Ok, ok," she rings her hands.

"Hello friends," the Queen speaks gently as she enters the room. Immediately, Alexander and Thomas stand. Alexander seamlessly switches his folded hands from his front to his back. Meldrawn sighs audible as he pulls himself to his feet. Anastasia and Elizabeth also stand politely. "I am glad you could all make it here, for this is a meeting of grave

importance,” she says meekly, walking to head of the table, adjacent to Alexander and Thomas. She sits. “Please, have a seat.”

The group sits. Now there is no chattering, but all eyes are focused on the queen. “Yes,” the familiar voice, an unwelcome seventh guest to this meeting, seeths, “Show them your weakness. Admit to your closest friends and advisors that are you not fit to be queen. Stand down, renounce your throne!”

“No,” Queen Alleloria replies aloud.

“Your Majesty?” Thomas responds to this apparently orphaned vocalization from the queen.

“Friends,” the queen resumes, “Long have I trusted you to assist me on the critical matters of administering this land. The people deserve more than I am able to offer only, and that is why I have called you here today.” Meldrawn smiles.

“Fools who would only be trusted by a fool,” the voice hisses.

“To each of you I grant the new noble title Regent. To each of you also I grant land, which you should rule, under my direction.” She pauses for a moment to let this sink in. Meldrawn blinks. Alexander places his folded hands on the table.

“Your Majesty,” Alexander begins, “All the people in the Land of Loria are happy with your rule. There is no need to take such drastic action.”

“There is need,” Alleloria responds gravely, “On this you, you all, must trust me and accept my guid-

ance.”

“Of course,” Thomas injects.

“Furthermore,” Alleloria resumes, “I have crafted for each of you a staff. A staff not unlike my own — imbued with the power of leadership and direction. But each of you I warn: the power contained in your staff will not simply lay dormant for you to manipulate. It will seek you out, attempt to manipulate you. If you let it, this very staff, which is the means by which you must rule, will instead rule you. That you observe this at all times is of the utmost importance.”

“My thoughts shall never stray from it, Your Highness,” Thomas intones.

“I’m sure we can manage it,” Meldrawn adds confidently.

“It sounds dangerous,” Elizabeth quips, rubbing her palms together and glancing at the other regents.

“Elizabeth is right,” Alleloria takes the opportunity, “These powers are dangerous. But with discipline, they can be channeled to enable you to rule your lands. If there were another way, I would surely take it. But the lands are vast, and the people are independently minded. Were it not for the staff, the Lorian dynasty would have fallen long ago.”

“So you admit that you are worthless as a queen,” the voice hisses, “You admit you are a failure.”

“Your Majesty, you do not give yourself the credit

you deserve,” Alexander replies to her.

“Let me divide to each of you your lands. You should then go there and establish yourself. Remember that I remain queen of this whole land, and I expect that each of you will continue to answer to me.”

“Yes, yes, we will,” Elizabeth spouts in awe.

“The land north of the Western Range, I give to Regent Meldrawn. Cultivate it well.”

“Not much to cultivate in that wasteland,” he mutters.

“The land west of the Hidden Cat Range I give to Elizabeth. In Eyudebi you shall find your home, and I suspect you will make it a place of much happiness.”

“I will, Alleloria, thank you,” Elizabeth smiles and squeezes her hands together.

“Anastasia, my sister, my friend. To you I grant the land north of the North Plains River from the edge of Meldrawn’s land east to the Leshi River.”

“I will make it a land that you will celebrate,” Anastasia accepts.

“General Thomas,” Alleloria address him.

“Your Majesty,” he replies formally.

“You shall have the land south of the Lamba Range.”

“Then I will build that land to service you, Your Majesty.”

“Alexander,” she smiles at him. He remains formally seated, hands folded and sitting upright. Yet a smile passes across his face too. “East of the Leshi and Moon Rivers are yours.”

“To each of you,” she addresses the group, “I grant land and a staff, carved of wood, engraved with the mystical symbols and capped with a gem of power. Use these gifts wisely, and they remain yours. But know that if you squander what I have given, I will take it back, for I am the Queen.”

“You are the queen,” the voices spits mockingly, “The queen who just gave away all her power. Oops! Your mistake.”

The staves that Alleloria made, each one inscribed for the individual who will use, are distributed. Alexander and Thomas hold their staves firmly and solemnly. Elizabeth seems to be enamoured and yet frightened. “She will be one to watch,” Alleloria muses, “The staff could easily seduce her.” Anastasia, as Alleloria’s sister, grew up having her mother, the previous Queen Alexis, wield such a staff and now she wields one as well. She seems comfortable with it. Meldrawn holds the staff close to him, with a smile and a look of empowerment upon his face. “He will surely know how to use it,” Alleloria comforts herself, “and will make great improvements in the lives of his people.”

“Go now,” Alleloria commands, spreading her arms, “Ride to your new homes. This is your reward for such service as you have given me. You are Regents now, and you share the power and the burden

of ruling this great Land of Loria.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Alexander leads, followed in chorus by the rest of the Regents.

The Regents leave, Meldrawn first, then Elizabeth and Anastasia together, and General Thomas. Alexander stays behind for a moment. “Are you quite alright, Alleloria?” Alexander asks.

“Why should I force my composure around him?” she challenges herself. Yet she does. “Quite alright, Alexander. Quite alright.” Alexander bows and leaves.

Alleloria sits, alone, at the head of the meeting table. A great silence fills the room. “What have I done?” she asks the air, “Never in the history of Loria has the land been divided. Yet I cannot go on. They deserve more, the people, and I can only provide so much.”

“The Kings and Queens before you were strong,” the never-departing voice adds, “but you are weak. You are the last of the Lorian dynasty. Yes, I know. I know many things that you mortals cannot see. I can see, though. I can see now the day of war, the day of the downfall of the Lorian dynasty. Your weakness has broken this land, this dynasty. Always there will be a ruler. If you will not rule, then others will, and war and strife will fill the land. Yes, they will. There is no stopping it now. And it is all of it on your shoulders, due to your weakness. You have failed, Queen Alleloria. You have failed.”

Approximately one year later...

25th Day of Fall

*2,442nd Year
of the Lorian Dynasty*

Chapter 3



“REGENT,” the Commander nods, “The day grows late. If we establish camp here, we will be able to arrive in Venisel City fresh tomorrow.”

“Very good,” Regent Thomas replies from atop his adorned stallion. The Commander raises his hand, and the assortment of a dozen horses and riders comes to stop in the open fields of grass north of the Western Range. Thomas dismounts, and the rest follow.

“We camp here tonight, and ride to meet Regent Meldrawn at dawn,” Thomas commands. The group of attendants, glad to have a reprieve from the harsh

days of working the soil for a small crop of food, eagerly prepare tents and a campfire. The Commander, not a military man really, but always a close friend of Thomas' comes next to him.

"It's been some time since you've last seen Regent Meldrawn?"

"About a year, I'd say," Thomas replies, a cool evening wind whipping across his face. A horse neighs. "Since Queen Alleloria divided the lands and handed us our staves."

"You don't enjoy his company," the Commander observes, walking with Thomas slowly away from the camp. Gopher holes dot the prairie landscape. Thomas walks with his staff, as always, but carefully so as to set it against only solid ground. There are few villages here, as the land is dry and infertile.

"I always suspect Alleloria gave him the northern province almost just to get him out of her hair," Thomas nods, "And this visit is purely professional, one Regent visiting another. I have no desire to spend a moment longer than necessary here."

"A harsh attitude, Regent."

"Venisel City. A god forsaken place where peasants are even poorer than at home, if such a thing were possible." Thomas shakes his head. "I would never want to live here."

They walk on for a while, until the smell of roasting lamb drifts from the camp. "I smell dinner," Thomas smiles to the Commander.

The next morning, after packing the tents and supplies, the group leaves for Venisel City. As the dawn turns to morning and the dew disappears, a marvelous sight presents itself.

“Is that...” the Commander gasps.

“It must be,” Thomas whispers. For who could have imagined that the dirty, decrepit Venisel City would ever be transformed, with houses and cobblestone roads, and smoke rising from chimneys. Chimneys! Chimneys made of real stone and brick!

“Only the capital has ever seen prosperity like this,” Thomas stares agape as they approached the edge of town, “Meldrawn must really have a talent for the staff which he wields.”

“Indeed,” the Commander responds quietly, a stunned look across his face. They ride forward to a large building, clearly the capitol building. Behind the capitol, the city extends out into the hills, and then the mammoth, snowy peak of Mount Venisel rises into the clouds. The peak adds a silent majesty to the town, making it seem far more desirable than Thomas remembered.

“Not a palace but not far from one either,” Thomas observes. The capitol sits in the center of the city, and is built of stone at the base, rising in brick with pillars along the front. Adjacent stables provide housing for horses, and attendants quickly help the group dismount. “Could use a little more green,” Thomas notes, referring to the universal cobblestones and buildings overrunning the grass and

trees as far as the city stretches.

An attendant interrupts. “Regent Meldrawn is pleased to hear of your arrival, Regent Thomas. Please follow me.”

The Commander stays behind with the rest of Thomas’ travelling group, and Thomas walks with the attendant. Passing between pillars and through a stone archway, they enter the capitol. The new construction is durable, strong and functional. Various workers bustle around, still finishing up parts of the building. Thomas’ staff clicks against the stone floor at every step. Approaching the governing chamber, Thomas notices many guards donned in hardened leather carrying spears. “Leather?” Thomas wonders to himself, “Since when has Venisel City raised cattle?”

The heavy doors open to reveal a sturdy and undecorated room, dominated by a wooden round table. Small windows set into the walls show the day progressing on its slow march toward night. At the table sits Meldrawn, wearing a black robe with conspicuous white buttons down the middle. Guards stand rigidly on either side. He speaks in whispered tones to an official leaning over his chair. The official straightens up as Thomas enters with the attendant. “Regent Thomas,” the attendant introduces, then backs out of the room. Meldrawn nods to the official, who leaves the room behind the attendant.

“Thomas,” Meldrawn smiles and stands, “So good to see you.” He addresses the guards, “Take a break.” They march out of the room, silently and stiffly, clos-

ing the door behind them. “I’m sure it’s been rough for you to cross the plains. Always is,” Meldrawn nods.

“Meldrawn, I’m frankly amazed at the changes I’ve seen here. I would never have imagined...” Thomas trails off.

“The key,” Meldrawn animates, leaping around the table, “is to be flexible! To know what to do, and to do it, without worrying about protocols and structures.”

“You seem to be very successful at that.”

“Yes, and please sit!” Meldrawn sits at the table, and Thomas joins him. “I have ordered a banquet prepared for us, and we can discuss the great transformations ahead.”

Soon the dinner arrives — fresh lamb, baked and seasoned, with carrots, zucchini and other vegetables that Thomas does not immediately recognize. “Meldrawn, I was first amazed at the growth, then at the construction, then at the presence of leather, and now this! How did you do this?”

The servers slice the lamb and dish onto Meldrawn’s and Thomas’ plates. “Trade,” Meldrawn answers simply. “Mostly with Elizabeth. Her lands are quite fertile, and she has a weakness for things that sparkle. I have mines at the volcano, and they need not go deep at all to find all manner of beautiful gems. Totally useless, of course, but Elizabeth will give up her people’s animals and resources in exchange for them.”

Thomas pauses. The servers, having finished, leave the room. "I hope you're not abusing Elizabeth," he says diplomatically.

Meldrawn shakes his head, having stuffed his mouth with lamb. He swallows. "No, she wants the trade just as much as I do. It's mutually beneficial. This is one of those things," he waves a fork around, "Where you have to go with the flow. Relax. Do what works."

"Speaking along those lines, how is it that the peasants have become so prosperous?"

"Ah ha!" Meldrawn cries victoriously, "This is really the key! They aren't peasants anymore. They're in charge of their own destiny."

Thomas blinks. "What do you mean?"

"Thomas, old friend, people do not need to be ruled by an iron hand and a magic staff. They need freedom to build their own lives. I have put away the staff, put it down. Uncoerced, the people build lives for themselves."

"You have..." Thomas stares openly across the table at Meldrawn, who munches away obliviously, "You put down... I can't imagine..."

"There you go, thinking in terms of legacy and tradition. So the staff has been used to govern for umpteen thousand years. So what? Put it down. The result, as you can clearly see for yourself, is fantastic."

"I am not sure that Queen Alleloria would ap-

prove,” Thomas responds finally.

“I mean no disrespect to her Majesty, Thomas. I merely governing the land she assigned to me to the best of my ability. I assure, but this isn’t needed, since you have seen it yourself, that simply by giving up the staff, all the land grows prosperous.”

“Indeed...” Thomas whispers. Meldrawn smiles as he eats.

“How are your lands, your people?” Meldrawn asks.

Thomas munchs slowly, formulating an answer. “Quite well,” he finally says.

“Oh?” Meldrawn responses, “Quite well? I would expect so, with all the resources you have. I suppose all your people have nice wooden houses and leather clothes?”

“The lands are prosperous,” Thomas replies, “The peasents live the same as always, of course.”

“Ah, peasents,” Meldrawn laughs, “It amazes me that someone of your stature would not see the dignity stolen from people by relegating them to dirt and calling them peasents.”

“Meldrawn,” Thomas states plainly, setting down his fork, “This is the way Queen Alleloria does always done it.”

“Did she give us each our lands to simply do what she has always done? To make us puppet clones of herself? Of course not!” Meldrawn counters.

Thomas chews in silence for a moment. “This is

really amazing what you've done here, Meldrawn. I would never have expected..."

"A clown like me to improve anything?" Meldrawn laughs, "Never underestimate the power of novelty!"

"Indeed," Thomas replies, "So what would you recommend for seeing these kinds of improvements in my own land?"

"Simple," Meldrawn replies seriously, "You must lay down the staff. Not just sometimes, but always. I have locked away my staff so that I will not be tempted to easily take it up again."

Thomas runs his hands along his carved wooden staff, given to him by the Queen herself. "I don't know..." he finally replies.

"I'll tell you what," Meldrawn rises and paces the room, "Why don't we take an oath together to both lay down our staves for three years? You can leave your staff here and I will have both staves locked away until the time has come. Then your people, and mine, will know that this is a serious attempt to grant them dignity and humanity, and not a ploy that may be reversed at any moment."

Thomas ruminates, twisting his fork in his hand. His normally stoic demeanor twists, betraying a flurry of emotions and conflicting thoughts. "Alright," he finally says, "I'll do it."

"Excellent," Meldrawn snaps his fingers, and an attendant enters. "Fetch Lord Parsal," he addresses the attendant, who bows and quickly leaves. "Lord

Parsal is my trusted advisor. He will witness the oaths and hold the staff for safe keeping.”

“I don’t know,” Thomas picks up his staff, “I should not let it out of my sight.”

“If you have not let it out of your sight, then you have hardly put it down. Where is my staff? I do not carry it with me nor have it at my side! You are entirely too concerned. Lighten up, and everything will go better,” Meldrawn smiles.

Lord Parsal enters, and Thomas notes he is the same man Meldrawn was whispering to when Thomas arrived. “Friend Parsal, Thomas and I have decided to make an oath to lay down our staves for three years, resisting all temptation and need to take them up again during that time. Will you witness this oath?”

“Yes, Regent,” Parsal replies promptly.

“Very well. I, Regent Meldrawn serving under Queen Alleloria, do pledge and oath to lay down my staff, and not take it up again no matter what the need, for a period of three years from today.”

Meldrawn then looks to Thomas. Thomas shifts, uncertain. “To lay down the staff is one thing, but to take such an oath?” he ponders silently. “Yet I already agreed to Meldrawn that I would oath, and I should not go back on my word, especially since he has himself just given the oath.”

Thomas inhales sharply, and speaks: “I, Regent Thomas serving under Queen Alleloria, do pledge and oath...” he hesitates. Meldrawn and Parsal look

on expectadly, “to lay down my staff, and not take it up again no matter what the need, for a period of three years from today.” Thomas hands his staff to Parsal, who bows, and carries it out of the room.

Attendants come in with a bottle of wine. Mel-drawn motions to the table. “Let us drink to celebrate your courage, Regent.”

Chapter 4



RIGHT having fallen, burning candles have been placed on the table and in a chandaleer hanging from the ceiling to illuminate the room. Elizabeth pokes at her soufflé. Alexander, sitting across from her, stares over her head, stroking his chin and apparently deep in thought.

“So tell me of this arrangement you have with Meldrawn,” Alleloria breaks the silence, directing her question to Elizabeth.

“It’s nothing, really,” Elizabeth answers hastily, glancing down at her uneaten dessert and poking it with her fork. “Meldrawn has difficult land, as you

know, very difficult to grow food up by the mountain.”

Alleloria smiles. “I am pleased that you have both the generosity and the bounty to give him some of yours.”

“Yes, of course,” Elizabeth rasps.

“What web of lies is she spinning?” the voice hisses in Alleloria’s ears, “What secret does she hold from you? Maybe they are plotting together against you! Plotting your downfall.”

“Well,” Alleloria inhales deeply, catching her breath, “It would be nice, Elizabeth, since you apparently see Meldrawn frequently..”

Elizabeth cuts her off, “No, not that much really, just the caravans.”

“Well,” Alleloria resumes, “I think it would be nice if you drop by and see how he is doing, and also mention that I’d love to have him visit. It’s been a while now, and he’s been a stranger.”

“And why wouldn’t he be? Who would want to sit with you?” the voice asks cynically.

Elizabeth looks away. Alexander folds his hands on the table, and looks long at Elizabeth. “I really think,” Elizabeth starts, “I mean, if we go together, well, I think there’s strength in numbers.”

“Yes,” the voice chortles in Alleloria’s mind, “go with her. Follow her into the perfectly laid trap set out for you by these so-called loyal servents. You know that they want nothing more than to cast you

down from the throne. They know, in their hearts, that you have usurped it. They know that the rightful monarch of this land is..."

Alleloria cuts off the voice abruptly. "Why would we need such strength? Are you suggesting that Meldrawn is being hostile?"

"No, of course not," Elizabeth blushes, "I'm just..." Her voice trails off.

Alleloria shakes her head. "Above all, we have always been friends. I will not make a show of intimidation against him," she speaks firmly. "But, if you do not wish to go," her voice softens, "then I will send Anastasia."

"Thank you, your majesty," Elizabeth chirps meekly.

Later that evening, Alleloria stands on the balcony, the stars shining down from the dark night sky above, and glows of occasional candle light shining up from the town around her. A cool, soothing wind blows and her robes, purple and blue, rustle in the breeze. They are the only noise amidst a deep silence which covers the valley.

Footsteps fall softly through the open double doors behind her, but she does not turn. Now behind, now next to her, a figure silhouetted in the starlight. For a moment, they both wait in silence, captivated by the stillness.

"Your Majesty," Alexander's deep and powerful voice cuts smoothly the silence.

Alleloria stares into the the distance, where the glow of the village blurs, dissapates and is consumed by the darkness. "I am concerned about Elizabeth. When one Regent fears to speak to another, that is too much discord."

"Your Majesty," Alexander responds, "Regent Elizabeth has always sought to avoid any semblance of confrontation. I doubt she is truly afraid, merely that she does not wish to rock the boat."

"It's just a visit, Alexander, just a visit. No, there's something else," Alleloria rolls her head, "Something else is going on between those two. I will send Anastasia to look into it. From my sister, at least, I am assured a true report."

"Only a fool like you would put so much faith in a sister like her. And what is happening? Something," the voice hisses, "But what? Oh, but you are too blind to see it! It is obvious to me, simply that... Oh, but why should I tell you another's secrets? No, you always said you were good enough. Good enough to usurp the throne, good enough to lie, straightfaced, and claim it as yours. Then surely you will be good enough to handle this," the voice chortles. "But you know that you are not good enough. You know that every day your end is one day closer. The end of your false rule, and you will certainly take down with you all of Loria. For in your dark heart is the greatest fear and clinging I have ever known."

"What is it?" Alexander notices the grimace on Alleloria's face. Alleloria shakes her head. "Have you been... tormented... as of late?"

Alleloria sighs, her breath joins the wind and is swept away in an instant. “No worse than a year ago, but no better. Alexander,” she turns to him, “I feel it heavier now. I feel it may be true.”

“What?” Alexander asks quizzically.

“That I am not the rightful Queen of Loria. That I will lead Loria to destruction,” Alleloria admits. “Maybe mother changed her mind...”

“Your Majesty,” Alexander affirms, “Do not confuse this twisted demon with the loving words of Queen Alexis. She established you, raised you up, and made it known from the day of your birth that you, Alleloria, were to be Queen when she passed.”

Tears appear in Alleloria’s eyes, and roll softly down her cheek in the darkness. “But it was her voice,” Alleloria cries, taking Alexander’s hand and holding it tightly, “I thought when she died that I had lost her, that I would never hear her loving voice again. And I cried, oh I cried, calling out to her. And she came to me, Alexander, she did. Her loving voice came to me and soothed me and filled me with confidence and joy. Then, little by little, it seemed to be less vibrant, less joyful, less... her. Now I stuck with this horrible creature, and I dare not believe it is my own mother, or I should surely throw myself from this balcony right now and be done with it.”

Alexander gently wipes the tears from Alleloria’s face, his dark hand brushing softly against her swollen cheeks. “It is not Alexis. She would never have said the horrible things that torment you.”

“I know,” Alleloria smiles weakly. “In my mind, I know. But my heart... Oh, I thought I would get used to it. I thought it would go away or I would learn to ignore it. But all this time, since Mother died five years ago, I’ve heard the voice and every year it is more twisted than before. I don’t know how long I can handle it. I just don’t know...”

“Your Majesty,” Alexander holds her gently, his arms wrapped around her shoulders. She would love nothing more than to rest her head against his chest, but, she smiles to herself, Alexander is little on the short side. More correctly, Alleloria is on the tall side. “You are strong,” he continues, “The throne is rightfully yours. Do not let the demon deceive you.”

“I am afraid,” Alleloria speaks into the breeze, wishing she could be carried away just as her words are. They seem so... empty. Useless. “I am afraid of all the bonds being broken, of the peace shattered, of lives lost. Maybe it is just the delusion, the demon... But I fear that there is a terrible storm brewing. Alexander,” she turns to him, “I am afraid something terrible is going to happen and I am going to lose everything I hold dear. I feel so alone, even now, and I don’t know what to do.”

Alexander stares out to the horizon, where the dim lights of civilization fade into the rising hills and the stars come down as if to touch the tops of mountains. “Your Majesty, you are not alone. You will never be alone.” He tentatively runs his hand through her long, wavy hair. “Your Majesty, you will never be alone... because I love you. I have always

loved you.”

Tears flow freshly from Alleloria’s eyes as she grasps Alexander in the moonlight. “Alexander, do not think yourself any less Majesty than I, for I have always loved you as well.”

Approximately one year later...

63rd Day of Winter

*2,443rd Year
of the Lorian Dynasty*

Chapter 5



IN the distance she could easily see that the city itself was encompassed in a light haze. She heard from Thomas, a reputable source if indeed there was any, that the city had expanded and was prospering beyond all previous imaginations.

But to see it now, for herself. It was beyond even what Thomas had described, both in glory and in ... something frightening. A knot twists in her stomach. She rides forward, having eschewed an escort so that she may travel faster, crunching over the snow covered plains of the barren northern land.

Meldrawn's lands.

And below the haze sprawls a city, a massive city, unlike any which has come before her eyes since her earliest memory. The buildings are low, drab, made of gravel and stone. Yet they spread, as if the city were itself a living thing growing in the foothills of Mount Venisel. Her pause over, she spurs her thoroughbred horse forward.

Approaching closer, she cries out, “Unbelievable!” For here there is an amazing sight: from within these houses and shops comes a magical glow, like a torch but without fire. Inward to the center of the city she rides, awestruck by this place. “Surely even the great capitol city,” she whispers, “does not compare to this.” Rising into the foothills again are an army of buildings. The forest here has been decimated, as if some great force shattered the trees and tore away their trunks and branches.

And here now the small buildings fall away and a great palace is presented before her. Two tall towers rise into the sky as if to guard this place, which stands dull yet imposing. Almost as imposing and large as the Palace of Loria itself, although lacking the beauty thereof. At the very steps of the palace, attendants rush to greet her. Quickly she dismounts her steed and, ignoring their attempts to guide her, ascends the staircase into the palace.

The magic glow of the buildings she glimpsed on arrival was in no way sufficient to prepare her for what awaited. She gasped, reflexively raising her hand to her mouth. For here a great hall is lined with these strange devices — a metal jug with glass

atop it. From within each glows a bright, orange light. The entire hall is lit with these lights. Yet they no flicker as torches, nor does any smoke rise from them.

“You are as beautiful as ever,” Meldrawn’s voice snaps her from her reverie. She shakes her head. He stands in front of her, the orange glow reflecting off shiny buttons on his black robe. “I see you were admiring my oil lamps.”

“This is amazing magic,” she responds, breathlessly.

“This is no magic,” he smiles and places his arm around her. “This is the power of invention. The power of creativity. The power of setting down the crutch and daring to venture forth,” now he raises his arms dramatically, “into an unknown world, an unknown frontier. This is the power,” now he whispers, as if a secret for her ears only, “of liberation.” He resumes flamboyant demonstration, “There is more — always more! We have built houses and shops with strong roofs and sturdy walls, we have clean water for the people, lights for the night time. The possibilities are endless!”

“Liberation?” she asks, thrown off track by Meldrawn’s whispered remark.

“Precisely that,” he answers confidently, “I do not tie my people down and force them to live in filth. I am not afraid of them, nor do I need any staff to control them. When the people are free, great things,” he motions to the illuminated hall, “always follow.”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about,” she shakes her head, “who is tying anyone down or forcing them to live in filth?”

“Well, the staff with which Queen Alleloria rules is itself a weapon to force down her people. Is she so afraid of them that she must carry it everywhere?”

Anastasia slaps him. “Never insult the Queen like that again!” she cries out.

Meldrawn rubs the red mark emerging on his face. “Dear Anastasia, this is a simple fact that the Queen has kept her people in dark, literally and figureatively. You are right, though, I spoke too harshly. Perhaps together we could discuss with her the benefits of progress?”

Anastasia ponders. “The staff is not a weapon of oppression,” she asserts finally, “but instead a tool to bring peace, health and joy to people. It is a tool to dispel chaos and confusion and shine forth the light of understanding.”

Meldrawn frowns. “Anastasia, do you see any staff here? No, and yet are you surrounded by chaos and confusion? Not at all,” he smiles, “instead, there is light, just as you said!”

“What’s your point?”

“I have laid down my staff, and I’m not alone. Regent Thomas has laid down his staff as well, and we both took oaths not to take them up again. I think you will find that his land is also doing quite well in the absence of coercion and control.”

“Be that as it may,” she replies shortly, “I hold my staff as a tool of honor. I will certainly not lay it down on your word! If Queen Alleloria were to merely but suggest it, then I would. But this staff of mine was given to me by the Queen, and you shall not usurp her authority.”

“Then you condemn your people to misery,” Meldrawn retorts.

“We will see,” she replies coldly. A moment of silence passes, broken only by the scampering of attendants in the shadows.

“Well,” Meldrawn breaks the silence, “the night is late. Please accept my invitation to dine here and then tomorrow we can leave together to see the Queen?”

She half smiles, hoping Meldrawn is merely being cordial and not amorous. “I’m sure she will be amazed to hear of your accomplishments.”

Approximately one month later...

10th Day of Spring

*2,444th Year
of the Lorian Dynasty*

Chapter 6



HE snow slowed Anastasia and Meldrawn slightly as they navigated around the Western Range and especially through Hansgurd's Pass, whose ragged and tall mountains imposed a barrier separating them from the Palace of Loria, and the Queen herself.

Finally, as the snow begin to melt and spring show its first blossoms, the pair arrived at Capitol city, crossed the victory lawn, passed the statue of Loria and arrived, finally and wearily, at the ivy draped gates of the Palace of Loria.

This would be the first time Regent Meldrawn had set foot in the Palace since the granting of the

lands, over two years prior.

“Regent Meldrawn, Regent Anastasia,” a well dressed attendant greets them. “Her Majesty, Queen Alleloria, greets you and will see you immediately.”

They are quickly ushered into the same well worn room, with its candles and long table. Anastasia jumps slightly, “Oh my!” she quips.

Meldrawn pauses, but quickly collects himself. “Friends,” he blurts out with open arms, “what a surprise that everyone is here!”

Sure enough, all the other regents are present, with Queen Alleloria seated at the head of the table. “Your timing is inpeccable,” Alleloria’s beautiful voice cuts through the chatter. Meldrawn and Anastasia sit quickly. “Each of you has come for your own reasons,” she continues, “and these will be addressed in turn. But the fact that you are all here together at once is not chance, but providence. For I have an announcement, a great announcement, a presentation of the very future of the Lands of Loria.”

“The naming of the successor,” Meldrawn whispers. He sits up straighter. Alexander folds his hand on the table. The room is shrouded in deep silence. All is silent, except for the voice in Alleloria’s mind.

“Fool!” It rasps. “Look at them! Look at their faces! They don’t care about your news, your announcement. They only seek to be named successor, the one who will follow you when you meet an unfortunate accident which they will certainly arrange for you. You already know this is true,” it continues,

“you can sense it in their eyes. Yes, your hold on the throne grows weaker and weaker. Let me tell you something, oh great majestic one of Loria, great sorceress queen,” it bites with sarcasm, “by the dawn of the next day, your authority shall be shaken to its core and your darkest secret made known to all. All those you call friend shall turn away from you, and you shall be left alone.”

“Regents,” Alleloria’s voice gently breaks the silence, “This is indeed the time when I present my successor. My successor shall be my son, prince Benjamin.”

Immediately a murmur sweeps across the table. “Your Majesty,” Regent Thomas speaks, “This is quite a roundabout way to announce the birth of your first child. And what of father? What royal bloodline does this child hold?” As he speaks, an attendant brings in a small bundle. Alleloria takes it gently, and unwraps the cloth to reveal the shining face of a young baby. The child’s rich, brown skin matches Alleloria’s, but the tiny sprouts of hair are already curly.

“Beautiful,” Elizabeth coos.

Anastasia smiles. “A prince among us,” she softly comments.

Alleloria gently bounces the child. “To answer Thomas’ question,” she addresses the gathering, “I am proud to tell you all that Regent Alexander, who is as you know a lifelong friend of mine, is Benjamin’s father.”

Anastasia's smile fades instantly, replaced with a grimace. Meldrawn shifts uncomfortably. "Your Majesty," Anastasia asks, "I mean no offense, but how can a child born of non-royal blood be a prince?"

"What will it be?" the voice hisses, "Either tell them the truth and be thrown out as the usurper you are, or concoct yet another lie to cover your path. Your house of cards will soon come tumbling down, oh foolish Queen!"

Alleloria shifts, then declares, "I have declared Prince Benjamin my successor, as is my right to do. This is not to be questioned."

"Yes, your Majesty," Anastasia nods with a frown. To have her desire of her heart, Alexander, stolen away by her own sister... But of course, she meant no personal insult, Anastasia reflects.

Meldrawn mutters quietly from the far end of the table, "I always expected that one of her noble and accomplished regents would succeed her." Anastasia glances at him, but says nothing. Alleloria ignores the comment, or perhaps she did not hear it.

"Friends," Alleloria quickly restores brightness to the room, "Let us celebrate! I have ordered a great banquet prepared for us in honor of Prince Benjamin."

She claps her hands twice, and a swarm of attendants erupt from various doors around the room like ants fleeing an anthill. The room becomes chaos; instructions shouted, dishes clanging, bodies everywhere, running, twisting. The table is swept clear

and, by a hundred hands acting as one, a tablecloth replete with the finest meats, vegetables and cheeses in the land is quickly set before the Queen and the Regents.

Just as quickly as the chaos erupted, it withdraws — the attendants disappearing behind the doors they came in from, having completed their task. The room falls silent, with only the steam rising from the stuffed lamb and boiled sweet corn and peas disrupting the stillness. Alleloria gently bounces Benjamin while casting her eyes about the table. Alexander sits upright, solid, with his hands folded in his lap and his gaze at the dishes laid out before them. Thomas sits formally, awaiting a word from the Queen to begin. Anastasia twirls a lock of her hair and glances back at Alleloria, smiling. Meldrawn gazes longfully at Anastasia. Elizabeth's eyes are all on the child, falling slowly to sleep into Alleloria's gentle arms.

Queen Alleloria takes the ladle of the vegetables near her and dishes a heaping serving onto her plate. "Let us eat, and, of course, I want to hear from each of you on how you are doing now that you have settled in to your lands."

Meldrawn carves a slice off the lamb. Alexander nods to Alleloria, and says outloud, "Thank you for providing us this banquet, your Majesty."

"Indeed," Thomas affirms. Alleloria and the Regents dish up heaping portions and eat in silence, broken only by the sound of chewing and the scrap of the Palace's silver utensils against the fired clay

plates and dishes.

As the meal draws toward a close, Meldrawn breaks the silence. “Your Majesty,” he begins, “in the nearly three years since you have granted us the lands, I have renewed Venisel City. What was once barren is now productive. People once living on the sod now live in houses. People once living in the cold now live in warmth. A vast and prosperous city has sprung up, grown up and arisen from the ashes of Mount Venisel.” He begins to become excited, making hand gestures to indicate these happenings. “Where there was only darkness, now there is light! Where there was only loss, now there is gain! Your Majesty, I wish that all the towns and villages in this land could share the prosperity of Venisel City and the northlands.”

Alleloria raises her eyebrows.

Anastasia interjects. “Your Majesty, Regent Meldrawn and I have just come from the northlands and Venisel City. It is unbelievable. There is great magic there — magic light which burns all through the night. There is metal and buildings and fire, stretching as far as the eye cares to gaze.”

“Indeed?” Alleloria intones, “Tell us, Regent Meldrawn, how have you accomplished this? The power of the staff is great, but I would not imagine that it could transform such a desolate place at Venisel City to a thriving city like you and Anastasia describe.”

“You fault the staff,” the dark voice whispers in her head, “but it is clear to me that the only fault is

the holder of the staff. One who is strong can surely wield it strongly. One who is weak can only gaze lustfully at the accomplishments of those so much greater than she will ever be.”

Meldrawn leans in, as if preparing to impart a great secret to the group. “Your Majesty,” he half whispers, “Regents, I have found a better way. A direct way to prosperity and gain. I have laid down my staff, and instead of the intimidation and coercion that it brings, I have liberating my people. Without being held down by foolish restrictions and power plays, the town naturally exploded in wealth and prosperity. It can work anywhere.” He raises his voice, “It can work, no, it will work everywhere!”

“What?” Elizabeth blurts out with disbelief, then covers her mouth in embarrassment.

“Regent Meldrawn, this quite unorthodox. You should have consulted me first,” the Queen tries to sound as imposing as possible. But inside, there is something else. A different feeling... Fear. A growing fear. A gnawing fear. A fear fed and bathed by the hissing voice which follows her every step of the way. Her only defense has been to deny it, to ignore it, to believe it spoke falsehood. What if it was true?

What if this dark voice really was the voice of her mother, Queen Alexis?

“Your Majesty,” Thomas gently intervenes, “I have also seen myself the great advances and prosperity of the northlands. I have entered in an agreement, a promise, with Regent Meldrawn to lay down

my staff as well for a time. Since then, I have seen that people feel more comfortable around me, and I even notice changes in myself. I've been more open to hearing what they say. I nothing spectacular to show as Meldrawn does, but I think this promise has benefited my lands and people so far. I think you should consider it at least as an option for the Regents."

"No," Alleloria asserts, in a deep and booming voice. "This ends now. The staff has been the core of governance since it was first handed down by the great Sorceress Loria herself over two thousand years ago. If any of you do not want to use your staff, then you can step down as Regent."

A heavy silence falls upon the room as the Regents glance at each other. "Your Majesty," Anastasia ventures, "At least go and see Venisel City for yourself. Don't listen just to us — if you see this for yourself, then I think you will understand the passion with which Regent Meldrawn speaks."

"Listen to her," the voice hisses, "Already your authority as Queen has been eroded away. Even your most loyal subjects, those closest and most dear to you, even your own sister, question your authority and judgements. They all see that you are floundering in foolishness, tied up by confusion. Do not call upon the spirit of Loria, for she is not with you. Her blessing is upon only those who are true heirs to the throne of Loria, not usurpers such as yourself. You are alone, oh Alleloria. You are alone and you are falling. Even before your eyes, you fall. Even the power of the staff cannot secure your position much

longer.”

Alleloria, spurred to action by the voice, stands abruptly, setting Benjamin down briskly on the table. The disruption wakes him, and he begins to cry. “Regent Anastasia!” Alleloria snarls over the wailing of young Prince Benjamin, “How dare you question my authority!”

An attendant rushes in and scoops up the child, cradling him in her arms, and quickly makes an exit. Alleloria lowers his voice to normal levels, “Do not think that I am so ignorant of things. I have seen before this magic, these works, these thoughts. Do not debase me or the great sorceress Loria by claiming you know better. I assure you, the path that looks inviting is the path to destruction. It is out of compassion that I command you to turn back.”

She exhales, spent, and collapses into her chair. The Regents stare, eyes wide open, stunned by her outburst. “Regent Meldrawn,” she says softly, but firmly, “You must dismantle these programs immediately. Return to the old ways shown by me and all the Kings and Queens before me.” She pauses. “Regent Meldrawn, Regent Thomas; I will respect your oaths and not ask you to go against them. When the term of the promise is over, however, you must resume governance with the staff. The rest of you must not consider laying it down. We must restore unity, not divide ourselves.”

“Yes, your Majesty,” Thomas replies formally.

Anastasia nods. “I understand.”

Meldrawn rolls his head. “Regent Meldrawn?” Queen Alleloria asks directly.

“Yes, yes, fine, I’ll throw it all in the trash just beca—” he begins to rant.

“You will end it. That will be all,” Alleloria interrupts him.

Chapter 7



THE footsteps of Anastasia fall silently on the cold marble steps. Her new cotten slippers defend and warm her feet from the cold, hard rock around her. Yet especially here care is required — the stairway is well worn and smooth, and the cotton slides easily across it. She carefully grasps the rail as she descends the spiral staircase. Small torches burn dimly on the wall, the only illumination in this tomb deep within the Palace of Loria. It's not a tomb of flesh and bone of course, Anastasia smiles to herself at the thought, but is filled with the words and visions of those rulers and shapers of the land who have long since passed on. It even feels like a tomb; dusty and

usually occupied by nary another living being.

The stairwell opens into a hazy, dusty room. Anastasia imagines that years have passed since any mortal walked in this place, although in reality servants come down every day to maintain the torches which light the room. Ahead of her tall bookshelves, loosely organized into rows, rise. Books, papers, scrolls and trinkets sit disorderly, dumped on these shelves from times long since forgotten. When shelf space ran out, less important material was moved to the floor, where it impedes Anastasia's movement through the room. This room is the love of historians thorough the land; although they are few and far between, this is their temple, their sanctuary, the house of their sacred texts. Indeed, this room houses texts which should be sacred to any citizen of this land, Anastasia reflects. The journal of Loria, the great sorceress. The early kings who set down the laws and established the strength of the dynasty. The lineage and succession of the royalty whose blood secures the Lorian dynasty.

But Anastasia is not here for any of these documents, nor for the various maps, letters and edicts from kings and queens long deceased that fill this room. There is something else that resides here which is of infinitely more value to her: peace and quiet. For here she is beyond the grasp of the bustle and noise of the Palace, as well as those who would seek her out for trivial matters.

Her musing and silent picking of her way through piles of papers and books is interrupted by a shuf-

fling sound and a sigh. Ahead, behind a bookshelf; someone else is here. Anastasia's hope for a moment vanishes, but she continues forward out of curiosity to see if it is someone she knows, or just a stranger from the city. She picks forward and around the bookshelf to find Meldrawn surrounded by candles dimly burning in the haze, hunched over a manuscript. Piles of papers and books have been gathered up around him.

"Hello Meldrawn," she says softly, not wishing to startle him.

"What?" he straightens up. "Sorry," he collects himself, then smiles, "I was lost in the ancient words and did not expect a modern beauty."

"Will he never cut it out?" Anastasia grumbles to herself, but half smiles at Meldrawn.

"And what brings you to this dark and dank corner of the world?" Meldrawn asks, reclining in the creaking wooden chair.

"I was just looking for some peace and quiet, to get away from the bustle. This place is so busy all the time."

"Yes," Meldrawn turns back to the table, and begins flipping through the pages of a dusty book, "I can certainly understand that. Well, please stay, my dear. I promise not to interrupt your contemplation."

"It's fine," Anastasia smiles, "I think I'll just go for a walk. There's a nice breeze this evening, and it's been a long time since I've sat in the Palace garden."

“Suit yourself,” Meldrawn sighs, “If the Queen would even allow a single oil lamp, this would not be so painful. I feel like my eyes are going to burn out of their sockets squinting in this dim candle light.”

“Meldrawn,” Anastasia lowers her voice, “You are being disrespectful again. It’s not fitting for a Regent to speak in such a way.”

Meldrawn raises his hands, “I’m just stating a simple fact.”

“So what are you looking for, if I may ask?” Anastasia furrows her brow as Meldrawn pours over another tome.

Meldrawn turns to her. “Do you remember your mother?”

“Of course,” Anastasia replies, “It was five years ago that she died,” Anastasia turns away, “But I still remember it like it was yesterday. Alleloria and I found her, we walked in to ask her something, I don’t remember, something stupid I’m sure. There she was. Sitting on the throne, her staff laying on the floor near her feet. That stare, that vacant stare,” Anastasia shivers and wraps her arms around herself, “just staring back at us. I was sick. I threw up and I was so scared, as if I was a teenager again. Alleloria was strong. I had never imagined she could be so strong. Mother had already named her as successor, of course, and when we entered her room we found a letter, sealed with wax, addressed to Alleloria. Alleloria never let anyone else read the letter, but she told us it confirmed Alexis’ decision of ap-

pointing her the new Queen. Not that there was any doubt," she quickly adds, "Since we had all heard from Alexis herself that Alleloria was to be Queen when she passed."

"Strange that she didn't share the letter," Meldrawn comments.

"A personal letter written from mother to daughter," Anastasia clarifies, "Of all things that may be kept private to the heart, surely that is the greatest."

"There are other such letters, from kings to princes and queens to princesses which grace these tomes, yet not the letter from Alexis to Alleloria."

"Who cares?" Anastasia starts to cry a little, "Why is this such a big deal to you?"

"You aren't even remotely curious about what the letter said?" Meldrawn asks with a twinkle in his eye.

"Meldrawn," Anastasia raises her voice, "It's none of my business! And it's none of yours either!"

"Anastasia, when Queen Alexis passed on, why did you not become Queen?"

Anastasia stares at Meldrawn for a moment. "Obviously, I am not the eldest child. The eldest child is always the successor."

"Always?" Meldrawn asks.

"Well, I suppose if he were dumb or crippled, maybe not, but almost always," Anastasia supports.

“Has there, in any of the history you know, ever been a successor to the throne that was not the eldest child?”

Anastasia ponders for a moment. Her history is not so sharp, but she recalls nothing of the sort. “I don’t remember hearing about anything like that,” she confesses.

“Indeed, because it has never happened,” Meldrawn responds, closing a book and setting it aside, “At least not as far as history knows. And history should know, because it is not a matter of preference, but a matter of dynastic imperative. Did you know,” he leans toward her, “that the great sorceress Loria, in her edict establishing the Lorian dynasty, required that all the successor be the eldest child? Look at this,” he picks up a heavy book, ornately bound in gold and silver and encrusted with gems. The pages are yellow and writing faded, and they nearly crumble at Meldrawn’s touch.

“Is that...?” Anastasia asks in awe.

“Not the original,” Meldrawn replies, “The original is but a pile of dust. This is an ancient copy, the most ancient copy, of the writings of the great sorceress Loria. These words were penned over two thousands years ago and have in all that time held together these lands.”

He opens the book to a page marked with a tassel. “The power which struck down the dark one who held you in such dire straights shall by no means disappear when I am gone,” he reads aloud from the

journal, “but shall follow my eldest child, and his eldest child, and from each king or queen unto their eldest child. This is the way of succession: There must never be any other succession, nor any second child, nor any adopted child, nor any other relative, nor any friend, nor any commoner. To the eldest child goes the succession, until the end of this dynasty.”

“So what’s your point?”

“Who is the eldest child of Queen Alexis?” Meldrawn asks.

“Queen Alleloria, my older sister, of course,” Anastasia responds, “We are her only children, and I am the younger. Why are you asking me this? What’s this all about?”

“No,” Meldrawn retorts with a cruel smile. “Alleloria is not the eldest child. You have a brother, the rightful heir to the throne, hidden away at birth because Alexis could not stand to see a man ascend to the throne. It is to him that the dynasty rightfully belongs.”

“You’re lying,” Anastasia cries, “Why are you saying this?”

“I have long suspected this, and tonight I have pruned the truth from these records. Regent Alexander is your brother, he is Alleloria’s brother. He is the rightful king of the Land of Loria! And Alleloria knows this, I’m sure of it. That makes her a usurper and a pervert. She calls him her lover yet steals from him his birthright!”

“You lying devil!” Anastasia screams, her voice

echoing from the walls and up the marble stairway, “Your hateful lies against the Queen have gone too far! I am going to the Queen right now to expose your evil deeds.” She turns and runs, slipping on the smooth floor and falling into a pile of papers.

Meldrawn rises, “See if she denies it!”

Anastasia rises and stumbles to the stairway.

“Your sister is a liar,” Meldrawn calls out after her as she ascends the staircase in tears, “and a cheat and a pervert and a usurper! She brings the end of the Lorian dynasty by her own selfishness!”

Chapter 8



NASTASIA rushes tearfully down the great arching hallways of the Palace of Loria. Attendants, workers, officials and strangers stare as the regent runs haphazardly in cotton slippers with tears flowing from her eyes. Ahead, Queen Alleloria's chamber is guarded by heavy wooden doors intricately carved thousands of years ago showing scenes of the great sorceress Loria. The entirety of the carvings are inlaid with gold, and the bright torchlight reflects and shines all through the hallway. Yet Anastasia cares not for their beauty, smashing into them with her full strength. The doors fly open, and Alleloria, stunned by this sudden intrusion, rises abruptly from the

throne, her robes flourishing around her, and takes hold of her staff.

“Regent Anastasia,” she booms, as attendants peak in around the open doors, “What is the meaning of this rude intrusion?”

“Your Majesty,” Anastasia cries, “I must speak with you at once.”

Alleloria’s face softens when she sees the tears carresing her sister’s face. She nods to the attendants, who quietly close the grand doors. Alleloria walks down from throne, her staff clicking against the floor. Taking Anastasia by the hand, she gently guides her to a set of facing, padded chairs underneath a window. “Anastasia, what has gotten into you?” Alleloria asks gently.

“It’s not true,” she blubbers through her tears, “I know it’s not true. It’s a lie.”

Alleloria’s stomach twists into a knot, and her mouth goes dry. Her mind races at the possibility... But no, she couldn’t possibly know... “Oh, but she does!” the voice laughs roughly, “Your secret has been pried from the cold darkness where it lay buried. Now the truth of your treachary spreads beyond rumor and into known fact. How long, oh Alleloria, will your people withstand this lie? Not long, I say, not long.”

“Sister,” Alleloria speaks softly, if only to not betray her own fear, “What is your concern?”

Anastasia cries quietly for a moment, then burst out abruptly. “Sister, I must know, is Alexander our

brother?"

"Yes, he is," Alleloria answers softly.

"How could you do this?" Anastasia erupts, "You force him into silence and steal the throne?"

"Anastasia," Alleloria quickly responds, "It's not like that. This was Mother's choice. She chose for me to become Queen. I knew nothing about Alexander until the day I took the throne. She told me, in her letter, about him. About how she hid him away and oathed all those who knew to secrecy. This is her will, Alexander and I merely execute it. He knows too. In his great honor, he never challenged her nor would he ever challenge me. It is not even a thought."

"And you just... Just went along with this? And you hid it from everyone? Even me? Even your own sister? And now he's your lover too? And you have a kid? You are sick!" Anastasia rises, knocking her chair to the floor, "You are sick and twisted and this is all wrong!" Anastasia shakes her head and stumbles toward the door.

"Anastasia, wait," Alleloria stands, calling out to her.

"No," Anastasia shakes her head, "All these years we've been the closest sisters could be. I thought so anyway. You would have told me as soon as you knew. If it were me, I would have handed over the throne immediately. But you, you're too selfish. I never realized how much so. I don't even know you, it was all a facade!"

Alleloria strides quickly over to Anastasia, and tries to embrace her. Anastasia shakes herself free of Alleloria's grasp. "Don't touch me!" she cries, tears pouring faster now from her red eyes. "I don't know you!" With those words, she bursts from the chamber, confused attendants peaking in through the doors, which slam shut in her wake.

Alleloria leans on her staff, her strength drained by this upheaval. She limps slowly across the marble floor, her staff clicking with each step, until she stands before her own throne. "Is this truly my chair?"

"No longer," the voice cackles, "The truth is known, your lie exposed. What authority have you left?"

Alleloria ponders. In her blurred vision, she imagines Queen Alexis sitting regally on the throne, patiently attending on Alleloria and Anastasia as they laugh and play. "Oh Mother, what shall I do?"

"You must renounce the throne, step down and lay aside your staff," the image speaks. But the voice, Alleloria notes with a furrowed brow, is not that of the late Queen.

"And if I do this, who shall take up the throne?"

"The throne is not yours to be concerned with. I tell you, Daughter, that the dynasty of Loria has ended. Lay down the staff. Lay down the throne," the image of Alexis raises her dark, wrinkled hand toward Alleloria, and a gentle smile graces her face, aged beyond years.

Yet Alleloria is not soothed. An anger once broken now crashes like a tsunami on the shore of her mind. She holds the staff out in front of her, bringing together the power imbued there-in. The gem erupts in a brilliant, multi-colored shine, making the previously dim room appear like a garden on a sunny day. "I am not your daughter!" She cries out, "And you are not my mother! I shall not be deceived by this foolish mirage!"

The light of the staff rips apart the image of Alexis, and in its stead is a horrible visage, a disfigured visage. A mouth wide with many teeth, skin red and blotched. A screech and a stench fill the room. Alleloria reels, her concentration broken. The gem goes dark, and the screech vanishes. The throne is barren, Alleloria falls to her knees, and the dull stench slowly fades out the open windows.

"How long have I been on the floor?" Alleloria wonders wordlessly. She glances to the throne. It sits, empty. But different. Now she knows that the voice which speaks to her is not her mother, but an imposter. Some other creature. Even so, doubts plague her mind. She rises, takes up her staff firmly, and with a last glance to the empty throne, strides out the great wooden doors.

Here in the hallway she spies Meldrawn heading toward his room, his work in the old library finished. "Meldrawn," she calls out authoritatively.

He stops, allowing her to approach. His eyes cast about, here and there, not meeting hers. "Meldrawn, I know the dissent you are sowing."

“I sow nothing but the truth,” Meldrawn replies briskly.

“And indeed,” the voice, apparently also recovered from the recent confrontation, “Where would point out a lie?”

“You lie in saying the throne is not rightfully mine,” Alleloria replies with confidence, “For Queen Alexis has granted it to me by her Majesty’s royal order. This evil work of yours ends here. You may not speak of royal matters to anyone from now on. You are no longer a Regent. Your lands are stripped from you, and your authority taken. You have disobeyed my ruling, disgraced me in front of the other regents and you will surely carry the words of your wicked tongue throughout the Lands of Loria if I so permitted it.”

“You, Alleloria, are a weakling and a fool, and silencing me shall not save you from—”

Alleloria interrupts Meldrawn by shining forth her staff toward him. Meldrawn turns away, his words siphoned from his mouth and replaced with silence.

“Be silent,” she commands, “and do not leave this castle. I will determine a fitting punishment for your abuse of authority.”

Releasing Meldrawn from the grasp of the staff, she turns to the palace guards which have gathered observing this interaction, and waiting on Alleloria’s command. “Place him in his room. Bring him food and water as needed. He is not to leave, nor speak

with anyone.”

“Yes, your Majesty,” the senior guard replies, as he and another guard take up Meldrawn by the arms. As they lead him away, he calls back to the Queen, “Even the staff of power shall not save you when it is found that you are bereft of authority.”

“Indeed,” the voice hisses, smoothly replacing Meldrawn’s, “Already the gears of collapse are turning. Do you enjoy playing pretend, oh Alleloria? Because your reign is just that — pretend.”

“Be quiet,” she speaks aloud, her voice echoing off the walls in the now vacant hallway. Her complexion is disturbed by this turn of events, and the maternal instinct calls out for her child, her son, Benjamin. He is now with Alexander, and it is there that she now goes.

Chapter 9



HE waning moon shines down from its throne in the night sky. Small clouds gather at the fringes of its grasp, but dare not encroach upon the height of the moon's ascension. Alleloria stands on the highest balcony, as is her wont, overlooking the twinkles of light from the town below and the stars above. Her staff rests gently next to her, its gem unilluminated, as to not obscure the beauty she finds here in the darkness. Her arms hold young Benjamin against her chest, and through her robes she feels his soft, regular breathing. Alexander, too, stands on the balcony. His hands rest lightly, folded upon the stone wall which encloses the balcony to waist height. The night is still,

silent save the faint sound of women singing off in the town — a celebration of a birth, most likely.

“I heard that you ordered Meldrawn confined to his room, under guard,” Alexander breaks the silence.

“He has discovered, and revealed, that which Alexis ordered never to be revealed,” Alleloria responds after a moment of pause.

“Why?”

“He claims,” tears well up in her eyes, “that I am unfit to be Queen, and that I have broken the line of succession. Anastasia knows about ... you. About us. She knows that you should have been King—”

“No,” Alexander suddenly interrupts, “Queen Alexis was very clear.” He voice is crisp, yet he looks away.

Holding Benjamin with one arm, she reaches out and takes Alexander’s hand with the other. “I am afraid, my brother, my love, I am afraid.”

He turns back, their dark eyes meeting in the moonlight. He gently strokes her hair. “Alleloria, you are a strong queen, an awesome queen, and we have each other. Nothing can tear us apart, certainly not a low life like Meldrawn.”

“He has greed and strength,” she looks down, “I surely cannot hold him here forever. Even if I could, he surely has followers ready to take his place. What if they break off? Claim to be of their own lineage, free from the bonds of Loria?” She muses silently for

a moment, "Or worse, what if they claim they are the true lineage of Loria?"

"Merely wordplay," Alexander dismisses it, "They have no heir."

"What are details to the masses? A charismatic word stirs them now here and now there. They care not for our dusty genealogy," she shakes her head, "And if they did, then Meldrawn's argument would turn them away."

"The land will survive," Alexander comforts, "You are not the downfall spoken of by Loria, of that I am convinced. You are not a usurper. Your claim to the throne is honest, by order of Queen Alexis, as the eldest known child." His voice pinches slightly pronouncing "known."

"I worry not for the land but for the people, for the end of greed like his is always pain and destruction."

"Alleloria, you need not allow such a thing. Take your staff, take the Regents, even raise an army if you need to. We can go and seize the land which is rightfully yours out from the traitor and his followers." Alexander's voice sounds strong and confident.

"Or could you?" This other voice, so different from the rich, deep flow of Alexander's, still speaks in Alleloria's mind. Weakened, perhaps, cautious, maybe, but remaining none the less. "You have no army. You have no fighters. Who would stand with you? Who would join you, oh Queen of Lies, to stand against the only man who has the courage to speak forth that which you already know is the truth? Are you

so deep in your lies that you would bring destruction upon the land and shed the blood of the innocent just to have him fall silent? Oh Alleloria, the truth cannot be silenced. It will be heard.”

“Alexander, what army do you speak of? We have no army.”

“Regent Thomas could raise an army for you easily,” Alexander replies, “He is still loyal to you. Even if he fell away, the people themselves love you and would rise up with the very tools of living to defend you.”

“Do they love me?” Alleloria looks down from the balcony, observing the few people briskly walking here and there, so small from this high view. “Do they love me, or the power that I wield?” She picks up her staff now, running her hands across the carved wood which has escorted so many kings and queens of old.

The voice rasps again. “This fake love, this fear, with which you impale the people; do not think they do not know. They know. When the time comes, they will shed you as a snake sheds its skin. For you are a hindrance to them, a deceiver and a manipulator. Do not fool yourself. There is no love for you here. You would call me a liar. But you know that I have spoken the truth. The truth that you refuse to see, to hear, to know. This is not your land. This is my land.”

Alexander rests his strong, warm hand on hers, dissolving the voice in an instant. Alleloria wipes a

tear from her eye, and Alexander assures her, “You wield the staff justly, you wield it rightly, you wield it well. My love, do not lose hope. How can you expect the people to have hope if you do not? You are a just Queen, if you only you could see this yourself.”

“Yet Thomas and Anastasia have both fallen under his spell. My only military general and my own sister. Tell me, brother, is there anyone who is immune? Anyone who does not lap up the words of Meldrawn like honey?”

“And why shouldn’t they?” the voice interrupts in Alleloria’s mind, “For when offered one who lies and one who speaks the truth, one who forces the people into poverty and one who brings them wealth, one who stifles advancement and one who press forward, why not take the true, sweet honey of the truth bringer? Too long have you, and those before you, and all the Lorian dynasty, kept the people in the dust. There is a new line rising. The Lorian dynasty is old. Too old, oh Alleloria, and too weak. There is a new line rising, and Meldrawn shall be the first to herald it.”

“Yes, my love,” he speaks, unaware of the assault against her in her own mind, caressing her hair and pulling her gently close to him, “I see his treachery. He seeks only his own gain, and I, for one, am not at all enamoured with his sweet talk.”

“The unity of these lands is at stake,” Alleloria pulls free of Alexander’s embrace, the turmoil of her thoughts showing on her face. “I did not intend the Regents to try to take their lands and break off from

my rule. I did not even so much as think that three of them would turn against me like this.”

“Alleloria,” Alexander’s brow furrows, “Anastasia and Thomas have not turned against you. Meldrawn is here, being held by your own guards. Certainly, Meldrawn has prepared a hostile populace at Mount Venisel, but I think that the rest of the land supports you. If you replace Anastasia and Thomas, they will accept your ruling and you can appoint new Regents with whom you are more comfortable.”

“Replace Thomas and Anastasia?” Alleloria raises her voice hysterically, her words echoing through the town and the palace. Benjamin wakes, and begins to wail. She continues, unabated, “I don’t believe you just suggested that. Anastasia is my sister. If I fall, the throne of Loria is hers. She has the bloodline of the dynasty, a pure blood daughter of Queen Alexis. And Thomas? The only one among us familiar with the art of war? Of all the people I want close by my side, he is certainly one of them. And even so,” her voice calms now, “replacing two and removing a third would be too disruptive.” She shakes her head. “I don’t know, maybe you’re right.”

Alleloria falls silent, focusing on the crying Benjamin. He shifts and turns, curled up against Alleloria, pawing at her breast and crying aloud. She rocks him gently side to side, and sings a lullaby, an old lullaby, the same lullaby that Alexis sang to her when she was just a child. “Oh baby fear not, the darkness here wrought; for the candle is brought, mom comforts her tot. Peace be now, rest be now, sleep

be now brought. Oh baby please smile, I shall wisk away your bile, and save you from guile, until into the morning light we shall file. Peace be now, rest be now, sleep be now brought.” She repeats the chorus softer and softer as Benjamin tears are replaced by calm, and calm is replaced by sleep.

“If only I could wrap myself in Mother’s arm,” Alleloria speaks softly, “and have her sing me to sleep. To know that all things were well, and that no matter what happened she would protect me. Even when I grew up and learned that even Mother, the Queen, could not protect me from everything, at least I could still talk to her. At least she could help, or just hold me while I cried. But now even that is gone. All that remains is this twisted demon in my mind which calls itself by her name but is not her, is nothing like her. Oh Mother,” now tears flow from Alleloria’s eyes, “come back to me. Please, tell me. Please, help me.”

To this plea, the only reply is the deep silence of night.

“I am here for you,” Alexander breaks the silence, “I believe that you are just as strong as Mother was. You can handle this. You can win this. I believe in you. I love you.”

Alleloria smiles through her tears. “Thank you, my love. Thank you.”

Chapter 10



THE royal caravan lines up before the gates of the Palace of Loria. Four wagons, each drawn by four chocolate brown stallions. Two uniformed attendants, arrayed in crisp blue and green, sit tall on fore of each wagon, holding the reins. Banners of blue and purple adorn the third wagon in the caravan, and riders flank it. The heavy wooden gate of the Palace opens, and Alleloria strides forward, arrayed in her purple and blue robes of majesty with her staff at her right side and her child held by her left hand. Coming forth too is Regent Alexander. He comes up beside her, and she whispers in his ear. He nods, and retreats to the Palace. The rider closest to Alleloria dismounts and

opens a door on the side of the wagon, holding forth his hand to assist her. Alleloria climbs easily into the wagon, without need for the rider's assistance. Closing the door behind her, the rider then remounts his steed. With a shout from the leading wagon driver, the caravan shudders and begins to roll, away from the Palace, out of the town and northeast toward Moon River.

Normally, the caravan would stop in each village along the way so that Alleloria could talk with the peasants, heal those who were wounded and comfort the families and friends of those who had died. But not today. Not this journey. The drivers push forward hard, avoiding the villages as much as possible. As evening falls, the caravan stops briefly. Normally, they would be housed by villagers. Here in the fields of uncultivated wild grass, they could at least prepare a camp. But Alleloria orders them on. They ride forth into the night, the moon lighting the path ahead. Alleloria lays in her wagon, jostled about by the rough stones and uneven ground. Benjamin sleeps fitfully, disturbed by the strange sounds and the irregular motion. But for Alleloria, there is no sleep. The voice whispers continually now, barely audible, over and over. "You know your weak prison of words cannot hold Meldrawn. Even with a great keep could you not hold him. He is beyond your power to restrain. It is not by lineage or birth that you are Queen. It is merely by the grace of Meldrawn, for his amusement. And I tell you, his smile fades now, and with its end comes your end, oh Alleloria."

With the evening of the second day, the exhausted horses drew the caravan up to Moon River. Moon River runs slow and wide, its banks escorted by gnarled oaks and berry bushes. Alleloria climbs down from her wagon and surveys the scene as the riders untie the horses from the wagons and escort them to the trees to feed. The berry bushes are adorned with small, white flowers and bees buzz around them. The foliage on the oaks is heavy and scented. In the distance across the river to the north, the rumble of thundercloud announces its approach. "We will camp here tonight," she announces to no one in particular, "And forge the river at dawn tomorrow."

There they slept, all of them, riders and horses, even young Prince Benjamin; all of them save Queen Alleloria. She walks alone in the dark, under the moon obscured by heavy clouds. Thunder rolls across the fields and the river, and flashes light illuminate the storm for merely a breath. She stands at the banks of the river, dipping her staff into the water. The thunder grows closer, and the lightning flashes illuminate the river, with its slow eddies and currents. Presently heavy raindrops start to fall. At first, Alleloria merely hears them splash into the river, the trees, and the berry bushes. Another flash of lightning, and another clap of thunder rolls by. Wind picks up and begins to swirl Alleloria's hair. The rain grows heavy, wetting Alleloria's face and robes. Yet even still she stands free of the shelter of the wagons. The riders, deep with exhaustion all sleep and do not rise with the coming of the thunder.

Even the horses, exposed to the rain, seem to rest motionless, their silhouette unchanged at each flash of lightning.

The storm clouds shift and swirl; the wind changes. A glow of lightning within the clouds brings to life an interplay of light and shadow. Here in the clouds appears the face, the mouth, the disfigurement. Yet Alleloria remains calm, as if in a trance. "Why do you follow me?" Alleloria asks the wind.

"I have followed each ruler of Loria; restrained by the awful bonds of that old hag." The voice speaks on the wind and through the trees. It seems calm as well, for once. "Her words, her awful words, I never imagined they would be salvation."

"What salvation?" Alleloria asks.

"Loria's own words to secure her dynasty have been disobeyed by your mother; and oh how I rejoiced on that day. And you, you I can touch, I can handle, I can speak to. Because you are not like the others; you are not protected by Loria's words. Only the staff protects you; only the staff stands between me and this land."

"You want this land?"

"It is mine." The voice sounds sure, with complete confidence. Alleloria wavers.

"Who are you?"

"My name cannot be spoken in the tongue of mortals," the face in the storm seems to smile, but then again it is difficult to tell.

“I will not hand my land over to you, nameless demon. I have withstood you once before, and I withstand you again.” She raises her voice, and her staff.

The demon is unperturbed. “The bonds of Loria are still many, but I have raised up my Minister. Him you shall not withstand, even with your staff. Once you have fallen, then I will be free at last.”

“I shall withstand him,” She answers, “And I bind you with my own words: As long as a son or daughter of Loria lives, you shall not claim even a pebble of this land. Begone!” To this she raises her staff, the light of the gem shining into the storm. The rain is repelled, and Alleloria’s robes dry in seconds. The thunder rumbles one last time, the face fades from view, and the storm settles into silence. Alleloria lowers her staff, and the gem goes dark. The clouds break, and to east the first rays of morning shine down upon Alleloria and the camp. In the oaks nearby, birds begin to chirp, first tentatively, then loudly.

The first of the riders begin to stir, and from within Alleloria’s wagon, Benjamin begins to cry. Alleloria returns to shelter there-of, and silences Benjamin with her breast. While Benjamin feeds, the riders prepare a morning meal for themselves and Queen Alleloria. Replacing her robe, she descends from the wagon into the morning, now sunny with only a few hints of clouds on the horizon. “Quite the storm last night,” she comments to the rider who hands her a platter with bread and eggs.

“Storm?” the rider asks and glances at several

of his companions. They look quizzical. Alleloria glances around, noticing that the ground and the wagons are dry. "We must have slept through it," the rider says quickly, and the others nod in step.

"Let's forge the river," Alleloria changes the subject. Although wide, the Moon River is both slow and relatively shallow. The wagons are floated across, and the riders guide their horses. The chore takes several hours, but as the sun rises in sky, the horses and wagons are brought safely to the north side of the river, to Regent Alexander's land, although he is at the moment back at the Palace of Loria. Here again they set out at the brisk pace. Benjamin coos at Alleloria as the warm sun shines in from outside her wagon. She smiles now, a genuine smile, for the first time in ... how long has it been? Peace, Alleloria muses, is difficult to come by these days. The path of the caravan shifts more to the east now, unable to avoid all the villages as they approach the city of Moondrake Valley. Another night and day of hard riding, and as evening approaches, the city comes into view.

Arriving at Moondrake Valley, the riders find ready shelter for their tired horses and comfortable beds for themselves. Alleloria goes to the house of her aunt, Beshe, sister of Alexis. The night passes with the three of them gathered around a small fire; the old and frail Beshe smiling joyful at Benjamin as she and Alleloria speak of light and friendly matters. But it is not for this that Alleloria has come, and the next morning she leaves Benjamin with Beshe, who

is overjoyed to play with a child again after so long, and mounts her personal steed to head east across from the city across through the valley in the Moon-drake Mountains to the strange swampy forests of the Parsion Deltas.

The city falls away and is replaced by a meandering valley between the Moondrake Mountains, which rise in snow capped summits around Alleloria. Small waterfalls pour down the snow, melting in the warmth of spring, and begin to form first a creek, then a stream and finally a river twisting through the valley. Alleloria rides along the bank of the river which often roars in brilliant displays of white foam across boulders and rocks deposited countless eons ago and worn smooth since then. Alleloria follows the river until the mountains fall away and are replaced by a swampy jungle. Trees rise tall above her, like giant mushrooms rising straight to the sky and spreading a wide, leafy canopy high above the mossy ground. Here too strange bird calls echo, and animals, both small and large, scurry away as Alleloria rides on.

Alleloria stops in the afternoon near a gourd vine. The vine is thick and scaly, and the gourds a bright purple color. At the Palace, the presence of even a single gourd from this vine would inspire awe; some peasants even spoke of purple gourds as royal gourds, which, according to their legend, only grow in a place where a king or queen has lived. Alleloria smiles, recalling the rare opportunities in childhood to eat royal gourd from her fathers expeditions

to these very deltas. Perhaps, she muses, her father even picked a gourd from this vine. Alleloria pulls a gourd from the vine and breaks it open with a strike from her staff. The gourd spills out wet, green fruit with small white seeds. Alleloria eats it blissfully, swept away by the taste to memories of her childhood, of Mother and Father.

The Palace was brighter in those days, or perhaps it only seemed that way. Queen Alexis walked with the same staff that Alleloria holds now, and smiled from her dark, round and warm face down at young Alleloria. Her father, Robert, was always either painting or on an adventure. Alleloria recalls him standing before an open window in the middle of a beautiful, pure sunny day. There he painting the landscape; the city surrounding the Palace, the fields beyond and in the distance, the Lorian ranges. Many times he travelled to the Parsion Deltas to acquire exotic plants from which he made beautiful paints. He also brought back the strangest fruits and even sometimes animals. One time he brought a small, brightly colored lizard which would walk up the walls and hang upside down from the ceiling. Anastasia accidentally killed it, she remembers, after poking it too hard with a stick. Of course, Anastasia only did so because she, Alleloria, dared her to. Several times her father brought home a royal gourd or two, of which Alleloria was allowed a small taste. There was some reason, some warning, about eating too much of the gourd's exquisite fruit. She couldn't quite recall what it was, probably merely a ruse by her parents to keep her or Anastasia from eating the

whole thing.

Engulfed in beautiful memories, Alleloria continues to munch of the fruit of the gourd. The memories grow brighter and brighter, until the whole world seems engulfed with the light of a thousand suns. Here all color dissolves and all that remains is timeless bliss.