

# Chapter 6: Associates, Both Loved and Hated

## Alice

The hush of Parliament Grounds had different effects on everyone. For some, it came off as reverential, honoring the incomprehensible workings of an Empire, housed in one place. For others, it epitomized discomfort, leaving them needing sound to fill a great emptiness.

For Alice, it was normal. She'd grown up here, spending three years of her childhood running up and down these halls with her mother while her father had finished his work. Those childish shrieks and giggles had died in her ninth year, replaced by a silent perch on a bench with Walter at her side while her mother had shouted at angry men.

This quiet was almost as normal to her as the poorly hidden stares ever directed her way. The people who regularly filled these halls had become accustomed to Alice Cunningham's oddities, but those who made sporadic visits here *always* did double takes when she passed them.

She didn't much blame them for that. Alice knew how strangely she acted and appeared, but she'd stopped caring about making these people comfortable soon after they'd ordered her father's death.

So, she marched down the hall, not in a dress as was proper but in her bell-sleeved jacket, leather gloves, and dress pants, and the only color she allowed to hang from her body was black, the better to accent her Ostium pale skin and blue eyes. They would *know* who she was, at least in this place. When completing her work throughout the five provinces, the same MPs probably wouldn't pick her out of a crowd.

The only reason Alice was walking down these halls today, instead of vanishing to her destination as she might like, was to remind people that she existed and so that she'd have freedom of movement after the coming conversation. Only a select few knew what her role in the government was, but considering who she was and who she reported to, the people who didn't know tended to assume the position was powerful.

They'd taken to calling her the Empire's Ghost, given how she seemed to appear from out of nowhere throughout the five provinces. Many were the speculations as to how Alice did it, all while she did her damndest to make that special talent appear as normal and boring as she could. She

didn't want people to know any of her secrets, but that one—how she got around the Empire—was the most dangerous one for her. The one that could get her killed.

The punishment for the crime of using magic in the Empire was still death, after all, if not by the same method of execution they'd used in the past.

Alice had no official reason for visiting Parliament Grounds today. With her monthly check on the provinces done, she only needed to wait for orders from her mother, free to do as she liked in the meantime, but today, she wanted to ensure that she'd have the entire day to herself. She had plans.

Upon turning onto the corridor that her mother's office opened onto, Alice cocked her head at the sight of the secret police officers standing outside the office's door. What were *they* doing here?

They watched her approach with blank faces, and stopping in front of them, Alice rested her hands on her hips, inclining her head toward the room they were guarding.

"May I go inside?" she asked.

Exchanging a glance, the two shrugged, which had Alice biting back a sigh. Where were the secret police always so difficult?

Brushing through them, she strode into the room beyond, briefly pausing once inside. In contrast to her living quarters, Zorana's office was elegant, if minimalistic. Rather than a cozy den, one encountered all the makings of a grand chamber: tall ceilings, glass windowed walls, and all.

Not much furniture filled the space, though, merely a desk and a few chairs in front of it. In those chairs sat two people Alice hadn't expected to run into today.

One, she didn't find *that* surprising to find here. Vaughn had been an ever-present shadow throughout her life, even before her father's death fourteen years ago. Since then, he'd only hovered more, not that Alice minded. She loved her Uncle Vaughn.

The other one was... Alice didn't know how she felt about that woman's presence. Unwanted? Intrusive? This person had every right to be here, as she was one of her mother's greatest allies in Parliament, but Alice couldn't help the dislike she held for her.

Because Beatrice, the commander of the secret police, might not have condemned her father to death, but she certainly hadn't helped with preventing it.

When Alice stopped, all three people turned to her before relaxing into welcoming expressions, even Beatrice.

"Alice! Come in," Zorana said. "We were just discussing the news you brought home from Crinas. You can join us—"

"Actually, I had something else in mind," Alice interrupted. "I didn't expect Uncle Vaughn or the commander to be here. You usually take your lunch around now. I can come back later. Wouldn't want to disturb your meeting."

She spun for the door, meaning to make a quick escape, but Vaughn brought her up short.

"Where do you think you're going?" he said in a mock grumpy voice. "You're not disturbing our meeting, Alice, so get over here and give your 'Unky' Vaughn a kiss."

Flushing, Alice bit the inside of her lip, chewing on it. Over the years, Vaughn hadn't once let her forget how badly she'd butchered his name as a child. Even with that teasing, Alice couldn't stop a grin from spreading over her face when she faced him.

Vaughn had always been her confidant, quiet protector, and even drinking companion at times. He was everything she'd ever needed, family in all but blood. So, she hurried across the distance to him, hugging his head to her waist instead of kissing his cheek, as he'd probably wanted. He reached up to pat her back.

Releasing him, Alice turned to the woman who'd been critically watching her since she'd entered, shallowly bowing.

"Commander," she said.

"Alice," Beatrice said. "It's good to see you."

Was it really, though? Of all the spies flung across the Empire, Alice was the only one who operated outside the purview of the secret police, and despite Beatrice's protests about a 'possible breach in security', her status was unlikely to change anytime soon. Because of that, tension had always hung between the two, one that Alice had never gone out of her way to ease.

"I could say the same," she said with a tight smile.

Which was true. She *could* express pleasure about being in Beatrice's presence, but she never would. Still, Alice always strove to be polite with everyone she spoke, even those who made her want to jump out a window.

"What did you want, my silly monster?" Zorana asked.

Reluctantly, Alice tore herself away from a staring contest to address her mother.

"I wanted to know if you'll need me for anything today," she said. "I have plans that may make it difficult to get ahold of me, but if necessary, I can postpone them."

Leaning her elbows on her desk, Alice's mother folded her hands in front of her face, smiling at her over them.

"I think you've earned yourself a day off. Others can pick up the slack," she said. "May I ask what you're doing today?"

Looking away, Alice rubbed an arm with her lip getting sore from her incessant chew on it. She wasn't sure how fully she should answer her mother's question, not with Beatrice in the room, but if Alice thought that woman wouldn't learn about her activities today before night fell, she was being naïve.

"I'm taking Ana to meet dad," she said.

The invocation of a missing father, husband, and son dropped the room into a hush, reminiscent of what was found throughout Parliament Grounds, if deeper. Alice felt as if she were dragging her head through viscous gel when looking at her mother. What would she think of this development?

Alice was so distracted by trying to decipher her mother's expression that she jumped when someone took her hand.

"You're serious about this girl, aren't you?" Vaughn quietly asked.

At Alice's nervous swallow, he swept a thumb along the back of her hand, imbuing courage in her.

"I love her," she said. "I think I want to spend my life at her side."

Vaughn tightened his hand around hers while his eyes pinched.

"Oh, Alice. You've chosen the hard road," he said. "I'm so proud of you."

"Looks like changing that social norm needs to get moved up on the agenda, thank *avan*," Beatrice said from behind Alice. "Maybe we can finally return to the way it should be, how it was before Flosari's archaic customs took precedence throughout the Empire."

What on *earth* was that woman talking about? Alice had understood Vaughn's comment. The relationship she had with Ana was *heavily* frowned upon in the Ibisian Empire. But Beatrice? What social norm could she have been referring to?

"Go visit your father, Alice," Zorana said, "and know that wherever he is, he's brimming with approval for you in the moment. As am I."

Alice sucked in a breath with her eyes burning. Given her support over the last few months, she'd known her mother would be happy for her once she'd declared her intentions, but even still, a tiny, irrational part of her had been worried about the possibility of a mother's rejection. As for her father...

"Why do you think dad would have approved?" she thickly asked.

"Many reasons, most of them including his belief that people should be free to make their own choices without judgment," Zorana said, "but I believe the biggest of them would have been that

he loved his big brother very much."

Uncle Maxton, the man Alice had never met. Who'd motivated her father's quest to change the Empire. Who'd died, screaming, in a chair years before his little brother would.

"What does he have to do with what we're discussing?" Alice asked.

Shifting in his chair, Vaughn said, "Max was attracted to men."

Oh...

Wait.

"Really?" Alice breathed.

She wasn't alone in the family?

With his throat working, Vaughn looked away as he nodded, which had Alice narrowing her eyes. Had that been grief flickering across his face?

"Silly monster," Zorana said, dragging Alice's focus back to her. "Go get Ana. Have a nice time in the forest."

Chuckling, Alice said, "We'll see about that. Thanks, mom. Vaughn. Good luck with planning."

Facing Beatrice, she bowed again.

"A pleasure, as always."

"I'm sure," Beatrice said with a knowing grin.

But even that annoyance couldn't dampen the glow in her. Alice practically skipped down the halls with her sporadic laughter chasing the quiet away. They'd understood, hadn't rejected her, *and* she had the whole day free to spend with Ana. Never mind that they were planning on going somewhere that managed to both comfort and roil her heart.

Today was shaping up to be *amazing*.

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