

# Investigator Alena

## *Part 1 - The wedding burglary*

Alena of Esma was in many ways an epitome of the Seran ideal. Educated, thoughtful and clear-headed. But in other ways, she was far different from your average Seran woman. Today especially, she felt severely out of place. She stood dressed in her finest garments, dark vestments in blacks and blues, with only small gemstones that sparkled in the dim light. A fine, black veil of elaborate lace covered her face, just thin enough so that she could see through it. She stood huddled with others from her family, her mother and father on one side, and her brother and his wife on the other. They were part of a great circle of shadows clad just like her, watching as her sister and her husband to be kneeled before a Dragoman of the Celestial Order. The Dragoman, a tall, gaunt woman clad in pure black robes with silver decorations and the angular headpiece of the order, held a black sphere as big as a head above the two bethroated. Inside the sphere burned a bright, white light which shone through small holes, projecting the starry heavens around the dark room. On this, her younger sister's wedding day, Alena was bored to tears. The Dragonman spoke of stars and destinies, of darkness and light and many other sacred things that Alena had stopped listening to a long time ago. She could not wait for this all to be over.

But ceremonies in Serdanos are never short affairs. Following the main ceremony, it was time for the closest blood relatives to have their private sacraments together with the couple and the Dragoman. As custom had it, the groom's family, being the more powerful one, gathered first while the other guests socialized in the dining hall. As soon as they came out of the ceremonial room, Alena tore off her veil, much to the ill-disguised annoyance to the older guests. Not only did they disapprove of her etiquette, but of her short hair, the way she carried herself, and of course, the fact that she as the eldest of three children was still unwed. But she had little patience for their judgment. She looked around for her uncle, her refuge when it came to social affairs like these. He was the host for the wedding, however, and had hostly duties to attend to the ceremony was held in his manor. Alone and vulnerable, she could only watch in exasperation as her aunt approached, with disdain in her eyes.

“And so, you remain alone,” her voice was dry and tired. It was almost funny, considering how relaxed and modern her uncle were, that his wife was so violently traditional. But then again, few got to choose their spouse.

“Senator. Aunt. I’m well aware that I remain unwed. It is by design, after all,” this was not the first time this conversation had played out, nor would it be the last.

“Foolishness, is what it is. The Amareli still have an unwed son, and he’d be more than a decent partner in wedlock. The fact that I am the only one who seems to lecture you on this matter speaks volumes about your parents”-

“I’ve heard plenty, thank you, Aunt. Rest assured, my parents lose just as much sleep as you do over the choices I make,” Alenna said dryly, eager to be done with the conversation. She knew that she should not push her Aunt, but her patience in the matter was running low.

“Hmpf.” Her aunt’s face twisted into a stern grimace, disapproval now turning into outright anger. “Unless your manners improve, there will come a day when no decent man will have you,” she said, voice dripping with indignation.

Alena stared at her aunt for a moment, imagining the day she’d finally see the old crone buried in the cold ground. “Have a pleasant wedding, Senator,” she said coldly, and further insulted her aunt by turning her back and walking away. For a moment, she caught a glimpse of her mother, who gave her a look that spoke of both fear and reproach. But Alena could not bring herself to care in that moment. Though her parents were not quite as zealous in their traditions as her aunt, they still enabled the same outdated society. So she sat herself down in a corner away from the crowd. She would get reprimanded for it later, no doubt, but she preferred to choose the time and selection of people herself. She shut her eyes, and to pass the time she recited formulas from her mathematical studies to herself. Anything to drown out the theatrical pleasantries between her relatives and the groom’s family. When the time finally came for her own family’s sacrament with the Dragoman, she had half a mind to just slink

into a back room and hide. But there was a limit even to her disdain of tradition.

Reluctantly, she followed the couple together with her parents, her uncle and her brother as they all returned into the gloomy chamber illuminated only by sorcerous starlight. Together, they joined hands as they knelt before the Dragoman to listen to her words. Alena did not reflect on those words very much however, tired as she was of archaic promises and vague mysticism. Her thoughts strayed instead to her younger siblings. They had bent to their family's will easily, as most did. For what they were, their spouses were not all bad. Of course, there was not much love in either marriage, but then again you never really married for love in Serdanos. That's what extramarital companions were for. Still, Alena did not desire a life as some proverbial brick in some powerhouse that had been built over centuries. While her siblings were content with serving the family, she had her own ambitions. She refused to give up her studies of and the search for knowledge simply because the elders of the family desired to maintain influence. If they wanted it so bad, they could work for it themselves. Her sister squeezed her hand tightly, pulling her attention back to the rite before them. The Dragoman, holding an ornate metal bowl containing a white powder, announced that it was time for the blood to give the couple their own blessings. Each member of the family took a pinch of the powder, and a fresh, floral scent spread through the room. Then, one by one, they made their declarations to the couple.

"May your union be guided by the brightest of stars," the mother began, citing words that had been passed down through her family's line for generations. "And know that in the darkest of moments, your family will protect you," she said, and sprinkled the powder lightly over her daughter and the husband-to-be.

"Through good times and bad times, the strength of a family united endures," her father continued, ever the idealist.

"Let these halls where your union was formed forever be a home to you as it is to me," her uncle said, the very spirit of generosity.

When her turn came, Alena hesitated for a moment. She abhorred these traditions, but she loved her little sister dearly. Embarrassing her parents was one thing, embarrassing her sister was a different matter. So she swallowed her pride. “Let wisdom guide your path, and walk bravely forward, knowing that family follows behind,” her heart ached a bit as she said those words, sprinkling the floral powder. As if she was losing her sister a little bit more.

Lastly, her brother spoke. “Righteous are those who act in the interest of the many at their own sacrifice.” Alena knew he was not very fond of the husband chosen for her sister. But even though he was young, he was a master of disguising his thoughts. It almost frightened Alena a little – to her, he was still her younger brother with his strange fascination for bugs and critters. But he too had been forced to conform, sacrificed on the altar of formality and family.

Once the sacrament finally ended, Alena wasted no time catching the arm of her uncle. There would now be some time when the Dragoman would divine the couple’s future, before the formal dinner would start. She desperately wanted some reprieve, and her uncle was her best bet.

“Please get me out of here, uncle. Or I will not be responsible for what I say and do,” she pleaded in a hushed voice.

Her uncles let out a small chuckle, careless as he was about his appearance. “Come now, one is always responsible for one’s actions,” he said, patting her arm. “But yes, I agree. I think it’s high time we escaped for a little while, or I might simply keel over dead during the dinner. Let us go to my study for some peace and quiet.” Sometimes, Alena wondered if she had not been born into the wrong family. Her uncle, like herself, had grown tired of traditions and formality. Though he looked like the very image of it with his strictly pulled-back black hair and immaculate, fine clothing, there was a very different side of him. He was a well-traveled man, and those travels had changed him. Many looked down on his shirking of traditions, but he was still an influential man who couldn’t be ignored easily.

Together, they sneaked out of the dining hall, and ventured through the

quiet, moonlit corridors of the mansion, arm in arm. Her uncle breathed a sigh of relief, happy to not have to keep up appearances for a little while. “I saw that your aunt caught you in her maw earlier,” he began, almost apologizing.

“Don’t remind me,” Alena sighed. “It is like she cannot think of anything else to speak to me about. For years, she has been repeating herself.”

“Do not judge her too harshly. After all, she in turn has to deal with the rumors that come with having difficult relatives. It is not easy having family like us if you are a Senator, in the end,” he chuckled. She could only imagine the arguments the two of them may have had through the years. “Were it not because she herself has to listen to the same complaints, she would not take the time to complain to you in turn...”

“That, uncle, is hardly my fault, but rather the fault of a society too concerned with appearances rather than substance. And my parents are bad enough as it is,” she muttered somberly.

“Now, now,” her uncle tried. “Your parents are hardly villains. Have they ever tried to force you to wed?”

“By some great wonder, no, not yet.”

“Precisely. They too are bound by the expectations of our society, but they would never force you,” he looked at her with affection. “They respect you too much for that. Your mother, though she is beside herself with worry at times, simply wants to see you flourish. Something that is much more difficult the more you take a stand against norms...”

“I resent the notion that they should know better than me what would make me flourish,” she said, growing weary of the topic.

“That may be. But they will come around, I’m sure. No one knows what awaits around the next corner of life,” they stopped in front of the door to his study as he took out a key from around his neck. “Now let’s just find something nice and strong and talk of”- he stopped as the key clicked oddly in the lock.





“What is wrong?” she asked, as she saw him struggle with the lock.

“That’s odd,” he muttered, as the key refused to turn properly. Suddenly, the door creaked open on its own.

“Did you leave the door unlocked?”

“I am certain I did not...” His concerned expression turned darker. “I think there may have been a break-in.”

“Really?” her heart jumped with sudden excitement. “Let me see the lock,” she produced a small metal tube out of her pocket, and removed its cap. A bright, cold light flooded out of the small tube, illuminating the hallway.

“What in winter’s name is that?” her uncle exclaimed, unused as he was to the strange applications of sorcery.

“Oh. It’s a trinket I got from aunt Eleniana once. For the longest time, I forgot I had it. But I’ve found it to be very useful,” she got down on her knees and shone the strange light into the keyhole.

“Wait...cousin Eleniana?” he asked, rather surprised. “I didn’t know anyone had kept in touch with her before her... disappearance.”

“Well...I’m afraid I know nothing about that,” Alena said, her voice trailing off as her focus shifted. As the light hit the innards of the lock, she saw that the mechanism had been bent and forced. Someone had broken in for sure. “You were right. Someone was here.”

“Are you certain? I locked this door just before I went to greet the first guests...but that must mean”-

“That either it’s one of the guests, or one of the servants,” Alena said, her voice cool and collected. She got up, opened the door slowly and shone her light inside. Her uncle’s study was modest in size, but extravagant in style. Two walls were made up completely of bookshelves, heavy with books and the small stone sculptures he found so fascinating. A large desk made of

dark wood dominated the center of the room, placed under a tall window through which the pale light of the moon shone.

“But that’s...who would do such a thing? During a wedding!” he exclaimed, seemingly more outraged by the timing rather than the act.

“Let’s check the room. See if you can spot if anything is missing,” she said, and ventured inside carefully. As the light swept the room, she couldn’t spot anything strange. Besides the lock, she couldn’t see anything broken or obviously tampered with. Her uncle went into the room and started checking his shelves. She closed the door behind them, and started checking the dark corners.

“I’m seeing nothing missing...valuable pieces are still left. Maybe they were not out for items? Or they didn’t have time to get what they wanted?” her uncle said, clearly not believing his own words.

“I would assume that any thief would think twice about trying to sneak out stolen goods during a wedding,” she muttered, as she knelt down on the floor, sweeping the floor with the light. And there, in the darkness under the desk, something flashed. She crawled over to look closer, but couldn’t quite make out what it was.

“There’s something under the desk, uncle. Can you lift it up for a moment?” she asked, eyes intently fixed on the small object, as if it would run off if she looked away. A moment later, her uncle was by the desk, and with a heavy grunt, managed to lift the heavy desk for a few seconds. She snatched the object quickly, got up and put it on the desk to examine it. For a moment, she wasn’t quite sure of what she was looking at. It was a piece of metal with an ornamental star on the end of it, no longer than her shortest finger. “What in the world,” she muttered, trying to make sense of it.

“That’s what you found?” her uncle asked, panting lightly from the strain. “What would a pin such as that be doing under my table?”

Suddenly, she realized what she was looking at. It was an ornamental pin, the kind that was meant for a young, unwed man to wear at special



occasions. Such as a wedding. Her uncle was right, it was a very strange thing to have ended up under his desk. “As I recall, you haven’t worn one of these for about thirty years, uncle?”

“And then some...do you think whoever broke in here dropped it?” he asked with baited breath.

She pondered this for a moment. The study was immaculately clean otherwise, and there was nothing but dustmites under the desk other than the pin. It certainly seemed likely.

“How many such men would you say are here this evening?” she asked, eyes still on the pin.

“Perhaps six or seven? Only two of them on our family’s side, as far as I know,” her uncle said, pondering. “Could we just check to see if any of them are missing theirs?”

“We could,” she muttered. “But I’m not sure we could start accusing people just based on this. I suppose it’s a start, however,” she swept around the room with her light, eyeing the bookshelves. Then a thought hit her. “Have you checked your desk?” she said, and looked at her uncle.

“No...not yet,” his voice shook a bit. He went around the desk, and opened a drawer.

Alena aided him with some light, and she saw that the drawer contained documents. It was hard to tell if they had been tampered with at a glance. Suddenly, she felt a strange smell. But before she could identify it, it was gone again. Her uncler picked up the documents, and looked through them. She tried not to look too closely, seeing tables and rows of numbers with scribbles. That’s when she spotted a strange mark on one of the documents. Not quite a smudge, but a some kind of residue. She grabbed a magnifying lens that her uncle had on her desk, and leaned in to look closer. But as she looked over the document, she felt the strange scent again, only stronger this time. A flowery, summery scent. She picked up the document carefully, brought it closer to her nose and took a deep breath. Then it hit her. She glanced over at her uncle, who was still looking

over his papers. She picked up the document gently, and held it in front of her uncle's face.

"Can you smell that?" she said, eyes alight with excitement.

He leaned in and smelled the document, his brow furrowing in confusion. "What is that scent?"

She let him think for a moment, before she couldn't hold it in anymore. "That's the powder the Dragoman had us strew over the bride and groom."

"By the dark halls, you're right! That's what it is. But what does"-

"That means that whoever went through these documents had that powder in their hand earlier this evening. Now, I know for a fact that none of the people from our side of the family could have made it here. And the Dragoman has not left that room since she got here. Which means..."

"I'll be damned. The groom's brother!" her uncle exclaimed.

"Indeed," she said with a smile. "He was there during the sacrament, and had plenty of opportunity while we were with the Dragoman. And as far as I know, he is unwed."

"Which would explain the pin," he said with a low voice, slightly shocked. "Very clever, Alena," he patted her on the back. "Now I have to figure out how to deal with this."

"I'm sure if we report this"- she started, before her uncle interrupted.

"I don't think reporting this will be necessary. No, this is probably something that I should speak with our guests with directly," her uncle said, smiling.

"But uncle...why"-

"You are frighteningly clever, Alena. But when it comes to politics, you are

by your own admission not a skilled player. Trust me, niece. Let us rejoin the others, and I shall make sure your findings are put to good use.”

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A little while later, Alena was watching from the other side of the room as her uncle conversed with the father of the groom. She could not hear what they were talking about, and her focus was not quite present. Instead, her mind was racing with the possibilities of what she had just experienced. There had been a thrill unlike any other she had experienced in solving even such a simple little thing. Surely, if she applied the sciences she had studied so hard, even more complex crimes could unfold their secrets? And if she were to apply the knowledge and skills of the nation’s sorcerers, the possibilities would be endless. Surely, in a nation as secretive as Serdanos, there would be no end to unsolved crimes. Suddenly, she saw her uncle pull out what she assumed was the pin she had found, and hold it in front of the groom’s father. The latter’s face fell, and he meekly called his son over. It was soon clear from the son’s body language that he knew he had messed up. He had been caught. But her uncle remained politely smiling, and took the groom’s father aside. She could only guess at what game he was playing.

A little while later, just before dinner was to start, her uncle came up to her, whispering. “I might have guessed that they were trying to get information about our family’s business. But now we have a nice hold on them. All thanks to you, niece,” there was pride, and a little bit of joy at the Amareli’s cost.

“Thank you uncle. I...” She hesitated for a moment. “I think I may have found my calling,” her voice trembled ever so slightly as she looked him deep in the eyes.

A few seconds passed as they looked at each other. Then, a wide smile cracked her uncle’s face as he put his arm around her. “Then let us talk about it after all these bores have left, shall we?”