

THE ANXIETY OF AUTHORSHIP
AMONG WOMEN FANTASY WRITERS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis applies Gilbert's and Gubar's feminist theory evident in *The Madwoman in the Attic* to the male-dominated, gender biased fantasy genre that works to support and embolden evidence of an existing "anxiety of authorship" among modern women fantasy writers. Anxiety faced by women writers in the fantasy genre is multifaceted in that previous fantasy works as well as publishers have created a bias based around women. In this essay, I answer questions that Gilbert and Gubar posit in their original work, such as what ghosts or parasitical presences women writers are confronting when attempting the pen and in what ways the act of attempting to write will isolate or destroy her. As I apply these questions to the fantasy genre, I examine how works by male fantasy authors offer unsatisfactory representations of women, and severe cases of publisher, reader, and reviewer gender bias in fantasy that contribute to loss of confidence and sense of identity among women writers as they struggle for their own self-creation.

My creative fantasy piece emerged from the question of how a character might live with themselves if they were at fault for a widespread issue that ruined the lives of many. In my piece, I delve deeply into the inner workings of the main character, who struggles with PTSD after the traumatic loss of her mother, and who also struggles to live with the guilt of her part in an empire-wide tradition that results in the deaths of many. The piece is written by me, as a woman fantasy writer, and centered on a female protagonist and told through a female gaze, which correlates with the critical introduction.

The Anxiety of Authorship Among Women Fantasy Writers

Susan Gubar and Sandra M. Gilbert's *The Madwoman in the Attic* is said to have developed the notion of women writers as a unified group that participates in its own literary subculture, distinctly separate from that of male writers. The main goal of *The Madwoman in the Attic* was to assert that the influential oedipal model developed by Harold Bloom—considered the first and foremost student of literary psychohistory—“to describe the relation of post-Enlightenment male writers to each other does not fit the entirely different situation of women in a male-dominated literary tradition” (Leitch et al. 1840). In arguing this assertion, Gilbert and Gubar thus have to answer this vital question: “What does it mean to be a woman writer in a culture whose fundamental definitions of literary authority are, as we have seen, both overtly and covertly patriarchal?” (Leitch et al. 1842). Gilbert and Gubar discuss representation of women in male-authored works, and female authorship. While male writers had many guiding “forefathers” to use as reference, women writers did not have the “foremothers” equivalent—thus, the “anxiety of influence” that Harold Bloom assigned to male writers could not apply. Instead, Gilbert and Gubar applied the term “anxiety of authorship” to female writers, defining it as “a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a ‘precursor’ the act of writing will isolate or destroy her” (Leitch et al. 1844). While Gilbert's and Gubar's theory is extremely applicative to nineteenth-century literary works, writing is now a widely accepted occupation for either gender. While women now have foremothers in many genres, those such as science fiction and fantasy still remain overtly male-dominated.

The objective of this essay is thus twofold: on one hand, I will apply Gilbert's and Gubar's feminist theory evident in *The Madwoman in the Attic* to the male-dominated,

gender biased fantasy genre that will, on the other hand, work to support and embolden evidence of an existing “anxiety of authorship” among modern women fantasy writers. There are many aspects of the fantasy genre that contribute to anxiety of authorship many women fantasy writers feel. Past works by male fantasy authors offer unsatisfactory representations of women, which influence current women writers’ *writing* of fantasy and how they *feel* about themselves as authors. There are also severe cases of publisher, reader, and reviewer gender bias in fantasy that contribute to loss of confidence and sense of identity among women writers as they struggle for their own self-creation. Just as the “anxiety of authorship” defined by Gilbert and Gubar was applicable to the nineteenth-century woman writer, it remains applicable to recent woman fantasy writers.

Gilbert and Gubar assert what they believe to be a central fact of literary history, which is that writers absorb information and ideas, then consciously or unconsciously affirm or deny the achievements of their predecessors (Leitch et al. 1842). At the time *The Madwoman in the Attic* was written, more literary theorists had begun to explore the ways in which literary texts were “inhabited... by a long chain of parasitical presences, echoes, allusions, guests, ghosts of previous texts” (Leitch et al. 1843). In the fantasy genre, where many of its successful predecessors are men, this begs the question of what, exactly, recent women writers are encountering when they confront the works of those male predecessors. Gilbert and Gubar sought to answer this question by confronting the vexing polarities of angel versus monster and other images literary tradition offers women. Likewise, we must delve into the fantasy genre to discern what images literary tradition offers women writers—and readers—of the genre. By learning what parasitical presences or ghosts of previous texts that women writers are confronting (i.e. presentation

of women in male-authored fantasy novels) when reading or writing this genre, we might grasp how they might feel “anxiety of authorship.”

First, we might resort to *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, which are arguably the most renowned fantasy series of all time. According to self-published author Garrett Robinson, *The Hobbit* does not have a single female character, and in *The Lord of the Rings* there are no women in the fellowship and the protagonists are purely male. Of Eowyn and Galadriel, two more significant female characters in *LOTR*, “much of Eowyn’s character development happens through Aragorn’s rejections of her affection, and the growth of her love for Faramir instead” (Robinson). Robinson goes on to mention *The Wheel of Time* by Robert Jordan, stating that though it at least includes women, most of them fail to be resonant. Their main character trait is being in love with the main male character and they are portrayed as unsympathetic, bickering about trivial matters constantly (Robinson). Though there are women in these stories, as Juliet McKenna points out, “Their presence offers the necessary balance, and if the characters who drive the plot are predominately male, that’s just a traditional aspect of this genre which does reflect so much history” (“The Representation of Women...”). While it’s certainly not true of all male fantasy writers, much of the history of female representations in fantasy tends to be unsatisfactory.

Such representations (or lack thereof) in the fantasy genre’s history evidence the ways in which the “ghosts” mentioned by Gilbert and Gubar may inhabit these novels and affect future female fantasy writers who grow up reading the genre. With such representations of women in fantasy continuing to persist to some extent in modern works, I return to a question Gilbert and Gubar presented after their own representation analyses: In a world and time period, when and where men permeated every aspect of writing, how

did this affect women writers' own voices? Will the woman writer try to imitate his tone, his inflections, his phrasing, or his point-of-view? Or does she "talk back" in her own vocabulary and tone, insisting on her own point-of-view? These are the basic questions Gilbert and Gubar insisted feminist literary criticism must answer, and these are questions that must be answered now in order to determine how male-dominion over the history of the fantasy genre has affected women fantasy writers' own voices.

Popular fantasy author, Sarah J. Maas, is a worldwide bestselling author whose books, as of 2021, have sold more than 12 million copies and are published in 37 languages. Sarah J. Maas, in several interviews has stated that books such as *Sabriel* by Garth Nix and *LOTR* were not only some of her favorite fantasies, but also inspired her own love for reading and writing fantasy. She also cited her love for Robin McKinley, a female fantasy writer. However, she has also mentioned in many interviews that she noticed the lack of female characters and protagonists, saying, "The stories I wanted to see being told weren't really there. There aren't many women in J.R.R. Tolkien's books: fantasy is not a genre that tends to be particularly rich in terms of female characters... it has historically been a domain of masculinity" (PressReader). Another well known woman fantasy writer is Tamora Pierce who grew up reading Tolkien, C.L. Moore, and Ray Bradbury, and as a young reader, she realized how few female heroes were in the stories she was reading and she was disappointed with the representations of women she was given (Cox). This disappointment and lack of representation that she could identify with affected her own fantasy writing later on. "I tried to write the kind of thing I was reading, with one difference: the books I loved were missing teenaged girl warriors. I couldn't understand this lapse of attention on the part of the writers I loved, so until I could talk them into

correcting this small problem, I wrote about those girls” (Pierce). It’s quite obvious that this lack of satisfactory representation has not escaped the notice of these female fantasy writers, and has, to some extent, prompted these authors to go out of their way to make sure these representations happen.

Alyssa Rosenberg is a culture writer with *The Washington Post*, and mentions in an article for *The Atlantic* how the fantasy genre matured in the 20th century. During its maturation, “authors began to use stories about magic and chivalry not as a way to reconcile women to waiting for better outcomes, but to imagine claiming kinds of power that were previously off-limits to them” (Rosenberg). In a genre in which barriers were shattered, turning poor boys and hobbits into knights and saviors, it was only a matter of time before those same principles applied to the female gender. However, a majority of these changes are happening at the hands of female fantasy writers. Rosenberg offers Tamora Pierce’s *Song of the Lioness* series as an example, describing it as a hero’s journey from novice to champion, “with the twist that the hero is a woman.” Rosenberg claimed that Pierce’s stories “are about allowing women to stand as candidates for positions previously reserved for men” (Rosenberg). Rosenberg cites yet another woman-authored example, the *Enchanted Forest* stories, which she claims are “about upsetting conventional understandings of how women’s roles work” (Rosenberg). While Rosenberg’s argument is made in good faith, as she’s trying to communicate the ways in which the fantasy genre has become less patriarchal and is actually something a female audience can identify with and enjoy, she only brings to light the glaring issues still clinging to modern fantasy... Do *male fantasy authors* need to devote plot and character towards fighting oppressive institutions in publishing and biased readership? Must *male fantasy authors* need to go out

of their way to assert the strength and significance of their *male characters*, and must this be the *main unique twist* to their story? Are male-authored fantasies defined by how they “upset conventional understandings” of how *men’s* roles work? Most of the time, the answers to these questions would be no. This history of unsatisfactory female representation in fantasy has set an expectation which, unfortunately, many male readers have of the genre (narrated from the POV of a male protagonist and centered on male experience) which effectively shuts women fantasy writers out, and makes their novels especially unappealing to male readers, when attempting to rectify this problem by including strong female characters and protagonists in their work.

Gilbert and Gubar criticized Harold Bloom’s model of literary subculture as offensively sexist and asserted that the woman writer doesn’t “fit” into it, but instead occupies her own literary subculture separate from that of male writers. They claimed the woman writer must occupy her own literary history because “Bloom’s male oriented theory of the ‘anxiety of the influence’ cannot be simply reversed or inverted in order to account for the situation of the woman writer” (Leitch et al. 1844). Thus, they coined “anxiety of authorship” for the female literary subculture, the difference between male and female literary subcultures being that while male writers feel exhausted for a need for revisionism, women writers feel exhilarated because they feel as though they are “helping to create a viable tradition which is at last definitively emerging” (Leitch et al. 1846). In the fantasy genre, we might see how male writers face a struggle of coming up with original content that hasn’t been seen before, whereas women writers—lacking an abundance of previous works and “foremothers”—might feel as if they’re starting from scratch. Therefore, if the woman writer is starting from scratch in terms of female representation and the female

point-of-view, then it'd be understandable why descriptions of women-written fantasy might resemble that of Rosenberg's. Because this feminist idea of the lead heroine protagonist is still seen as a new development in fantasy, this elements appears to garner the most attention. Therefore, the plot or narrative of the story takes a backseat to the perceived feminism by male and female fantasy readers alike (regardless of author intention).

Gilbert's and Gubar's concept of the woman writer's "anxiety of authorship" is the woman writer's fear she can't create because she has few predecessors to identify with, and that writing will isolate or destroy her. Women fantasy writers face this anxiety of authorship when confronting the fantasy genre and its audience. In order to fight this "anxiety of authorship," the woman writer must battle for her own self-creation. "She can begin only by actively seeking a female precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal authority is possible" (1845). But, how do foremothers come to *be* so that later women writers can seek them out in order to face their own anxiety of authorship? Gilbert and Gubar state that the foremothers of literature had to struggle through "isolation-like-illness" or "alienation-like-madness" so that contemporary women writers could attempt the pen with energy and authority. Likewise, women fantasy writers must struggle through these states in order to create in themselves predecessors who might one day prove useful for future women fantasy writers to look back on.

The misogynistic structure of the fantasy genre creates this "anxiety of authorship" resembling "isolation-like-illness" or "alienation-like-madness" that these female authors must face while attempting self-creation. Between writing a book and putting it on the

shelves of bookstores, one must first secure rights to publish it. However, several studies, even in recent years, have showed a bias in the publishing industry (especially with science fiction and fantasy) in which novels written by men are valued over those written by women. Kristian Wilson Colyard, a university professor specializing in fantasy literature, speaks about many issues in publishing (“Gender Bias in Publishing Revealed...”). The experiment mentioned was done by sci-fi and fantasy writer Catherine Nichols, who sent out 50 queries under her own name, and 50 of the exact same manuscript out under a male pseudonym named “George.” Her results were shocking and appalling, as many of the publishers who responded to her queries thought “George” was a better writer... *eight times better*. As herself, she received two manuscript requests. *George got 17*. “Nichols grimly observes, ‘He is eight and a half times better than me at writing the same book. Fully a third of the agents who saw his query wanted to see more, where my numbers never did shift from one in 25’” (“Gender Bias in Publishing Revealed...”). Not only did the number of responses vary, but so did the quality of those responses. The rejections to “George” were more polite and warm than any of the rejections sent to Catherine. Some of the adjectives used to describe George’s work were “clever,” “well-constructed,” and “exciting” whereas some of the descriptors used for Catherine’s work were that it was lyrical or her main characters were feisty.

Articles and experiments such as these have created much discord in the publishing community as well as women authors and readers. Julie Crisp, a commissioning editor at Tor UK, makes clear her frustration with these claims, as a woman in publishing who works with many female coworkers. She says that as a female editor, she commissions and actively looks for *any* good works in the genres, whether by male or female authors. The

issue is not with these female editors having some ingrained bias leaning them towards preferring male authors over female authors. Instead, Crisp asserts that the issue lies in the fact that they can't publish what they're not submitted. She supplies percentages from the latest five hundred submissions, and out of 503 submissions across genres—epic/high-fantasy, urban fantasy/paranormal romance, horror, sci-fi, YA, and other—only 32% were from women writers (Crisp). Only 33% of all epic/high-fantasy submissions were from women as opposed to urban fantasy/paranormal romance being 57% women writer submissions (Crisp). Its interesting that the percentage of women submissions would be higher in urban fantasy and paranormal romance, possibly to do with more modern settings and romantic possibilities (appealing to the idea that women prefer romance in their stories).

With the ongoing gender bias in the publishing industry, and even claims such as those made by David Morgan on a popular book blog in 2019 in which he says “even agents seem to be against women” and that “some studies suggest that women are up to 3 times less likely to garner interest from an agent,” it is no wonder that women writers are less likely to submit their work to publishers, especially in male-dominated genres such as science fiction and fantasy. Women writers seem to have much more luck—and feel more comfortable with—submitting genres such as romance or young adult. Editor Rob Spillman even states that when he asked a group of writers whose works had been previously rejected to resubmit, women were five times less likely to resend their work than men were (Macauley-Gierhart). Additionally, as editor, publisher, and writer at Inkerman & Blunt, Donna Ward, says: the fact that men dominate positions of power, “as teachers of literature, as judges of literary prizes, as literary critics and reviewers... while

they remain unconscious of their bias” inevitably leads to the preference of male writers over female writers (Macauley-Gierhart). According to Juliet E. McKenna, this bias doesn’t only include men as it could be ingrained in the minds of women too, but at this point it is just “gross, systematic bias at this entry stage” (“Gender Identity and Sexuality...”). Hannah Loewentheil found in a study of large publishing companies such as Random House, women account for only 30% of the titles published in 2011. One of the main factors Loewentheil listed as the possible cause of this gender gap in publishing was reader tastes. “While women are likely to read a book regardless of the author’s gender, men tend to read books written by authors of their own gender” (Loewentheil). Therefore, it’s likely publishers assume that books written by men will sell to both men and women, whereas a book written by a woman is a less reliable bet. Any of these factors can contribute to this lack of confidence women writers seem to feel with submitting their work, and are examples of the painful obstacles and debilitating inadequacies Gilbert and Gubar claim women writers must face in their struggle for self-creation.

The publishing process is just the start of gender bias in the book industry. Male and female readers seem to prefer reading male-written fantasy novels over female-written ones, and even reviewers show bias towards choosing male-authored fantasy for their focus. “Modern women writers face the challenge of being unaccepted in the literary world, often having to prove the worthiness and importance of their works, being categorized in ways different to men, and still have been subject to unethical remarks” (Howell). In 2016, researchers from the Australian National University and Monash University examined book reviews in prominent publications from 1985 to 2013, and found that although two-thirds of published authors in Australia are women, two-thirds of the books being *reviewed*

are written by men, and this ratio has remained the same for 30 years (“Gender Bias in Publishing is Real...”). In fact, they also found that the percentage of men who reviewed books by female authors was 17. What’s most surprising is that women are the largest group of readers and buyers of books; women buy two-thirds of books in Britain and 50% of women consider themselves as avid readers compared to 26% of men (Dempster). “This all underlines a vast chasm between people who are consuming literature, who are mostly women, and those who are being lauded and rewarded for their work, who are mostly men” (Dempster). And as Lisa Dempster also points out, these statistics are part of a global trend that extends to Britain and the United States.

M.A. Sieghart is the author of *The Authority Gap* (2021), a book which analyzes why women are still taken less seriously than men, and she commissioned Nielsen Book Research in order to find out who was reading what. “I wanted to know whether female authors were not just deemed less authoritative than men, but whether they were being read by men in the first place. And the results confirmed my suspicion that men were disproportionately unlikely even to open a book by a woman” (Sieghart). Among the readership of 10 bestselling female authors (Jane Austen, Margaret Atwood, Danielle Steel, and Jojo Moyes), 19% of their readers are men and 81% were women whereas for the readership of the top 10 bestselling male authors (Charles Dickens, J.R.R. Tolkien, Lee Child, and Stephen King), 55% were men and 45% were women (Sieghart). Sieghart found that women were much more likely to read books written by men, but few men were likely to read books written by women. Sieghart asked, “what does this tell us about how reluctant men are to accord equal authority—intellectual, artistic, cultural—to women and men?” Her question points to one of the debilitating inadequacies women writers face in the

process of self-creation outlined by Gilbert and Gubar: “dread of patriarchal authority of art.” M.A. Sieghart says this bias is not about women’s writing being worse than men’s. Indeed, “it’s not as if men don’t enjoy reading books by women when they do open them; in fact, they marginally prefer them. The average rating men give to books by women on Goodreads is 3.9 out of 5; for books by men, it’s 3.8” (Sieghart). The evidence suggests that men don’t give female authors as much authority as male ones; and if this is true of general literature, then this readership bias might be worse in a genre such as fantasy.

Given that a majority of book reviews, especially those written by men, are on male-authored books, it’s vital that the reviews on works by women writers be uplifting and respectful. Yet, there was a term that gained significant traction in 2015, following the 2013 release of Donna Tartt’s novel, *The Goldfinch*, which spent more than 40 weeks on the NYT Bestseller List and won the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction; this term is “goldfinching” and refers to “unfounded criticism by men of lengthy, award-nominated books from women writers” (“Gender Bias in Publishing is Real...”). In other words, when a novel written by a female author wins awards or remains steady on the bestseller charts, critics ridicule the book using gender-specific insults. “It decries women’s writing skills and reading tastes as juvenile and untempered then calls out their influence as detrimental to the state of the community and its current climate” (“How Sexist Critics...”). Regarding the novel, *New Yorker* critic James Wood claimed, “the rupture with which this novel has been received is further proof of the infantilization of our literary culture” (“Gender Bias in Publishing is Real...”). Another example of goldfinching applies to Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life*—that won the Kirkus Prize and was shortlisted for the Booker prize and the National Book Award—which critic Daniel Mendelsohn claimed bore resemblance to

“women’s novels” of earlier ages and had a “deep an unadult sentimentality” that read like a teenager’s narration (“How Sexist Critics...”). He then ridicules Yanagihara’s writing, calling it “atrocious, oscillating between the incoherently ungrammatical... and painfully strained attempts at ‘lyrical’ effects” (“How Sexist Critics...”). K.W. Colyard says that while we rely on the unbiased, honest reviews of critics, the “problem with Goldfinching lies in its agents’ insistence on hurling gendered insults at targeted authors and their readers. The only purpose of these slurs is to discredit. Once a writer resorts [to that]... he’s no longer critiquing the work, but engaging in a personal attack.” According to goldfinching, sentimentality is feminine and emotion is feminine and thus un-literary. Likewise, women’s writing is childish, ungrammatical, painfully strained, and represents a decline in literature.

Through this publisher, reader, *and* reviewer bias about gender, as well as the negative effects of goldfinching, women authors suffer a loss of confidence and identity. Male readers refuse to read women-authored books because they feel as though women authors have nothing of value to provide, publishers see women writers as a financial risk instead of the male-author’s financial opportunity, and reviewers see women’s texts as of less interest or use disrespectful gender slurs in such reviews. It is here that the rest of Gilbert’s and Gubar’s list of the painful obstacles or debilitating inadequacies marking a woman writer’s struggle for self-definition and self-creation comes through, those being the (1) need for sisterly precursors and successors, and for a female audience, (2) fear of antagonism from male readers, and (3) anxiety about the impropriety of female invention. So very literally, “unlike her male counterpart, the female artist must struggle against the

effects of a socialization which makes conflicts with the will of her male precursors seem absurd, futile, or self-annihilating” (Leitch et al. 1845).

Gilbert and Gubar claim that every woman writer has “to steal (at great risk and great cost to herself) a right to write that society [extends] only to men” (Leitch et al. 1840). Thus, the woman fantasy writer might consider risking her identity (i.e. through pseudonyms or pen names) to garner respect, success, and readership. Female writers have a history of adopting male pseudonyms to grow their potential audience, and this practice is very prevalent in genres such as science fiction and fantasy. Olivia Mason, a writer and editor of multiple book sites, put together a list of female sci-fi and fantasy authors who address gender issues in their books using male or androgynous pen names, including Alice Mary Norton (Andre Norton), Alice Sheldon (James Tiptree, Jr.), Megan Lindholm (Robin Hobb), Joanne Rowling (JK Rowling and Robert Galbraith), Carolyn Janice Cherry (C.J. Cherryh), and Christina Lynch and Meg Howrey (Magnus Flyte). According to Charles de Lint, “because the fantasy genre... was largely produced by men, for men... Women working in the genre in its earlier years tended to by their initials or a man’s name so as not to scare off the male readership (de Lint 46). The practice continues to this day. Alice Mary Norton, J.K. Rowling, and Christina Lynch and Meg Howrey adopted male pseudonyms at the recommendations of their publishers, who claimed it would be better received by their intended (mostly male) readers. Because “a fake male identity tends to resonate more with the thousands of male book-buyers—and thus improves sales; because how could a *woman* write good science fiction” (Mason). Megan Lindholm adopted a male pseudonym in order to be taken more seriously as a writer of a fantasy series from a male character’s point-of-view. Carolyn Janice Cherry was told her name resembled a romance

novelist, but the male pseudonym was also a tactic employed as a sales and readership-appeal strategy. Other women fantasy authors who use pseudonyms or other androgynous name forms include N.K. Jemisin, V.E. Schwab, and S.A. Chakraborty. As K.W. Colyard points out, women writers “should be able to find bylines, garner praise, and build careers under [their] own names, but the state of the industry—even though it’s improving—makes it impossible... to criticize those women who choose to write as men.” Additionally, using a male pseudonym has become a way that women fantasy writers can expect to be taken more seriously as writers of the genre, and prevents harmful goldfinching and other gender-specific effects from occurring.

With all the gender-bias in the fantasy genre and industry, there are many ways women might internalize negative beliefs these experiences might provide about their worth as women fantasy writers. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar detail the various illnesses women writers suffered, focusing on psychic cost of repression. Thus, I return to Catherine Nichols, the female sci-fi and fantasy writer who sent out the same manuscript under her name and a male pseudonym “George” and received gender-biased results. Afterwards, Nichols experienced a fundamental change in how she looked at her own work. Catherine used the critiques George got to improve her manuscript, and eventually obtained an agent (“Gender Bias in Publishing Revealed...”). Catherine finally succeeded, but only by temporarily taking on the identity of George. Now more aware of gender bias, she is more confident, however, prior to knowing that she’d be treated much differently if she were male, she suffered lack of confidence and was close to giving up for good. David Morgan theorizes some deep-rooted internal beliefs women writers might have that prevent them from submitting their work to publishers: (1) women writers might

believe negative stereotypes concerning women fantasy writers and (2) they've given up trying to solve gender inequality in traditional publishing and are instead turning to self-publishing as what they feel is their only option (Morgan). Regardless, "female writers have long had to endure being pigeon holed as romance or paranormal romance writers and this has led to the creation of a glass ceiling that we now see in few female authors submitting works of sci-fi and fantasy" (Morgan). Christine Piper, Australian author and editor, claims that she's been guilty of self-sabotage, doubting her ability, playing down her talents, taking rejections personally, and being shy about pursuing opportunities as a woman writer (Macauley-Gierhart). As Hannah Macauley-Gierhardt notes, "for women, it seems that establishing ourselves as serious writers can be a huge psychological battle."

The same rings true for fantasy author V.E. Schwab, who first made a name for herself writing YA and children's fantasy, but then transitioned into adult fantasy. In her most recent adult fantasy title, *The Invisible Life of Addie Larue*, she writes of a young female artist named Adeline who makes a Faustian bargain in 1714 France at the age of 23. She is to be married off, yet yearns for a life of freedom so she prays to the gods after dark, which she's been told all her life not to do. One answers and grants her social freedom through immortality, but she must pay a price. Desperate for her freedom, she agrees. Afterwards, Addie Larue cannot say her name nor write it; cannot leave a mark on the world or create her art, as everything she touches reverts back to its original state; and she cannot be remembered by anyone she meets. V.E. Schwab admits to how long it took her to deem herself ready to write it (age 30). "Part of her readiness can be attributed to the empathy she began feeling for Addie. With years in publishing under her belt, Schwab felt like she, too, had made her own difficult bargains" (Charaipotra). Schwab admitted all

artists and writers such as herself just keep trying to leave a mark in some way or another, and that it can be very lonely and isolating as a writer, as it was for her. Identifying closely with Gilbert's and Gubar's theory, V.E. Schwab admitted to having to make sacrifices in order to garner the success she did, and alluded to the futility and initial difficulty of attempting to make a mark (also exhibited in *Addie Larue* and the confines of her bargain). Schwab hits on the loneliness and isolation one must confront in the process of self-creation as a writer.

In a recent interview, V.E. Schwab admitted she was scared to death of writing *The Invisible Life of Addie Larue*. The timeline didn't scare her, her feelings of her own inadequacy did. Perhaps this is because of how much *Addie Larue* and her struggles compared to V.E. Schwab's life experiences and struggles as a woman and an artist. Schwab admits she's always struggled with how much of herself to reveal and how much to erase to meet society's expectations. "One reason she writes adult novels under her initials, V.E., instead of her first name, Victoria, is because she knows some readers of traditionally male-dominated science fiction and fantasy only want to read books written by a man" (Boyd). Schwab claims she had to do a self-erasure such as that in order to get people to pick up her books. This further aligns with Gilbert's and Gubar's theory, especially when they asserted that "even the maker of a text, when she is a woman, may feel imprisoned within texts" (Leitch et al. 1847) and the high cost women writers pay for success—which is where the title *The Madwoman in the Attic* came from in the first place, standing for everything the woman must try to repress in order to write acceptable books by male standards.

Heiress of Death and Shadow

PROLOGUE

A GIRL STANDS before a broken mirror, knuckles sliced and bleeding. Seething, she grits her teeth and pulls bits of glass from where it's embedded in her skin.

She wears a uniform, the thin cotton dress of a servant girl. The emblem on her right breast pocket signifies the house she belongs to; a three pronged staff, the center prong wide and embedded with rubies. She rinses her hands under the water trickling from the faucet. Scrubs at the blood until it's reduced to a faint red stain across her skin. There's nothing she can do about the broken mirror. She gathers the larger pieces of glass that litter the sink and the floor, then discards them into a trash bin in the corner of the tiny bathroom.

A pounding on the door startles her. The tavern has become busy and crowded, all of the nightly regulars well into their glasses.

"One minute!" She calls out to the impatient man on the other side of the door. He lets out a muffled string of obscenities that get fainter as he walks away. Seconds later, she hears the pounding start anew on the other bathroom's door down the hall.

The girl glances at her reflection in the remains of the shattered mirror. Her eyes don't soften with recognition. Instead they narrow, become stoney and defensive. As if the girl in the fractured reflection is not her, but a stranger she can't stand the sight of. She studies the girl in the reflection. A heart-shaped face, thick chestnut curls, eyes a vivid blue, a spattering of freckles across her cheeks and the bridge of her nose. It is an attractive face, she thought. Yet, it seemed, not good enough for a simple baker's boy.

She blinks back the sting of tears, resolving not to shed a single one for the boy who just shredded her heart to pieces with not an ounce of remorse.

“I think it best we stop meeting like this,” Lukas had said to her earlier, only after a considerable amount of time spent fooling around in the pitch-black of his parent’s bakery that had long since closed for the evening.

“W-what?” She had stuttered out, caught off guard. He had just been kissing her, but now it seemed as if he were ending things with her.

An expression flashed across Lukas’ face, too quick to determine for certain. If she didn’t know better, she would have thought it were impatience, or frustration. “Come on now, Davina,” Lukas had said then. Usually, when he spoke to her, his voice was almost seductive, slow and smooth. Now, however, his tone was sharp, and there was no hint of his slightly crooked, incredibly charming smile that never failed to draw the girl’s attention to his full lips. She wished they could continue on as they had been just moments earlier, like they’d done for the several weeks prior. “Can you honestly say you expected this to amount to anything?”

She was silent. She didn’t know what to say. She hadn’t thought that far ahead, never intentionally wondered about the possibility of anything more serious. But she certainly hadn’t expected it to end so soon, so abruptly. Her heart clenched painfully in her chest when he laughed, the sound coming out painfully strained.

Lukas shook his head, taking her silence as an answer. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. Goodbye, Davina.”

“Wait,” she’d blurted, catching his hand as he turned away, making to leave. He turned to her and waited for her to continue. Her mouth moved to form words, but nothing came out. Still, she had nothing to say. She couldn’t honestly tell him she saw a future between them. All she knew is she didn’t want to let go of what they currently had.

Lukas scowled and pulled his hand from her grasp. She stepped back, shocked at the hostility in his expression, an ugly emotion she'd never seen him display. "Davina, it's been weeks and I barely know you." Lukas' voice trembled with barely contained frustration. "And despite my best efforts—because believe me, I've tried—I can't break through to you. And truthfully, I wouldn't be surprised if everything I think I know about you turns out to be a lie."

If she hadn't had words before, she sure didn't after that. Everything Lukas was saying, everything he was thinking and feeling was completely valid. She had been keeping him at a distance since the very beginning. Had intentionally been elusive and withholding. The news that he'd finally tired of it all, of her, should not have been the least bit surprising. Still, it hurt.

When traitorous tears welled in her eyes, the frustration disappeared from Lukas' body. He sighed and rubbed a hand over his face, dragged it up and through his tousled blonde hair. "I like you, Davina, I really do. From what little I know, at least. But all this? The secrecy, lies, and sneaking around? This isn't for me, and it's not for you either."

His kind words made no effect on the self-deprecating thoughts racing through her mind. A kind rejection was still a rejection. And they were all godsdamned painful. Without a word, she had walked calmly through the back exit, which deposited her into a dimly lit alleyway, abandoned but for a small black cat that hissed at her when she nearly stepped on its tail. She had walked aimlessly until she came across the Gold Rose tavern, where she'd then pulled the hood of her dark grey cloak over her head and slipped inside. She'd immediately headed for the bathroom which was where she'd been for the past half-hour, struggling to grasp hold of her emotions, a confusing mix of insecurity, hurt, and rage.

That's it, she thinks. She'd had quite enough of this. The girl shuts her eyes and breathes in once, deeply. She slowly lets it out, and feels the transformation take over. The ring encircling the middle finger of her right hand flares to life. She imagines the three rubies contained in the collets soldered to the band; how they'll glow faintly as the magic works. She ignores the pain as the ring's heat singes the skin underneath. Over the years, she's drawn on the ring's magic to shift so often that the old wounds never have time to completely heal. As a result, new burns layer over the old, blistering painfully before eventually fading into the dark pink scar of smooth, damaged skin beneath the band. Only when in the privacy of her room does she ever carefully slide the ring over the raw, sensitive skin to reveal the scarring and treat the new wounds with a cool salve meant to rapidly speed up the healing process. Still, while she now manages to heal most in time to prevent permanent nerve damage, the pain of the wounds, both old and new, continue to increase.

The burning stops and the ring cools, signifying the completion of the girl's transformation. When she opens her eyes, and greets her reflection once again, Davina no longer looks back at her. She bends slightly to account for the several inches height difference between this new body and Davina's, and studies the change. She never found out how the magic worked, how when she changed, the clothes changed with her, becoming whatever she wished. How the ring, changed form too, masking itself depending on the form she took, so that attention was never intentionally drawn towards it. The mechanics of it all were never explained to her. If she were being honest, she had never really cared. As long as it worked.

Davina's servant dress is gone, and the girl now wears a large olive-green tunic and dark breeches with tall black boots. The tunic is stretched across a broad, well-muscled

chest that belongs to the man whose eyes she meets in the mirror. They're a dull brown, as unremarkable as the rest of his face. She reaches a hand up to her squared jaw where her fingers run through the short, trimmed beard she now possesses. The corners of her mouth twitch up in amusement, the hurt of her earlier encounter with Lukas temporarily forgotten, just as she'd planned. The man in the reflection mirrored her movements, making the expression look predatory.

The girl—the man—nods, satisfied just as pounding on the thin bathroom door begins anew, rattling the hinges. She stalks over to the door, each footfall of her enormous feet seeming to shake the ground beneath her, and unlatches the lock. She frowns in annoyance as she swings open the door. The thin, reedy man on the other side of the door shrinks back when he catches sight of her—sees only the man she confronted in the mirror.

He mutters his apologies as she pushes past him and down the narrow, dimly lit hallway towards the sound of stilted music and boisterous laughter. She checks the clock when she enters the main room of the tavern and grins when she sees it's barely half past ten.

Her and Nadaline had agreed to meet underneath the clock tower in the center of the town square around midnight. Any later, then they'd risk other servants of their house finding out about their frequent disappearances. And the girl did not look forward to the possibility of divulging the many, many secrets of all their late night trysts. Knowing she had no chance of finding her friend before midnight, the girl would just have to entertain herself until then.

People clear out of her path as she maneuvers her massive frame through the crowd. When she arrives at the long bar where the servers pour drinks with impressive speed, she

slides into the nearest empty chair. She taps the bar, tosses a handful of coins onto the narrow wooden plank serving as the countertop and orders a pint of the strongest the Gold Rose tavern has to offer. The nearest server grins, eyes never leaving the coins as he sweeps them up and leaves to grab the drink she requested. She glances down at her hand, which is now large and meaty to match the man's form she's taken on, and regards the ring. It had been delicate before, inlaid with three rubies, the centermost ruby larger than its neighbors. Now, it is a simple metal band, the rubies nowhere to be found. The server returns with her drink and it's barely left his hand before she grabs it in her own and downs it in a few large gulps, foam and all. She taps to request another refill, and despite being in the form of a man—which she decides to name Tomás—she forces down the belch that threatens to surface.

Even she has her standards.

She downs the second just as quickly, but the third pint she takes slowly, sipping leisurely. She brought limited coin tonight, and at this rate, it would be gone before the hour ended.

As she sips, studies the night's patrons. In the far back corner, where the lights can't quite penetrate the darkness of the booths, she witnesses an exchanging of goods and coin between deft hands. She moves on, uninterested in the dangers a crowd like that would provide. In the opposite corner, located near the hallway leading to the bathrooms, she watches a card game unfold. A red-haired man with a beard long enough to brush his chest switches his cards out almost imperceptibly beneath the table.

The girl rolls her eyes, certain there's an expression of disgust displayed prominently on her face for anyone to see. She goes to turn her back to the room,

unimpressed by the drunkards the night has to offer, when she overhears a conversation at the low table right off the bar to her right. She continues turning and faces the bar, feigning intense interest in her drink as she hones in on the conversation. Just maybe, she'll hear something mildly entertaining. She barely feels the tingle of the ring's heat as the shape of her ear shifts just slightly enough to enhance her hearing. It's a risk, one she shouldn't take and one Daya would kill her for, but she's never been one for thinking things through. For her, it's always act now, beg for forgiveness later.

When the shift is complete, the words start flooding in.

“—saw Harlow, just the other day. Kid's scared out of his wits,” a man was saying. The girl twists the pint in her hands, just enough to reflect the table behind her. Three men sit at the table, bent over pints of their own. One blonde with several piercings spread across his lips, his nose, his brows; the other two with hair several shades darker, one incredibly thin and covered with tattoos, the other so large his body spills out from both sides of his chair.

“I don't blame him,” the thin man with the tattoos responds. “The kid's being sent to die. The tradition is archaic.”

The large man snorts. “It's not archaic, you dumbass. That would imply the tradition is old. Sikremora has only been around for a decade.”

“Barbaric then,” the thin man corrects. “Sadistic, tragic, whatever you want to call it.” He lifts his pint and takes a large gulp. The ale turns bitter and rotten in the girl's mouth at the mention of Sikremora. It *was* barbaric, and it was the last thing she wanted to think about. A knot forms in her stomach, and for a moment she's afraid she might vomit right here on the bar.

“Makes me wonder,” the blond starts. “What really happened a decade ago, to open the Seam.” She wills them to stop talking about it. Her chest tightens and her breath becomes ragged.

“Fredrick,” the large man warns, his voice dipping low in warning.

“What? You can’t possibly believe that nonsense the emperor has been spewing for the past ten years. I’d sooner believe that this was some meticulously executed plan to acquire more control and more power over us. Perhaps our beloved emperor wishes to wage war and conquer the kingdoms across the Sea of Bohai, next?”

“Frederick!” Spittle flies from the large man’s mouth this time. His face is near purple with frustration. “Watch your mouth before someone hangs you for treason.”

“Oh, piss off, Petyr,” Fredrick snaps, but his voice lowers nonetheless, and the girl starts to lose bits and pieces of the conversation. “Really think... be *here*... report...?”

She stops listening at this point and lowers the pint back to the bar. Her ears buzz at what she just heard and all the emotions from the encounter with Lukas earlier come flooding back, combining with the equally negative emotions brought up by the mention of Sikremora. The quarterly celebration—if it could even be called that—was in just under two weeks. Parades had already been winding their way through the five kingdoms that made up the empire, and had arrived in Vendra a few days ago. The fireworks outside her window keep her up at night.

She doesn’t mind much. They’re loud enough to drown out the whispers that keep her up anyway. At least when she’s out here, far away from her home, from *it*, the whispers slightly lessen. As if sensing the direction her thoughts are heading, a familiar whispering chorus teases the back of her mind. She subtly shakes her head, as if that might clear them

from her mind. It doesn't work, never works, so she does her best to ignore them, lest she be called out as a lunatic in this very bar. She's long since found out that nobody hears the whispers as she does. No one knows she can hear them talking.

It must stay that way.

She straightens as she finishes off her pint. By now she's had enough that the heaviness she felt earlier has been replaced by a floating sensation. The lights of the tavern blur slightly and sound speeds and slows at random intervals. A buzz. Drunk enough to take the edge off, but not enough to excuse any foolish behavior.

That's never stopped her before.

A stout, balding man sits beside her at the bar and gives her—Tómas—a glance down his nose. He seems not to like what he finds because he wrinkles his nose and turns with a grunt to call the nearest server over. And perhaps it was because of Lukas' earlier rejection of her as Danika, and this stranger's immediate rejection of her as Tómas; or perhaps it was the mention of Sikremora that does it. The tight hold she's kept on her patience all night snaps.

"You got a problem?" Her voice comes out threatening—low and deep, which surprises her. She's become very adept at changing forms, but she's still learning the details of vocal chords. For now, she continued to be surprised at the voice that came when she initially spoke in each different form. The man turns to her as the server leaves, addressing him by name. Gieran. He must be a regular if the staff knows him so personally. His tunic is dark grey and wrinkled, smelling strongly of sweat and ale. She wouldn't be surprised if he'd gone straight home from the Gold Rose for a few hours of sleep before rolling out of bed and heading straight back.

“Speak to me that way again, and I should think I do,” Gieran responds, tone just as threatening. The girl knows she should stop, should give it up and go meet Nadaline beneath the clock tower. It’s half past eleven, and if she leaves now, she’ll make it just in time. But something about the danger in his tone, the violence of it, sends a thrill through her.

For so long, the only strong feelings she’s been capable of are grief and guilt. Not even the happy moments provided an emotional release great enough to surmount the endless tide of misery. So for this, the thrill of adrenaline coursing through her veins. The anticipation of a fight, something to make her feel anything else... It’s addictive.

“Frankly, I’m surprised you picked up on it, Gieran,” she says, speaking with as much condescension as she can muster. “I must apologize, but from the looks of you... Well, you know how it is.”

Gieran’s face turns red as the blood rushes to the surface of his skin. “Watch it,” he growls. She realizes with no shortage of satisfaction how quick the man is to anger, and the rush of adrenaline keeps her going.

“I believe it’s the eyes. Were you aware that the left is ever-so-slightly skewed? Did your mother give you that eye, or was it your father, perhaps?”

For a moment, she wonders if her comment went over Gieran’s head, but quickly, his face turns a shade darker, nearing dangerously close to purple. She expects a verbal retort, so she’s a moment too late to dodge the fist that connects with her—Tómas’—cheek. The force from the punch’s impact sends her toppling out of the chair, yet she manages to remain on her feet. She groans, immediately regretting chasing the high of the adrenaline. It had fled just as quickly as it had come. Before she could either bail or return the favor,

the collar of her tunic is yanked from behind. The neckline chokes her as she's dragged backward and out of the tavern. The bar's servers and attendants watch them go, unconcerned with her fate. She fights back the curses that threaten to spill out of her mouth.

It's fine, she reassures herself. *This form is massive and in well enough shape*. She could take Gieran and still make it to the clock tower to meet Nadaline. She's thrown by her tunic onto the cobblestones outside the tavern. She rushes to her feet and turns around to confront Gieran. "Look, man. I wasn't looking for trouble—" The blood in her mouth makes it difficult for her to speak. She spits it out, the coppery tang overwhelming her tastebuds. She knows without seeing that her teeth are likely stained red with it.

"Truthfully, I think you were," Gieran says. Despite the wrinkled tunic reeking of ale, Gieran manages to look well-composed. She'd initially took him for a useless, good-for-nothing drunkard with no job, no family, and maybe not even a stable home. She's starting to rethink her initial assessment, especially when the whistles. It's a three-note sound that prompts a trickle of fear to run down the girl's back. She starts to back away, towards the tavern's back door. If she can just get inside, she can make a break for the front door and into the wide, populated street and—someone grabs her from behind, pinning Tómas' large arms to her sides. She glances over her shoulders to see two large men—much, much larger than Gieran or herself—restraining her.

"Not so mouthy now, are you?" Gieran's smile resembles more of a sneer, which only amplifies the girl's growing panic.

"You're right, Gieran," Tómas' voice comes out in a pathetic, embarrassing squeak as she forces the words out. Gieran dismisses it, obviously eager for a fight. She continues

on, not so easily deterred. “Perhaps we should let bygones be bygones, and go inside. Have a few rounds, my treat.”

At a flash of movement to her right, her heart thunders even more painfully. Her gaze darts in that direction to find two equally large men entering the alleyway. They stand a distance away, grins feral, arms crossed over huge barrel chests. She takes a shaky breath in, feeling lightheaded. With any luck, she’d pass out and they’d leave her sprawled out in the alleyway, unharmed.

She highly doubted that’d be how events would unfold.

“While the offer is enticing, I think I’ll have to pass,” Gieran answers. He gestures with a hand towards the men guarding the alley exit to her right, and they draw in closer.

Five men against one.

She braces herself for what’s to come.

* * *

A GIRL STANDS beneath the clock tower, pacing.

She checks the small watch she always keeps on her for situations such as these. A quarter til one. Makessa had agreed to meet her at midnight, but she’d never showed. She’d never been late before.

Nadaline’s gut churns as her mind goes rampant with thoughts of all the horrible things that could’ve happened between Lukas and the clock tower. While Damien is wealthier, part of the lower classes of nobility, and the walk from his home to the clock tower was short and as safe as the streets could get at this time of night for Nadaline, Lukas lived on the rougher edge of Vendra. And though Makessa refused to listen to any mention about the people or the state of the Kohrmirian Empire, Nadaline did her best to remain

educated. There would come a time when Makessa wished to know—when she'd have to know everything she's been ignoring for so many years. And Nadaline would be ready to help educate her in every way she could. Nadaline knows of the dangers that now lurk in what used to be the safest towns across the five kingdoms, the protesters Makessa's brother, Taran, had revealed to Nadaline in rushed whispers. The number of protesters grew everyday, incensed by the continuation of Sikremora each season. As if the emperor and his council had any choice in the matter. If Sikremora was put to an end, they'd all die. Nadaline isn't ready to die, and she'd hazard a guess that none of the protestors are so eager to either.

The clock reaches one, then two, and though Nadaline knows the servants of the house will notice and report their absence, she continues waiting. When the sun rises, she rushes to the nearby stables where the two girls had tied their horses the evening before and hurriedly climbs into the saddle. Her heart has sunk to the pit of her stomach and she settles on a horrifying conclusion as she brings the horse to a gallop towards the castle.

The princess is missing.

CHAPTER ONE

I CAN FEEL the emperor's stare on me like a brand.

I sit in the chair by the window and watch the guards train on the lawn down below as my father waits for an answer. I try not to move much, as each movement sends sharp pains through my entire body.

There is a faint whispering in my ears. I know from years of experience that my father cannot hear it. I am the only one cursed with it. Since my return to the castle, since I'd gained consciousness, they'd become louder, their strength returning with my proximity

to the Seam. I remind myself to take the tonic Dayanara made for me a few weeks ago. It always helped to take their edge off, dull the sound a bit.

My father sighs, his annoyance evident in the sound. “Have you anything to say, Makessa?”

Do I? I am still recovering from the near deadly beating Gieran and his gang had given me before leaving me for dead in the alley. This morning, I could barely slide out of bed and make it to the chair without passing out in pain, despite Dayanara’s best efforts to speed up the healing process. And my father had insisted on seeing me, had barged into my room as soon as he’d heard news of my improved condition and demanded things change.

I was sitting at the window, tending to the burns encircling my ring finger, and when he’d stormed in, I’d startled and threw a panicked glance at the ring which lie on the table several feet away. The door clicked closed behind my father, yet he remained frozen in place, staring. I stared back; it was already too late to lunge for the ring and take on a different form. His lips had parted in surprise as he scanned my face. Though I’d seen my father occasionally throughout the years of my isolation, I’d nearly always been in another form, or altered my appearance to what I *should* have looked like, if the color hadn’t been leeched from me when I’d been brought back from the dead. With few opportunities to see me in my true form, my father would have easily forgotten what I truly looked like.

“I wish to speak to you about your future,” he’d said once the shock abated. “Ten years in seclusion is long enough, you were a child then. But now you’re eighteen, Makessa. You can’t stay in this room forever, I will not allow it.” His voice had been stern, something I’d become all too accustomed to hearing after mother’s death. I used to think

losing her had changed my father, that the grief hardened him. Before, he was warm. His smile had come easy, and he loved my brother, Taran, and I dotingly. After, he was withdrawn, colder. It was as if he were no longer capable of warmth and unconditional love. It took weeks before I realized that the drastic change in his behavior was reserved only for me. I didn't blame him.

What I've done is unforgivable. The whispers hum in agreement.

My father waits for my answer, but I know there's only one answer I can give. I have no choice in the matter. A pressure sits like a weight in my chest as dread begins to creep over me. The thought of being forced to leave this room, to go back to how things were before... I don't think I can handle it. I shake my head, deciding I'm unable to answer.

Unsatisfied with my answer, my father continues. "I had hoped that giving you space would allow the trauma of your... accident, and witnessing your mother's murder to heal, but clearly, things are not improving. You remain reclusive, perhaps even more so as time goes on, and now you've become reckless, sneaking out in the middle of the night for these... trysts and putting yourself in direct danger of any criminal roaming the streets."

So Nadaline admitted everything to them. I can't bring myself to be mad at her. She's just keeping me safe, something I clearly can't do for myself.

"I can't allow this to go on." There is a tremble in my father's voice that causes me to look back at him. So rarely do I ever get to see this side of him. "If I lost you too, I wouldn't be able to forgive myself."

I remain silent, avoiding his eyes. The love evident in his words and the tone of his voice catches me off guard. It causes a part of me to recoil. My gaze stays pinned to a spot just below his jaw. My father is dressed cleanly, in a crisp crimson tunic, with a cape of

white fur draped over his shoulders, pinned in place by a large golden brooch with our family's crest carved into it. The three-pronged tip of a staff inlaid with rubies, a chilling likeness to the Staff of Viseras—which Dayanara carries on her person at all times—with a skull carved at its base and the glowing prism within.

“I have spoken with Dayanara, and she agrees with me,” my father says. There's a pleading edge to his voice that nearly breaks something in me. “You need help, someone to talk to aside from Nadaline. Something to do. Something that will force you out of this room which does nothing but serve as a constant reminder of that night.”

I don't know when I began to shake, but my entire upper body is trembling.

“Which is why I have come to a decision I think would be beneficial.” I keep my gaze steadily on his tunic, resolving not to react. “I'm sure you've done your best to remain unaware of our relations within the empire, but I have a tremulous past with King Aeson Vanterre of kingdom Bruzick. I made a decision when you were young that insulted Aeson, and he still harbors resentment towards me for it. As the kingdom of Bruzick supplies our greatest military forces and weaponry, and with the number of protestors rapidly increasing with each Sikremora season we host, and the growing powers in the eastern continent posing a larger threat than ever, it's imperative that Bruzick remains a fierce and loyal ally within the Kohrmirian Empire.

“Thus, I thought it would be in our best interests if I allow a courtship between you and one of his sons.” I immediately feel sick at thought, and can't help as my eyes flit up to assess my father's face. *As if I'd allow such a thing.* But from the resolved expression my father wears, I quickly realize that I have no choice in the matter. It isn't a question of if I am to allow it. It's if my father will allow it. And it seems he's already decided.

“This isn’t a proposal. There are no promises of marriage.” I don’t miss the implied “yet” in my father’s tone.

I open and close my mouth, unable to form a response. Though my thoughts are vividly near. *No, absolutely not. There is no godsdamned way I am going through with this.*

“Makessa, I cannot stress how important it is that you come out of isolation. Not only for your own good, but for the good of your family. This empire.” How strange it is to hear my father speak to me like a daughter. “Though I’ve done my best to quell the rumors and prevent suspicion, you have become a stranger to the people and they do not trust you.”

When I’d first entered into isolation, Nadaline had told me of the story my father and Dayanara had fabricated to tell the kohrmirians: I’d been injured and had fallen ill after the hukari attacked. My mother, having sacrificed herself to save me from the horrifying creatures, bought me the time to run, but not before I witnessed her brutal murder. The trauma had left me a husk of who I once was.

The people thought I’d gone mad. *It’s better than the truth*, I remind myself, thinking of the whispers that constantly plague me. Sometimes, I wish I were just mad.

“You must do all that you can to gain their loyalty and their trust,” my father says. He keeps speaking, keeps moving forward, but I remain frozen, unable to comprehend more than my intense, bone-deep fear of being forced to leave the private sanctuary of these chambers. “We can’t have the people distrusting me as their emperor, or your and Taran as my heirs. Not when so much is at stake.”

“Which is another reason why this agreement with King Aeson and Prince Anderson is vital. Duke Farlow has recently announced his retirement from his post as the overseer of accolade recruitment for Sikremora. Despite his youth, Prince Anderson has made an impressive captain of his own military unit; he’d make for a more than suitable replacement for Duke Farlow. During your time with the prince, you will also be overseeing recruitment, and attending all necessary celebratory events. It’s crucial you be seen interacting with your citizens, that you show compassion and empathy.”

My mind is too slow, unpracticed with absorbing so much information so quickly. It races to catch up with everything my father is throwing at me. I’d been too young to pay any mind towards politics prior to my mother’s death, and afterwards, the only information I learned came from the lessons I got from Dayanara— and it wasn’t much, as I discontinued my lessons shortly after the attack.

Sikremora is the morbid celebration held quarterly—once at the end of each season, when the weather begins its shift from the rains of spring into the stifling heat of summer, or the crisp breezes of fall into the brutal snowfall of winter. It is when each of the five kingdoms present their selected accolade—a generous, and all too benevolent term for what I more accurately call a cruel sacrifice—before the nobility of the empire. The Seam, which will have grown in size throughout the three month long season, will be at its peak. That night the opening would be just wide enough to let a human body pass through, yet just narrow enough to keep the terrifying creatures of nightmares out—the hukari. The accolades’ families are awarded money and status for their bravery—their sacrifice—and the accolades enjoy one last extravagant ball in the Great Hall, looked upon by their beloved emperor, before being fed to the Seam to satiate its dark, feral hunger. Once

engorging itself on all five accolades, the Seam seals itself almost entirely, shrinking until only a sliver of itself remains, leaving all attendants and the entire empire, the entire world, safe from the hukari for another few months. The season immediately following the initial attack, that first Sikremora, I'd crept up to the uppermost balconies of the throne room despite my father's order to stay put in my rooms. I'd watched the entire event with utter horror, and never returned. I hadn't planned to ever return.

As for the overseer post I'd be assisting the Bruzian prince with, and what it entailed, as well as the events I'd be forced to attend, I have not the slightest clue. I know the history of the Seam and the barbaric lengths we have to go through to keep it contained. I have no desire to learn more.

"I can't—I won't do this," I blurt at last, a sharp edge to my voice. My father manages to look stunned at the outburst.

He recovers quickly, anger flushing his cheeks red, something I've rarely seen directed at me. Not for a long time. "I may be your father, Makessa, but I am also your king." He speaks slowly and quietly, his voice turning frightening. "You will do as I say. Under which title you obey me, that remains up to you."

I clench my jaw until it physically hurts, but remain unable to come up with a retort. He holds all the power.

At my increasing anger, my father's eyes soften, going sad. "Someday," he says as he stands up from the chair and brushes nonexistent dust from his pants, "You'll understand why I did this, Makessa. Being a good leader, and a good parent, isn't about making everyone around you happy. Oftentimes, it's about making the tough choices no one else

can, disappointing everyone around you. Not because you want to, but because it's necessary.

He is halfway out the door before I respond in a dull, flat voice. "Well it's a good thing I never intend to become either." When the door shuts behind him, the whispers that always lurk in the shadows of my mind pounce.

* * *

THE WHISPERS COME for me in my sleep.

The final night before the ceremony, I toss and turn in bed, unable to close my eyes without seeing the shadows closing in. They move from the corners of my mind, and creep inward until they occupy all my thoughts. Until they are all I see.

Come to us, they beckon me.

I tense, hands clenching at pile of sheets around me, anticipating the pull that will follow. Surely enough, a tugging sensation starts in my chest, spreading to the pit of my stomach. I sit up without thinking, some subconscious part of me wanting to follow that pull. I know where it'll lead me, just as it always does.

I do not want to go. I never want to go. But that's never stopped me all the times before.

Come to us, little heiress.

I slip from under the warmth of the blankets and touch my bare feet to the cold floor. It feels like ice, a familiar cold having spread throughout the castle. I do my best to ignore the stabbing pain of it as I pad towards the chair near the window and slide my feet into the slippers waiting on the floor beside it. I shiver as the night breeze from the open window drifts over the bits of exposed skin my nightgown doesn't cover. Even the

nighttime air, crisp still with the last remnant of the fading winter yet carrying the scent of the upcoming rain of spring, has turned colder as if it too, knows what awakened tonight.

Usually, on nights such as this, I exit my chambers through the main door. However, after my father had forcibly ended my isolation and exited my chambers, Dayanara had stopped by and introduced me to the two guards who'd be taking up permanent residence outside my chamber doors. And I know without a doubt that if I try to leave the room at this hour through those doors, that they'll either demand to follow, or lock me back into the room and refuse to let me leave.

Snatching the box of matches from the bedside table, I light one and hold it to the wick of the candle beside it. I blow out the match and discard it before grabbing the candlestick and moving towards the wardrobe at the far end of the room. To the right sits my vanity, and to the left, a large partition that allows me to change in private, in the event that I should ever have guests in my chambers. I duck behind the partition and stride up to the wall. A massive tapestry covers a majority of it, decorative yet at the same time, covering the hole in the wall made the night the hukari attacked—when the hukari who killed my mother had torn the fire poker from my hands and thrown it, embedding it in the family portrait hung there. The hole had immediately been repaired and the ruined portrait tossed out. But still, I know where to look, where to find the smear of paint, a touch too dark where the new coat overlaps the edges of the old one. The wall itself serves as another painful reminder of that night. One I can't stomach. So I had it covered entirely.

But not before discovering what was hidden beneath.

I set the candlestick on the ground before the wall, and grab the edge of the tapestry, pulling it to the side and hooking its edge over my vanity mirror to keep it out of the way.

With this section of the wall exposed, I can just make out the razor thin gaps between the panels. The lines make a large rectangle, big enough to be a doorway. And that's what it is.

I press my hand to the panel, right where a handle would be, and push until I hear a faint click. When I release the pressure, the panel cracks open, the movement so faint that only a person who knows what to look for would have even notice. With a nail, I edge the panel aside until it's wide enough that I can grab ahold of it and open it the rest of the way. Behind the hidden doorway is a dark passage. I suspect it might once have been used for servants, or as an emergency exit in times of crisis. But it's long since been abandoned, if the thick coat of dust lining the floors and the tangles of cobwebs clustered into corners are any indication. The only marks in the dust are my footprints, each set more and more faded depending how much time has passed.

I bend down and grab the candlestick from the floor, making sure to keep it away from the fabric of the tapestry as I unhook it from the vanity mirror. In doing so, I catch a glimpse of my reflection and pause. In the single flame of the candle, the dead of night surrounding me, I looked like a ghost, drained of color. The ring, inlaid with three rubies, is back on my finger, and I debate using it to shift some color to my skin, hair, and eyes where I'm most affected. But not finding myself in the mood to withstand the burning brand of the ring's magic, I let the desire drain from my body and tear my eyes from the mirror.

No one will see me, anyway. I highly doubt anyone would dare go where I'm headed.

I walk back to the passage with the corner of the tapestry still in my hand. I duck into the tunnel and let the tapestry go. It falls into place, securing the open doorway from sight, one small protection in case anyone decides to enter my chambers while I'm away.

Come to us, the hukari whisper. Answering their call, I brace myself with one steadying breath and set off down the passage.

CHAPTER TWO

THE THRONE ROOM hasn't changed.

There've been times in past years when I passed through as a servant, undetected and unnoticed. Always when the Seam was at its smallest, easy to ignore, to act as if it weren't there. As if it didn't exist. During many of those times, the hall had teemed with people and the sounds of revelry. Now it sits silent and abandoned, apart from me and the whispers. All entryways and exits, down to the well-traveled servants passages and even the balcony windows are locked up tight in preparation for tonight.

Strange and dangerous things tend to happen on nights like these.

I sit precariously on the guardrail of the highest balcony overlooking the polished floor several stories below, my legs dangling over the ledge tauntingly. A fall from this height would be deadly, but I know better than anyone that there are much more dangerous things to fear. Balancing my weight with my hands, which cling to the rail beneath me, I lean forward for a better vantage point. Far below, the Seam cleaves the throne room apart—wide, towering, and curved at its top, like a large archway. There's no door, just an open black pit, filled with warped and writhing darkness.

Black and thick and starving.

Dark clawed hands reach outwards and grasp at their surroundings, clinging to the floor when they can find no other purchase. My gaze snags on a flower vase set too close mere moments before a stray hand whips in its direction. The impact sends the vase toppling over and I flinch when it makes contact with the floor and shatters. The sound echoes throughout the room, loud enough for the guards stationed at every entrance to hear. I wait several long seconds, but no one enters to check on the commotion. No one dares.

Whatever mess the Seam creates in this room tonight will only be faced after sunrise, when all the shadows of night have retreated. The shattered flower vase attracts the attention of more arms, more spindly fingers. They claw at the shattered glass and tear into the spilled stems of flowers, dragging it backwards, into the endless pit within the archway. Shards of glass tumble over one another, creating an eerie chime as the vase is sucked into the Seam. In seconds there's no evidence that there was ever a vase at all. I suppress a shudder at the Seam's hunger and wonder if it can endure starvation until tomorrow. Our estimations have not been off in years, but the haunting memories of those first few cycles and our erroneous calculations have left a lingering trace of fear and doubt in me.

The hukari's whispers become louder, more frenzied, as they catch on to the direction my thoughts have drifted. *Your fault*, they whisper. *All your fault*.

I recoil, the force from which I withdraw from the Seam causing me to topple backwards off the balcony railing. My back hits the ground with a thud, forcing the air from my lungs. With a groan, partly because of the pain and partly due to frustration, I find my footing and stand. This time, I stay on the safe side of the balcony, feet secured firmly

to the floor, and lean against the railing, pressing my forearms into the cold, smooth surface of the handrail.

“Makessa?” The soft trilling voice, full of disbelief, startles me, at odd contrast with the ominous whispers in my mind and the layered, sinister silence of the throne room. I turn around. A girl stands several paces back, and looks to be around my age, maybe a little younger. My chest tightens, and my throat feels like it’s closing up, an indication of oncoming emotions that often end in tears. The girl’s face is heart-shaped, her hair auburn and neatly coiled into a regal updo. Icy blue eyes, framed by thick, dark lashes stare back at me with shock that mirrors my own.

Danika. As children, her and her sister Asha had been my closest friends aside from Nadaline. We’d been inseparable. That had been before the accident, before the Seam opened and the hukari attacked, killing so many. I haven’t talked to her since.

Danika takes a step forward, the movement unsure. “They said... Taran mentioned you’d recovered at last.” Her eyes drift across my face and towards my hair, its paleness illuminated by the moon that shines through the window at her back. Her brows furrow. My heart speeds. I finger the ring on the middle finger of my right hand with the pad of my thumb, but resist the urge to use the magic to bring the natural honey-blond hues to my hair, or the vivid blue to my irises. Not yet, I’d have to wait for her to glance away.

No one can know of the existence of true magic, Dayanara had warned when she’d first gifted the ring to me all those years ago. It’s the only rule I’ve never broken.

“Yeah,” I say, my voice coming out raspy. “All better.”

Danika walks the rest of the way forward and leans up against the rail beside me, facing my direction. She scans my face, taking everything in. I avoid her eyes, not wanting her to see their haunting vacantness.

“Horrible, isn’t it?” She asks, pulling her gaze from my face to stare down at the Seam. I take the opportunity to draw on the ring’s magic, pulling the long-lost blue back into the irises. I even dare to bring the slightest hint of honey-blonde to my hair, hoping she won’t detect the change.

“Indeed,” I agree. The whispers stir in satisfaction at our words. When she looks back at me, her eyes don’t even stray from my face.

“I missed you, you know? Every single day.” Guilt sits heavy like a stone in my chest when I see the gleam in her eyes. The moonlight reflects against the unshed tears there. “I lost my sister that night. I’m not sure how much you’ve been told. She left her chambers to find me, to warn me and get me out. The hukari came across her in the halls, tore her apart just outside my door.”

Danika lets out a laugh, but it sounds hollow and broken.

“I wasn’t even there, though. Taran and I had snuck out, gone to the weaponry to see what it contained. The fact that it was off-limits to us made it all the more exciting...” Danika trailed off, perhaps wondering why I hadn’t begged them to join. It never bothered Asha to be left out of the adventures Taran and Danika tended to always take together, separate from the group, but for me, it had been an entirely different matter. Nearly always, I found a way to invite myself to all of their adventures, even if it had meant staying up late into the night, listening for stifled giggles and the scuffing of shoes against the floor to sound in the hall. Danika’s hesitation doesn’t last longer than a breath, her thoughts racing

over the hole in her memories, so small it'd be near impossible to notice. Dayanara's work is flawless.

Danika shakes her head and continues. "We were inside when we heard the screams. We cowered in the corner of the room, trembling with terror. Your father—His Imperial Majesty—found us."

I know all of this. I've known it all since the day after it had happened. But to Danika, I've been unwell all this time, in no shape to focus on much other than how to keep surviving one day to the next. "I'm so sorry," I say, my voice cracking. It's what someone might say if they are sorry for her loss, a polite gesture. But only I know how deep those words go when I say them to her. How I am the only person who really *needs* to say them to her.

"I am too. About your mother," Danika says with a sniff, brushing at a tear that had escaped. "I can't imagine what you must be feeling. Your father and brother have had time to mend, to start the healing, but it all must be so fresh for you."

She isn't looking at me, is just staring at the Seam down below which has gone quiet and still. The arms have fully retreated, as if they'd come to the conclusion that there was nothing else within reach. As if biding their time, in case we slip up within the next twenty-four hours. Or as if the hukari are content on listening in on our conversation. From the whispers brushing up against my mind, they are amused at my predicament. And gleeful at Danika's pain, still fresh despite the years, a wound festering.

"I missed you too," I say once the silence becomes unbearable. I've seen her often over the years, while in many different forms. After the loss of her sister and my continued absence at court in the years following, her and Taran drifted apart. It wasn't until the past

few months that they'd reacquainted and become closer once again, due in part to the recent discussions between her mother and my father concerning a potential marriage between the pair in the near future. Danika's arm slides along the rail as she reaches out a hand to me. She grips my fingers in hers, her skin hot to the touch compared to the searing cold of my own. If she's startled by it, she doesn't show.

"I'm glad you're back." Danika pulls away from the rail and smiles at me. Her teeth are a brilliant white in the moonlight, her smile radiant despite the pain she let show just moments earlier, and the ugliness lurking far below. "I have to be getting back to Taran and the others. We get together the night before Sikremora, to ease the fear and anxiety. It helps."

I nod and go to pull my hand from hers but she holds firm.

"Would you like to come?"

On impulse, I shake my head. This time, when I pull my hand from hers, more forcefully, she lets it slip from her grasp. There is no anger or hurt in her expression, only pity. "I don't think it would be wise. I'm still getting my bearings. There's been a lot for me to learn in such little time, and I'm afraid what I need most is rest."

She nods. "Of course, my apologies."

"I look forward to seeing you tomorrow, though." Danika pulls me into a fierce embrace before I finish my sentence, nearly knocking the breath out of me. It should have been comforting, but instead the action makes me feel like a thief. Stealing that which I don't deserve. Compassion that doesn't belong to me.

Danika wishes me well and makes me promise to return to my chambers promptly and safely before taking her leave and heading back to Taran and *the others* she'd referred to.

I stand at the rail a little while longer, listening to the ebb and flow of the whispers as the moon traces its path across the sky. I stare at the Seam as it shifts and writhes. I don't glance away, even when the whisper of wings joins the cacophony of voices and a hulking presence looms at my back, casting an enormous shadow over me as it blocks out most of the moon's light that shines in through the window. Despite the curling flame of rage and the cold need for vengeance that rises inside me at Hiasythe's arrival, its essence brushes up against me as if greeting an old friend. Vexed by the part of me that recognizes the hukari as a distant form of kin, I direct a sharp command at Hiasythe. The hukari that murdered my mother a decade ago obeys, dropping to its knees and dipping its head in a deferential bow. My irritation lessens and grim satisfaction takes its place.

In the decade since I'd spared Hiasythe, I've never once called it back to me. Its return is always voluntary, however unwanted, and always on this night. As though the same hypnotic pull that never fails to drag me from bed also drags it from the depths of the forrest in which I banished it. Dozens of shared nights like these, with few words exchanged between us, has resulted in a strange relationship of sorts. I'll never forgive Hiasythe for killing my mother. Will never stop debating on whether to renege on my initial act of mercy and rip its heart from its chest as it had done to me when it had slit her throat. However, I cannot deny the link between us, an understanding that only we are privy to.

A monster, tamed. A pitiful shadow compared to what it once was.

A monster, created. A shameful ghost of the girl I could've become.

And so, I stand there in companionable silence with Hiasythe, deciding once more, to postpone its death for another season.

* * *

THE MORNING OF Sikremora, my rooms are more crowded than they've ever been. The servants fuss at the dark circles under my eyes as they make vain attempts at conceal them.

I'd remained awake, standing on that balcony with Hiasythe, so late into the night that it could more accurately be considered early morning. The moon was just starting to sink, the darkness of the sky beginning to lighten when I trekked back through the system of passages and collapsed on top of my bed, asleep before I could even bother with drawing the covers over my body. Still, I'm surprised I managed to get even an ounce of sleep. My stomach has been tied in painful knots all morning, all in dreadful anticipation of this afternoon's events.

"You look exquisite, Your Highness," Nadaline says, somehow managing to make every word of her statement sound teasing. I look at her through the reflection of the mirror I'm seated in front of. She's digging into the heaping platter a male servant had brought up for me earlier, piled high with fruit, toasted bread, and an assortment of flavored jams. A feast in celebration of the princess's return to society. I've been too sick with apprehension to stomach a bite. I'm thankful when a servant steps in front of me, blocking my view of the food in the mirror's reflection. The bile that had risen in my throat settles back into the pit of my stomach, brewing and waiting for the right trigger.

I sit still while the servants continue to fuss and fret, closing my eyes, or puckering my lips when instructed. Eventually the servants dwindle until only a few remain. Alesia

and Zadie, if I remembered their names correctly. The two girls would be my personal servants from this point onward, under the supervision of Nadaline, according to my father's wishes.

"Disregarding the tone," Alesia starts, "Nadaline had a point, Your Highness. You do look quite exquisite." Zadie nods in agreement, a proud smile lighting her delicate oval-shaped face. I give them a small smile in thanks as they step out of the way of the mirror. I gaze at my reflection. The honey-blond strands of my hair, vibrant from the glamour of the ring, cascade in silky voluminous waves over my shoulders and down my back. My vivid blue eyes, also courtesy of the ring, are lined with black, my top lids dusted with color that complements my skin tone and matches the dress Dayanara picked out. My lips are painted a deep red, and I try not to think of what the color reminds me of.

"Ready for the dress, Your Highness?" Alesia asks, her voice soft. I suck in a deep breath, willing my body to relax. It had become tense, as if preparing for me to bolt from the room, away from all this. Once I'm sure I won't run away if I give control back to my limbs, I stand from my chair.

"Yes."

Alexia and Zadie lead me to the slightly raised platform before a the large, full-length mirror in the corner of my room, to the left of the wardrobe partition. They disappear from the mirror's reflection, only to return holding a dress that nearly steals the breath from my lungs. I twist around to see it, as if I somehow knew its reflection in the mirror hasn't done it justice. I'm at a loss for words as I untie my robe and let Nadaline pluck it from my hands. I stare at the way the deep maroon swaths of fabric move as Alesia and Zadie slide the dress along my skin, fitting it into place. The silk is a soothing whisper against my arms

and legs, at contrast with the harshness of the whispers in my own mind, which are deafening today.

I inspect its fit, even as the all too familiar feeling of guilt slides into my gut. I watch as Alesia fixes it to perfection, moving the fabric around, the golden sewn-in floral designs rising up the skirt glittering in the sunlight that bleeds in from the windows along the far wall. I quell my appreciation of the dress just as Zadie tightens a shining, golden belt around my waist. Despite my efforts, I can't keep my eyes from straying. My gaze slides up from the belt, noticing how the make of the dress leaves my left arm entirely exposed, the fabric instead reaching across my chest to drape over my right shoulder. I reach back with my right hand and run my fingers over the fabric that hangs there, not quite a sleeve but one-shouldered cape, so long that it brushed the floor. Leg by leg, I step into the black heels, threaded through with gold, that Zadie had set aside for me.

Alesia's tall stature allows her to place a golden diadem on top of my curls without my having to lean down, and when she finishes, she steps back to regard the finished look with a smile. Zadie does the same at her side. My throat tightens at the sight of being appraised in such a way. Aside from a brief glance at my reflection, I don't allow myself to linger on how I look. To admire the dress, and to admire myself in it before, had been a mistake, a momentary lapse in judgment. I turn my back to the mirror and smile, giving the servants my gratitude.

"Absolutely gorgeous," I overhear Zadie whispering to Alesia, her hands clasped together as her eyes can't help but cling to my every movement. I force myself to smile, despite the churning in my gut, the bile threatening to resurface. Guilt turns my insides to ice, hardening me for what's to come. What I'm being forced to watch.

Yes, I think. I will, indeed look gorgeous as I sit upon the dais and watch people die.

CHAPTER THREE

MORE THAN ONE kind of whisper follows me through the maze of corridors leading to the throne room. Servants become corporeal shadows, layering over the ones always taunting the edges of my vision, lingering just out of sight as they trail in my wake. I can feel their stares, even through the half dozen guards flanking me, an airtight barrier that threatens to suffocate me.

My hands have been clenched tight from the moment I left the privacy of my chambers, and my fingernails are embedding in the soft skin of my palms, creating crescent-shaped indentions in the otherwise smooth surface. The urge to vomit is ever present, the nausea having increased with every step forward, with every new servant that falls silent and gapes as their eyes meet mine, and scan my face before sliding down the length of my body, committing every detail of me to their memory.

The past few days, I'd run these next several hours over and over again on an endless loop in my mind. I'd pictured the way the first few moments after leaving my chambers would go, followed by the walk to the throne room, my dreaded climactic entrance, and the Sikremora celebration that would follow. In each scenario I concocted, I'd been flanked by my brother, my father, Dayanara. Even, in some cases, Nadaline, though the possibility of that particular scenario was incredibly slim. However, not once did I imagine a version of today in which Nadaline departs to help the castle servants with whatever tasks still needed to be completed prior to the celebration. A version where my

father, Taran, or Dayanara never show up at my door to escort me to the throne room. In which I walk to the Great Hall alone, aside from the six guards encircling me.

It's not surprising, but for some reason, when the guards had knocked on my door to notify me that it was time to leave, I had waited. Told them to hold on a few more minutes, then a few more, until I ran out of excuses. Until I gave up on anyone I knew showing up at my chamber doors. The small kernel of hope I'd managed to hold onto had sunk deep into the pit of my stomach, its light smothered, when I finally called out to them that I was ready. I was beyond late at this point. I blink rapidly in an attempt to ease the burning sensation irritating my eyes.

This is fine, I can do this alone. I've been alone for a decade now, pushed everyone away so I could have the privilege of being alone. *This is more than fine, this is what I wanted. Things are much easier when done alone.*

All too soon, the two massive doors marking the Great Hall's entrance come into view, flanked by guards on either side. My mouth goes dry and I uncurl my clenched fists only to wipe my clammy palms on my dress. My hands tremble when I rest them back at my sides, careful to keep my fingers relaxed, palms open to the refreshing cool air of the corridor. When I near the doors, the circle of guards around me breaks apart, their movements synchronized as they move with impressive precision. The final formation left my frontside unobscured, with two guards side-by-side at my back, and one stationed at my left and right. The remaining two had peeled off and stand further away, watchful but not hovering. The formation is still suffocating, but less so than before.

I hear the sharp intakes of breath moments before the guards stationed at the Great Hall's entrance straighten and bow, murmuring strains of flattering nonsense that they'd

be better off wasting on my brother. The only heir with actual power. A flush rushes to my cheeks, flooding my face with heat as every guest in the corridor within hearing distance pauses their conversations and cranes their necks, straining to catch a glimpse at what caused such a commotion from the usually stoic guards. My shoulders go stiff as a wave of whispers rises from the end of the corridor, drawing nearer and louder as it threatens to crest. The guards have barely begun to heave the doors open when I break formation and threw myself into the throne room.

* * *

THERE IS A BUZZING in my ears so loud I barely hear my name and title announced. I can feel my heartbeat in my head, and my vision is blurry, a haze of shapes and color with little depth or definition. I stumble as I take my first step, but someone grabs my arm before I can fall and doesn't let go until I regain my footing. I squint at the person who'd come to my rescue, and find it to be one of my guards. He falls back into formation with the others, who are back to surrounding me on three sides.

After a few moments, my vision begins to clear and sound gradually floods my ears once again. I immediately wish that it hadn't. The Great Hall is nearly as silent as it had been last night, when it was just me up on the highest balcony, overlooking the Seam. However, this time, the cavernous space is filled with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of guests. They all stare at me with a varying mix of emotions.

Shock, excitement, hatred, envy, compassion, distrust, pity. Some gazes I meet with my own, letting the emotion wash over me, penetrate my walls. Others, I avoid like I would an illness, the emotions there too risky to face. One by one, heads dip. Women curtsy and men bow, acknowledging me for who they believe me to be. Who I'm supposed to be.

I draw in a shaky breath that does nothing to calm my racing heart, and step forward until I join the throng of honored guests and nobility congregated deeper within the hall. A surge of relief rushes through my entire body when people start to turn back to their neighbors, reinitiating forgotten conversations, and the eerie silence of the room returns to a dull roar. All I have to do is reach the far end of the hall, where my parents' thrones sit atop the raised dais. Where the royal families are sure to be gathered, including my father and brother.

The celebration is already an hour in, and it seems like I was one of the last to arrive. The dancing has already begun in the center of the room, those participating staying far away from the Seam that appears to swallow a good portion of the floor. Large rectangular tables line the large pillars on the left side of the hall, laden with all manners of food from around the continent—fresh strawberries, peaches, and grapes imported from Denaine; roasted venison locally found in the deep forests of Bruzick; cheese cubes and thick slices of baked bread from Hemendal; cherry and apple pies made just last night by the servants in the kitchens here in the castle; and cooked salmon brought in from the fishing ports of Terayna. My mouth waters at the sight and I contemplate taking a longer route towards the dais just to snag a plate. Soon, though, all attempts at getting anywhere are thwarted by an endless stream of guests that halt all progress. It seems every person in attendance desires to have a word with the long-absent Imperial Princess.

“What was it like, being sick for so long? I suppose you were unable to continue your lessons in such a state. Are you even able to speak? To read? In that case, it would be no wonder why you were hidden away for so long.” A middle-aged woman was saying.

Her skin is sallow, her black hair tied back so tightly that it pulls her skin around her eyes so tight her lids are widened in a perpetual expression of surprise.

I scowl at the bite to her words and push past her, not deigning to respond. My patience had been limited to start with, and after a quarter of an hour, it'd already been completely spent. I scan the room, searching for a familiar face among the sea of strangers. Just as I think I spot Taran's blond hair near the foot of the dais, another woman steps in front of me, filling my vision.

"Oh, you must know how sorry I am for the loss of your mother," she dotes. Her face twists up in grief, contradicting the cruel and cunning glint in her cold green eyes. "You are so brave. *So strong*, to have been able to survive what she could not." The words are like a knife plunged into my heart. The sudden jarring pain of it knocks the breath from my lungs. I must have betrayed my feelings with my expression because the woman's lips, painted a deep red, twists up into a smirk that matches the coldness of her eyes before she turns and walks away.

That was the first scathing comment I'd gotten so far, but it was unlikely to be the last. My breaths starts to come in shallow, audible gasps as I scan the room with more desperation than before. I pray I'll spot someone—my father, Taran, or Dayanara—as I stumble deeper into the center of the hall, nearing the massive black archway of the Seam that everyone goes through great lengths to avoid, yet at the same time can't turn their backs to. The nearest guests are still a dozen feet away from the gaping rip, eyes frequently darting between their acquaintances and the Seam, not quite trusting the hukari to stay put within.

A man older than my father grabs my arm to halt my momentum, a strange look on his face that causes bile to rise in my throat. I have half a thought to let it come, anything to deter the man from advancing any further. Before I can settle on a decision, a hand grabs my other arm and tugs me away from the man, whose grip tightens once, painfully, before he notices who has arrived and begrudgingly lets go.

“What a disgusting brute,” my savior mutters under her breath. I glance over, and words fail me the moment I see her. Danika is breathtaking, her glossy auburn hair pulled into a high ponytail that falls long and straight down her back. Her eyes are outlined in black, emphasizing the icy blue of her eyes. She wears a dress of deep purple, accented with copper beading and matching jewelry, the colors of her home kingdom, Denaine. She glances over and smiles at me, the friendly expression soothing some of the tension from my body. She tucks an arm through mine. “It can be overwhelming at first, especially if you haven’t been around crowds for as long as you have. But it’ll get easier as the evening goes on.”

I’m not so sure Sikremora would ever get easier, not even if I managed to survive this night a thousand times, but I force a smile back at her and nod. “Thank you for saving me back there.”

“Always,” she responds before pulling me along. She drags me from group to group, introducing me to various nobles—including the sons and daughters of the kings and queens of Hemendal and Terayna whom haven’t seen me since I was eight. Among the courtiers Danika introduced me to, only one makes a lasting impression.

The Duke of Adena, a tall man with salt and pepper hair and a slightly crooked nose controls a significant portion of the empire’s trade through the Port of Adena on Denaine’s

east coastline. Despite the slight superficial nature to his outward appearance that seems an inevitable consequence of being a person so involved in the business and politics of the empire, I found myself enjoying his company the most, drawn in by the plethora of fascinating stories he appeared to have at his disposal.

When Danika begins pulling me further into the room, approaching the dais occupied by members of the various royal families in the Kohrmirian Empire, I finally dare a lengthy look around. The endless levels of balconies raising far above are packed with people, some sitting at the tables nestled in dark alcoves closer to the outer walls, others pressed tightly against the rails to get a good view at the floor below. I try not to think about how, just last night, I'd been up in those balconies, staring down at the Seam in companionable silence with none other than a hukari. I avoid glancing back up, as if by doing so, the onlookers above might see the guilt written across my face and somehow know of my betrayal.

On the main level, in which I'd somehow nearly made it from one end to the other, countless circular tables are arranged along the edges of the room. Only five long rectangular tables are positioned close to the dais on which a set of thrones perch. Each table is draped in cloth the color of the kingdom which the table is meant to represent. Crimson and gold for my Kingdom—Kohrmire; purple and copper for Denaine, green and silver for Hemendal, blue and bronze for Terayna, and black and platinum for Bruzick.

For Sikremora, the tables are not only inhabited by the usual royal family of each kingdom—they also house the honored Accolade of this season as well as every member of his or her extended family in attendance. It is considered a great honor to all citizens, but I can't help but wonder how I'd feel if I were an Accolade or a member of the

Accolade's family, forced to sit across from a royal family all day, to converse with them as if they weren't about to sentence me or someone I loved to die. Given, there wasn't much choice in the matter, and my father and the council—made up of the kings and queens and a few trusted courtiers of high rank—did the best they could at making the selection and sacrificial ceremony as humane as possible. But it was war. Had been since the Seam opened. And no matter how much respect you give your soldiers, and how much you try to ensure they receive the best treatment or how much you attempt to increase their chances of survival... War and mass casualty, however necessary or unavoidable, make a mockery of any semblance of humanity. Death was death, regardless of the pretty packaging.

“Makessa, you remember my mother, don't you?” Danika asks. She pulls us to a stop before a striking woman with dark brown hair plaited and draped over one shoulder. There are wrinkle lines around her eyes, evidence that despite the dark times we'd been forced into for the past ten years, she still found ways to smile, to laugh. I remember every detail.

Her expression is benevolent as she gently takes one of my hands in her own and bows her head. “Your Highness. Dear Makessa, I'm relieved to find you're doing better.” Unlike many of the well wishes and grateful commentary from other guests, Danika's mother sounds wholly genuine.

“Thank you, Queen Jesope,” I say to her, and find I can't contain a small smile of my own. I glance at her side, which is empty. In my childhood, her husband King Keenan, had always been at her elbow. The two were inseparable, a marriage made of love rather than obligation, which had reminded me much of my own parents. Today he is absent from

her side, and a quick scan of the hall shows he isn't anywhere nearby, either. "Where is your husband?"

Danika flinches, and Queen Jesope's open, compassionate expression closes, crumpling in on itself. "Unfortunately, not all of my family could bear the losses sustained the night the Seam opened. Keenan... has not been the same since that day. He prefers keep to himself these days, stick to the comforts of what's familiar. Home."

I nod, guilt regripping my heart, more painful than before as if to punish me for forgetting myself for even a moment. For daring to connect, to have even one semi-normal conversation with my oldest friend and her mother. Even walking the castle as a shadow all these years, overhearing things I never would have if I were myself, there are still things I'd missed. Things I should know about, and don't. "I am so sorry. Forgive me, I shouldn't have asked."

"No, no. It's quite alright," Queen Jesope smiles and pats my hand lightly. "I think I've taken up quite a bit of your time, I'm sure many other families are waiting to talk to you. Once again, we are so grateful to have you back. Do be sure to visit us, soon."

I nod again, but the action is forced, my neck dipping stiffly as if even my own body knows that it's a lie. That I will do everything in my power to avoid visiting a family that I've screwed up in too many ways to count.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE NEXT HOUR lasts an eternity.

Inch by inch, dread consumes me from the inside out. It's gnawing ache festers and spreads like wildfire, inducing a stomach-roiling that makes all attempts at eating impossible. Any efforts towards socializing had been destined to fail from the start, so at

least my mounting trepidation doesn't affected much in the way of that. Well, it wouldn't have affected it much, if anyone had deigned to speak to me at all aside from the incessant flooding of shallow condolences and all-too-eager invitations to dance.

My fingers shake as I fumble anxiously with the cape of fabric draping over my right shoulder and across my lap. I press them flat to the tops of my thighs to still their movement, granting them a short reprieve. Reluctantly, my gaze slides back to the black writhing mass in the center of the room. I'd made it three minutes without acknowledging the Seam. A new record for the evening. The spindly black arms from the night before don't dare reach out this early in the evening, with the light of the setting sun still penetrating through the windows lining the outer walls. No, they like to wait until the sunlight fades completely, leaving the room bathed only in torchlight.

Hungry, the voices in my head whisper. *So hungry*.

I clench my eyes shut and twist my head away, restarting the count. When I open them, I avoid the Seam, and instead glance over at Taran, seated to my left. He is focused intently on his conversation with a few members of the Accolade's family seated across the table from us. A sigh makes its way up my throat, brought forward by my increasing regret at making the decision to sit over here in the first place. Briefly, I entertain the thought of where I might have gone if not to my family's table. One of the smaller round tables littering the edges of the main floor? Or the couches in the dimly lit seating areas of the upper balconies? Neither option seems more appealing than my current situation. No, it seems the problem is that I regret being here at all—where in *here* I am doesn't really matter.

On the other side of Taran sits my father, in an enormous high-backed chair embedded with rubies that glint in the light of the torches that brightly illuminate the hall. And on the other side of my father sits Dayanara, who is easily the most beautiful person in the room. Her hair, black as night, falls in glossy waves down her back and she wears a dress of gold silk that accentuates the subtle curves of her body. Past her, there sits no one else, just as there is no one seated on my right or beyond. Only four of us on this one side—untouchable—a stark contrast to the dozen or so family members of Harlow Badden seated across from us.

When I'd first been introduced to Kohrmire's Accolade upon arriving at the table, I'd frozen. Harlow had bowed and launched into a series of praises and compliments that I'd already heard countless times in the walk from the entrance to the dais. I'd only been able to stare at his face—which was unmarred by the wrinkles of age, unmarked by crows feet that would surely show up around his eyes in his later years as proof of a life well-enjoyed. He is only twenty-six, a former blacksmith's apprentice. And he is going to die tonight. Along with four other innocent people.

Facing an accolade, meeting one, exchanging words with one... Knowing who they are, their name, that they have a family—parents, siblings, a partner—is something I wasn't prepared for. For the past decade, I've barely suffered through the guilt of simply knowing of the pain and tragedy I've caused. From today onward, I have to endure the agony of *knowing* the people I am inflicting that pain and tragedy on. I'll see every escaped tear, hear every tortured sob, and know I'm to blame for it all.

Delicious, the whispers croon, feeding ravenously off the horrible scenes my mind conjures up.

My nails are beginning to slice open the flesh of my palms, a welcome distraction from the direction in which my thoughts were headed. I attempt to listen in on the conversation Taran is having with who I guess are Harlow's parents, or perhaps an aunt and uncle, but quickly lose interest when I find the topic to be blacksmithing.

Careful to avoid looking at the Seam, I instead glance at the two long tables lining the right row of columns. Closest to the dais is the royal table of Terayna, where the king and queen sit, surrounded by their seven children—five daughters and two sons. Across from them sits the family of the Terayna Accolade—thirty-one year old Alyce Flynn. Furthest from the dais is the royal table of Bruzick. The Bruzick Accolade is an enormous, wide-framed and well-muscled twenty-nine year old man named Cassian Ashcroft surrounded by his equally large-framed family. Across from them sits the royal family of Bruzick, the king and queen and four sons.

At King Aeson's right sits his eldest son, Kyran. I shudder at my childhood memories of him. Kyran had been sixteen at the time I reached eight, and already cruel like his father. However, while King Aeson preferred to keep his monstrous side private, contained behind closed doors, Kyran found a sick satisfaction in the publicity of it. He took pride in the fact that he was older, bigger, and stronger than most of the other royal children. Though, Kyran took the most interest in my elder brother—and made Taran's day-to-day life as difficult as one could when tormenting an Imperial Heir. Kyran would be about twenty-six by now, and is several times larger than he'd been as a teenager. Broad enough to fill the large chair he sits in, biceps as big around as my head, and over six-and-a-half feet tall. What would that much more size and strength have done to his anger issues over the years? I shudder again.

Next to Kyran sits the second eldest of the bunch, and on the opposite side, to the left of the queen, sits the remaining two sons, one a small child and the other who looks close to entering his teens. The entire family looks similar, skin tanned deeply from long days spent out in the sun, and inky black hair. I haven't learned their names, but as I return to the second eldest, I suspect that he might be the Prince Anderson my father sought to send me off with for the next few months.

Before I could study the Prince, someone stepped directly in front of me, obscuring him from sight.

"Care to dance, Your Highness?" My gaze slides up until it reaches the stranger's face. It's a young man who looks to be a few years older than me. His eyes are a warm, rich brown and his hair is long enough that it curls slightly behind his ears. He offers his hand with a smile, pure and kind, that has me leaning forward. My hand twitches towards his own instinctively, and I nearly allow it to before grabbing ahold of myself and jerking away.

"Oh. No, thank you," I say, curtly. The kind stranger pulls his hand back, expression somewhere between shocked and perplexed as if he hadn't expected my short dismissal. Without another word, he turns and walks away. I notice he doesn't even make it beyond the royal tables before he snags the attention of one of the Hemendal princesses. They sweep onto the dance floor in a flurry of skirts and tailcoats.

Feeling eyes on me, I turn to Taran. His expression is disapproving. "You haven't danced tonight. Not even once. Do you not worry you might be giving off the wrong impression?"

“I beg your pardon?” I ask. “And exactly would be the *wrong* impression? Considering father struck a bargain wherein Prince Anderson would be allowed to openly court me, I would assume that by rejecting any other proposals for a even a dance would, in fact, be giving off the *right* impression.”

“Be serious, Makessa.” The look Taran gives me is patronizing. He leans forward so that he can speak in a hushed, clipped tone. “You’ve been missing for a decade. Many of the people in this room, and outside of it, have made their own assumptions regarding you. Many of those not especially in our favor. The least you could do is act like you care about this, about them.”

“You wish to speak to me about the impression I’m giving off?” I snap, finding it hard to keep my voice just as hushed as his had been. “What about you? You hadn’t said but five words to me today until now. I’ve received even less from father and Dayanara. And while you were all sitting here, presenting this unified front like some tight knit little family, I was in my chambers *waiting* for *my* family to arrive to escort me to this stupid celebration. Instead, I had to arrive entirely alone.”

Taran’s eyes are wide, his mouth moving as he struggles to form a response. Not often do I shock my brother to the point of no words.

“Well, you—“ He starts, his cheeks flushing. In anger or embarrassment, I’m not entirely sure. “You’ve made it fairly difficult, Makessa.”

“Made *what* difficult?” I ask with a roll of my eyes.

He lets out a laugh under his breath that sounds more annoyed than mirthful. “To... I don’t know, be around you? To know what you’re thinking, or what you want. Gods, Makessa. We used to be close, closer than anyone else. I knew everything about you.

Sometimes I think I knew what you were thinking or feeling before even you did. But after mom, after... well, everything, you completely shut me out. Shut all of us out. Now, I look at you, and I don't recognize you at all. It's like I'm staring at a stranger."

The words claw their way into my chest, leaving it hollow and aching. He speaks the truth, but it's still incredibly painful to hear.

"I would have liked it if I hadn't had to do this alone," I mutter. I look away and stare down at the table. I rub my finger over an indentation in the wood, afraid to meet his gaze after sharing something so vulnerable. He's become a stranger to me over the years too, at my own doing. And I'm not sure how he'll respond to anything I say, what he'll do with any vulnerability I reveal to him.

A hand grabs mine and squeezes briefly before letting go.

"I'm sorry, I'll keep that in mind for next time," Taran says.

And even though the thought of there being a next time still fills me with an overpowering sense of dread, I feeling a little better in knowing that I won't be alone. I allow myself that.

With some of the tension settled between us, Taran is soon pulled away by Danika and dragged towards the floor for a dance. I stay sitting at the table with my father, Dayanara, and a few stragglers of Harlow's family who remain seated at the table, engrossed in conversation with Harlow himself. The conversations eventually turn more private, the closer the Sikremora ceremony looms, and even my father and Dayanara did not dare impede or interrupt.

Invitations to dance become few and far between as the night draws on, and guests start to get the impression that it's a hopeless endeavor. I shift, wincing at the stiffness in

my back from being in the same position for so long, and can't help but let my gaze stray towards each of the accolades. The more the night drags on, the more my stomach tightens into knots. The more the guilt eats away at me. But I can't ignore the strange need I have to memorize the accolades—their faces, their names. It's the least I can do. Many of the accolades are no longer roaming the room, dancing, or chatting with strangers or newly made friends. As the evening had turned into night, the conversations with others had ebbed away, and while some members of the Accolades' family are still flitting off to dance, others remain near their accolades soaking up the last dregs of quality time they'd ever have with them, whoever he or she was to each of them.

A sudden surge in the hukari's whispers has my attention darting to the Seam. The air around me seems to still, prompting goosebumps to rise along my arms. I blink and in the next second, the whispers and the pressure are gone. The dancing couples continue twirling about on the floor, still giving the Seam a wide berth, and the conversation in the hall stays a steady thrum. It appears no one had noticed the pressure in the air, something that hadn't felt quite of this world. I stare at the archway, into the deep writhing darkness within, straining my ears, my eyes, for what might have caused the surge. In the decade since the Seam had opened, something like this had never happened. Whatever that was, it was likely due to my proximity to it. Curiosity getting the best of me, I reach out with my mind. Tentatively, I lower the mental barrier I always keep between the whispers and myself. While they picked up on the direction of my thoughts, and were able to see and hear as I did, I'd never initiated direct communication with them. As if aware of what I was doing, as if sensing it like a beacon, the whispers pounce for the small opening in my defenses. A sharp pain flares inside my head, blurring my vision and making me dizzy as

the whispers turn to high-toned screeches, the voices of the hukari strong and clear without my mental block keeping them contained.

“Makessa, are you all right?” Taran’s voice sounds distant, muffled by the dozens of hukari screeching for my attention. I hadn’t even noticed his return. I clench my teeth and nodded, my eyes squeezed shut. I rub at my temples until the pain lessens and becomes tolerable. Once I am able to concentrate on something other than the pain, I hastily throw up the mental barrier, locking the voices out once again. But despite the dozens of hukari shrieking for my attention, one message had managed to make its way through unscathed.

It opens for us, the hukari had whispered to me. Soon, we will devour your world.

I know, then, without a doubt, that what I’d felt earlier was the fabric of our world ripping open a few stitches further. That much more space given to the hukari. Given a few days, they’d be able to slip more than just an arm through and into our world.

Ignoring Taran’s worried glances my way, I stare past him, towards the left wall of windows. The sun is already sinking below the horizon. Soon the torches will be the only source of light filling the hall and the ceremony would commence.

There would be no time to spare.

As if reading my thoughts, my father stands, his chair scraping against the floor as it slides backwards to accommodate his large frame. A hush falls over the crowd. The musicians slow the music to a stop and the dancing halts.

When my father speaks, his voice booms, echoing throughout the room, “It is time.”

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ACCOLADES EXCHANGE final rushed goodbyes with their loved ones before guards step forward and escort them from the room. The Denaine accolade, a girl

with bronzed skin and a thick black braid wrapped into a sleek knot at the crown of her head sends back one glance before she's forced through the doorway and out of sight. Her expression—wide eyes full of tears, brows drawn down and lips parted in pure, undiluted terror—sends chills down my spine. I force the image from my mind before it has a chance to become permanently ingrained.

Conversation continues in hushed tones as guests make their way back to their designated tables. In span of a minute, the center of the room is cleared. With the guests all seated at tables positioned behind the long royal tables stationed along the left and right rows of columns, and ours at the head of the room, it's as if we—the leaders of the five kingdoms that made up the Kohrmirian Empire—were forming a solid barrier against the Seam and its monsters. Impenetrable.

Taran and I remain seated at the table with Dayanara and Harlow Badden's family, even when my father takes his goblet of wine and walks up the dais steps and toward the set of thrones gleaming gold in the torchlight. As he passes by my mother's throne, he grazes the tips of his calloused fingers along the armrest, an action made in deference to the memory of her. He stops before his own throne and turns to address the entirety of the Great Hall.

Silence falls over the room.

My father's eyes dart down to Taran, then shift to me as he gathers a deep breath and forces a reassuring smile. The sadness in his eyes and the pain in his smile startle me. It mirrors everything I'm feeling, everything I've thought my father had long healed from.

It seems I am not alone in struggling to let go.

Not alone in carrying this burden either.

As my father's gaze lingers on me, I can see traces of his own guilt, his own shame and self-loathing. Perhaps *this* is why I've avoided him all these years; looking at him—truly seeing him—is like staring into my own reflection. Acknowledging the reality of our actions, recognizing the proof of their consequences. Because as much as I tend to focus on my part in this nightmare—as much as I believe the blame deserved to be placed entirely on me—I can't ignore that my father had played a role in this too. That he'd felt as if he had no choice but to play this role, or suffer a loss that might destroy his wife, his son... his entire family.

Nights such as these serve as a constant reminder of everything he'd lost and the debt he'd spend his entire life attempting to settle. Sikremora, and the life of my mother, were the price he had to pay for saving my life all those years ago.

I don't care what the consequences are, you will bring my daughter back, my mother had said that night as I hovered between the world of the living and the realm of the dead. My father had nodded, and alongside my mother, had begged Dayanara to save my life with her divinely-gifted magic, the wrath of the gods be damned. This had been the cost. The Seam, the constant threat of the hukari, the sacrifice of life required to temporarily seal it each season.

I will never have the courage to ask him if he still believed it was worth it. That I was worth it. I know what my answer would be, and I can't imagine his would be any different.

I am the first to break eye contact, tears burning my eyes. I blink them back and when I return my gaze to him, he's already turned away.

There is no trace of the smile he wore just moments before as my father surveys the crowd. Everyone is watching, waiting. No one speaks as his gaze flits from person to person, and some even hold their breath as they fall under that intimidating gaze. My father looks powerful with the golden crown sitting on his dark hair. Despite the several strands of grey catching the light when he shifts, his appearance emanates power. Finally, my father's cold, calculating expression morphs back into a smile. Not particularly warm, considering the occasion, but as close as it will ever get.

"Welcome to Vendra," my father greets the crowd, the warmth in his voice convincing despite its falseness. The guests break into smiles, and a wave of raised wine glasses rise throughout the room in salute to our capital city, the very heart of the Kohrmirian Empire. "I am pleased to see so many guests from each of the five kingdoms here tonight for our celebration."

While the faces among the members of the royal families remain stoic, the expressions flitting across the faces of the nobility and commoners throughout the room vary dramatically—from elation to anticipation to fear. Receiving an invitation to Sikremora is rare, and it was up to the royal families to decide which of the nobility and common folk could attend each celebration. To many nobles, it's a great honor to attend. To the commoners, it's so exceedingly rare, none ever dared to hope. It takes effort not to wrinkle my nose at those who smile a bit too broadly. Too proudly.

"Though recently established, Sikremora is our most vital tradition," my father states. "You all know the history, as I'm sure the stories of what happened that night have traveled far and wide—how the monstrous creatures we've come to call the hukari discovered the existence of our world and clawed their way in."

It's a well-spun story, tuned with several years of practice and woven with enough detail to keep the gossip-mongers satiated but with enough ambiguity that it doesn't arouse suspicion as to where we might have acquired such knowledge. Dayanara had been the mastermind behind the fabrication, and it had not failed us yet.

"We know not where they came from, or how they came to be. Nor the details of how they came to find us," my father continues. "But they tested the boundaries of this world, the fabric that holds it all together, and took advantage of any points of weakness. And that night, they'd found what they'd been searching for, the smallest of fissures, and they cleaved their way in. Clawed at that fissure until it ripped wide open, and flooded the castle, ravenous."

As if cued, heads around the room turn to regard the Seam. It stands proudly, swallowing the center of the room, space that was once visible a few months ago now engulfed in the depths of its dark void that lurks just outside our world. The temperature of the room increases rapidly as a result of the mounting tension among the guests crowded throughout the room. I glance out the far windows lining hall and dread pools in the pit of my stomach. The last rays of sunlight are fading with the sinking sun. We are minutes away from the darkness that falls with the coming of night. It's almost time.

"We never could have predicted such an event," my father says with a shake of his head. "Before that night, it was believed to be impossible, so far removed from our reality that to entertain the notion of an extraterrestrial attack would have been considered ludicrous." The hall is silent, guests frozen in horrified rapture, unable to do anything but hold onto my father's every word. "By the time we managed to take control of the chaos and eradicate these terrible creatures, the damage had already been done. Countless lives

were lost, and the castle as well as much of the surrounding city were decimated by the few hukari who managed to slip away from the mass. However, despite our success in handling a near impossible situation, it was by sheer coincidence and incredible luck that we learned a valuable piece of information that very night: the Seam could be temporarily sealed.”

My father spares the crowd the gory details of how that secret revealed itself to us. How only one guard out of hundreds survived the onslaught of hukari that flooded through the Seam that night. How the hukari dragged his friends, his fellow warriors into the nothingness of the Seam until it eventually sealed itself off. How the hukari, then stuck on this side of the Seam fled into other parts of the castle, leaving him to die. And how he crawled towards the very entranceway that stared me down across the length of this very hall, the lower half of his legs shredded and bleeding profusely—until a panicked young servant girl came across him and listened to his last desperate plea. To deliver the knowledge of its closure to the king.

“Thus,” my father says, nearing the conclusion of his introductory speech. “Sikremora is an occasion that bears witness to—and acknowledges with profound gratitude and respect—the sacrifices that must be made to ensure a future of peace and prosperity.”

A mercy provided by the benevolence of the gods, Dayanara had said after the incident. A second chance rarely bestowed.

A shudder wracks my body as I remember that mercy. Unbidden, an image comes to the forefront of my mind. The scene that had repeated hall after hall throughout the entire castle. Bodies left in pieces, so much blood splattered along the walls and floors that it resembled the effect made when paint is poured on canvas.

I grit my teeth. *If that is the mercy of the gods, then I despise them.*

“Never again, will we experience the terror and death we endured ten years ago.”

“Never again!” A chorus of shouts rings out like a battle cry in response to my father’s declaration.

As if on cue, the massive set of doors at the far entry to the Great Hall swing open and five warriors enter the room.

* * *

IT HAD ONLY BEEN mere minutes, but the accolades had completely transformed. Gone are the free flowing gowns and finely woven tunics paired with well-tailored trousers. Instead, sleek armor of gleaming silver steel plates covered covers the majority of their bodies. Swords hang from waists, and axes and crossbows are strapped across backs.

Goosebumps spread along my skin at the sight. If I didn’t know better, I might truly believe they stand a chance against the hukari lurking inside the unknown black of the Seam.

The silence in the hall allows for their footsteps to echo as they approach. I recognize Harlow Badden, his weapons of choice consisting of a long sword hanging from his belt and a massive hammer strapped to his back.

Among the group are the four other accolades, and two men I don’t recognize. The men flank each side of the group, as if to discourage the accolades from entertaining the possibility of escape. Of the two men, the man on the left flank is much older than the man on the right. Though his eyes are soft, there was an intimidating hardness to his features. For a man of his age, he is in incredible shape, decked out in military garb with a generous

number of medallions pinned to his tunic, half concealed beneath his crimson cloak. The man to the right looks to be in his early twenties, and wears a matching black tunic and crimson cape, sporting its own impressive collection of medallions despite his youth that has me leaning ever-so-slightly forward in curiosity. My gaze slides from the man's clothing up to his face, made up of sharp angles from his jaw to the cut of his cheekbones. His hair is black as night, just barely long enough to brush his forehead and the tips of his ears. As if my stare is something he can feel, his eyes dart to meet mine.

I abruptly straighten and tear my gaze from his, focusing my eyes on his entourage as I will my heart to stop racing. The accolades part as they near the Seam, and give it a wide berth as they pass. The sun has dropped behind the horizon, at last, and with only the torchlight to illuminate the space, the hukari within the Seam begin to edge claw-tipped fingers out, some managing an entire leathery black arm. They swipe at the surrounding air, grappling with one another for some form of purchase, as if sensing that any moment now, the rip in our world will crack open just a fraction further. The crack would be just large enough for a human body to slip in or out, but it would be only a matter of days before the large, winged body of the hukari could slip through. Which is why it's imperative that Sikremora be held just when the rip became the ideal size, when we have all the control.

The accolades rejoin one another on the other side of the Seam, right before the dais where my father sits above on his golden throne and my brother and I sit below with Dayanara at our kingdom's table. To the left and right, the tables of the other ruling families surround the group of accolades.

The brown-skinned girl representing Denaine shakes, her eyes still widened in fear as she glances at the tables surrounding her, the barrier they form between her and the other guests. The accolades are trapped, imprisoned and waiting like pigs to the slaughter.

“Accolades,” my father addresses the group. “I hope as our honored guests, you have enjoyed tonight’s festivities. And though you will traverse into dangerous, unknown terrain tonight—“ My lips twist in a pained grimace at my father’s choice of words. Everyone knows that there is no terrain on the other side available *to traverse*. It’s all darkness and the hukari, waiting and starving. The accolades won’t last five seconds, no matter how long they’ve spent training, and honing their survival skills. This is nothing but glorified suicide.

“But your sacrifices will not be in vain, nor will they be taken lightly. Your families, though grieving will be rewarded with status and riches, and you can rest easy knowing that your loved ones are provided for. On behalf of the millions who dwell within our empire, and the billions who populate our entire world, we owe you our lives and our eternal gratitude.” My father bows in reverence to the five warriors standing in a v-formation before the dais. For an emperor to bow is the greatest and rarest honor one could ever receive. One by one, the rulers of each of the Kohrmiran kingdoms stand and bow in reverence as well. Those of the guests who are standing dip in gratitude and respect, and though my brother dips his head and grasps his hands to show the same, I am frozen to the spot unable to move.

I can’t pretend I’m grateful, that I respect them. Those actions belong to the innocent, and I am not innocent. I remain still as a statue, even as I notice eyes around the room narrow in my direction. Even when I see the lips move on the servants at the edges

of the room, subtle nods my way. It is not until my brother nudges me, and when ignored, grabs my hand and squeezes until the pain becomes unbearable, that I finally dip my head..

But it's not out of respect, out of gratitude. No. It's out of shame. For I am the reason we are all here. If I hadn't gotten been careless and gotten myself killed ten years ago, if Dayanara hadn't angered the gods by practicing forbidden magic in order to bring me back to life, then the Seam would never have burst open. The hukari would never have broken through. And we would never have had to send thousands to their death for the rest of eternity.

My father's next words are a death sentence.

"Let us begin."

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