

But I knew better.

Chapter One

The desert wind slinks into Aran from the west, winding its way through the pathways, turning corners, catching people unaware. Nights like ~~these~~ this end in fights and, in tears. ~~It was a night like this when my~~ My mother jumped from the ~~wall~~ Wall into the desert on a night like this, her body swallowed by the sand, her soul held ransom for silver.

Tonight, many will remember things they'd rather forget, deeds that are best left in the past. ~~Others~~ Some will dread terrible events lurking in their futures if they aren't ~~re~~ not vigilant enough, or lucky enough, to stop them. ~~And dark~~ Dark plans will take roots in the minds of ~~some~~ others, things they would ~~d~~ never consider on any other night.

The chime of ~~the~~ tambors in the ~~dining hall~~ Dining Hall is louder than usual. Drums beat like a heart ~~beat~~, Laughter ~~laughter~~ echoes ~~form~~ off the walls. The wistful melody of the lute holds a warning, but it is lost in the sounds of merriment.

We sit on soft cushions around a low table, our goblets filled with sweet wine and our plates overflowing with spicy fish. Queen Solena presides at our center, her large dewy eyes glittering. Her ebony hair shines, ~~her eyes large and dewy~~, and her ~~her~~ cheeks are sharp, as if they were carved from stone. Our honored guest, the Duke of Dorros, sits to her right. He drinks deeply from his wine, his eyes fixed on her.

“It should have ~~already happened~~ happened already.”

As if on cue, screams erupt from below. Figures race across the courtyards, pulling on clothes as they run. A gardener looks up from clipping Solena’s favorite flowers, then turns away and returns to his task.

I rest my forehead on my arms and, close my eyes, the sun beating down on the back of my neck. ~~“His heart will nearly stop. The healers will labor long minutes over it. He will barely be alive.”~~ The screams are like knives against my ears.

~~“All afternoon his heart will beat faintly. There will be hope. ~~But~~ but then this evening it will stop again,”~~ I say into my arms. Did I mix the poison correctly? Only a little too much, and his heart won’t restart. ~~And then~~ Then I’ll have another ghost haunting me from over the ~~wall~~ Wall.

“I’m sorry, Badriya.” At the sound of my true name tears burn ~~at~~ my eyes, ~~tears~~ but I know that they won’t fall ~~anymore~~. Petra touches her hand to my shoulder. She sits with me until she must see to Solena, ~~to aid her~~ in the face of during this calamity. I remain atop ~~the dome~~ the Dome until the wails begin.

Rachel Howe

This seems to be phrased a little awkwardly. Is there a way that we can reword this?

Rachel Howe

From the initial description, it sounded like this would be a much less drawn-out thing, like they would find the Duke dead (even though he isn’t) and then take him back to Dorros where he will miraculously awaken. But this sounds like something completely different. Can you clarify and clear up some of these inconsistencies?

Rachel Howe

I think a different word choice would be better. Maybe something like “support”?

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The Duke’s entourage departs just as the sky turns vermillion and the moon fills with amber light. I watch from the ~~wall~~ Wall as the caravan leaves the city, not quite fleeing, ~~but~~ insistent upon not remaining another night. The men cast many looks over their shoulders as they journey ~~out~~ into the desert, the Duke’s body enclosed in the litter in which he arrived, and the King’s favorite horse led by a stranger.

They hurry right past my mother as she dances, and one of her scarves brushing brushes the against a bodyguard on horseback beside the litter. He shudders and urges his horse forward, though I know he can’t see her. The King’s gaze never wavers from my

Rachel Howe

What does this mean?

“The Duke of Dorros certainly tried to talk us out of coming,” Arlo says.

~~Again the~~ The table ~~once again~~ falls silent.

“The Duke of Dorros?” Solena repeats.

“We passed his caravan early this morning,” Khalen says. “Apparently he suffered some sort of accident during his visit to Aran ~~here~~. His court thought he’d died. ~~But, but~~ then he ~~woke~~ ~~awoke~~.”

“Cursing and demanding wine,” Arlo adds.

I widen my eyes in ~~genuine~~ shock; ~~that isn’t completely feigned~~. I did not expect the Duke’s entourage to encounter anyone until they reached Dorros.

Solena taps her nails. “We certainly thought him dead, when he left here,” she says, her eyes flicking toward me. “His heart gave out, wasn’t that it?”

“Evidently he’d caroused too much the previous night,” I agree, holding her gaze.

“Well, thank the stars he is all right,” Khalen says, raising his glass. We all follow suit, and I drink deeply ~~once again~~ from my water.

Rachel Howe
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Rachel Howe
Readers never really find out where Dorros is located. If Khalen and Arlo met him in the desert on their way into Aran, then Dorros must be in the same general direction as Tanera. You may want to slip in a hint to this somewhere. It will also be a good thing for us to know since we're interested in creating a map for the front matter of the book.

“Aran is known for its hospitality,” Khalen continues, setting down his glass.

“Your father, the King, was famous for welcoming travelers. He recently passed, isn’t that true?”

My hand freezes on my glass. His voice is smooth, but I wonder how much he suspects of the King’s death.

“It’s been three years. But yes, he did.” She lifts a hand toward her father’s effigy.

Even in stone, his smile makes me shiver.

Rachel Howe
There’s some confusion about how often/possible it is for people to cross the desert. It’s stated earlier that it’s a very dangerous journey to make, and only possible by riding particularly fast horses or by hiring a Witch. However, this statement makes it seem as if this kind of travel is common enough to earn Aran a reputation. These don’t need to be conflicting stories—it could be that there were so few travelers that Aran would always welcome them with open arms.

“And it will be done tonight?”

“What is the rush? Neither she, nor her silver, ~~r~~ are going anywhere.”

“Because I command it.” Her voice is ~~sharp edged~~ as sharp as broken tile.

“As you wish,” I reply, my eyes on the ~~Acheroot~~ acheroot. The pieces are oddly cut ~~and~~, their edges ragged. ~~They, they~~ will cause memory loss in whoever consumes them.

Solena leaves as silently as she arrived. ~~After she leaves~~ After, I grind ~~the Stardust~~ Stardust, ~~Dreamroot~~ dreamroot, ~~and Fortunescent~~ fortunescent until my fingers are sore. ~~The ladies who come to visit in the~~ My customers ~~dark~~ will be sorely upset when they discover that I’ve doubled the cost.

~~The musky scent of white lilies fills the air. It may be the scent that fills us with giddiness, our caution sloughing from us like heavy cloaks.~~ The paper stars gleam

Rachel Howe

There seems to be a scene change here. Did Diya leave her chamber and go somewhere else where she is experiencing this?

overhead in the lamplight. ~~The musicians~~ Musicians pound ~~at their~~ drums ~~and~~, strum ~~at their~~ lutes, and blow ~~at their~~ pipes, creating a weave of melodies that is both familiar and strange. A band of children carrying swords made of shiny paper and wearing crowns of stars thread their way through the grass, peering intently downward, looking for hidden gems. A little girl gives a triumphant cry as she snatches a pretty stone from the ground and holds it aloft.

~~This is a tradition the King started, years before, scattering jewelry that once belonged to his mother and grandmother for the servants’ children to find. Only the pieces that that his wife and Solena deemed too ugly and old-fashioned are used, of course.~~ My throat tightens as I watch them. My first year here ~~I’d~~ I had joined the children, thrilled to find a milky stone, hard and cool. “My mother hated that ring,”

Solena said at my shoulder. “She tried to give it to me, but I wouldn’t take it. You can