

From the Shadows: Setting as an Expression of Character Development in the Epic Fantasy
Genre

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Abstract

Epic fantasy is a genre defined by its setting. It offers writers the opportunity to be incredibly specific with the way setting contributes to the overall story, specifically as an aid character development. In order to successfully use setting to support character development, the writer must understand what preconceptions with which the reader enters the epic fantasy genre and what purpose setting plays in the overarching story world. The writer must determine what setting elements to include and, just as importantly, which to leave out. Finally, because setting is such an abstract component of writing, it is useful not only to discuss generalities that apply to all writers but to examine a specific example in order to better understand how worldbuilding can be implemented in a way that feels natural to the reader.

From the Shadows: Setting as an Expression of Character Development in the Epic Fantasy

Genre

Fantasy is perhaps the most versatile genre when it comes to the flexibility its setting offers writers, and it is a valuable tool that writers can use to enhance a character-centric story. In fantasy, there is already an expectation from the reader that the world in which the story takes place will be different to some extent from the ordinary world experienced by the reader. Writers within this genre are able to use the ordinary world as a starting point, adding minor fantastical elements to create a hidden world within our own, or create an entirely new universe that may not even contain human life. Fantasy may be the genre that places the most emphasis on setting, and this provides an expanse of opportunities for the fantasy writer to control exactly how the setting is used to support the character's developmental arcs throughout the story.

Character development often governs the way writers think about story. Plot becomes a conduit through which characters are tried, tested, and given opportunities to grow. Themes become worldview questions explored through the characters' journeys. However, setting is often simplified to a few examples of symbolism used throughout the story or an arbitrary world characters are placed within so that the story can happen. Compared to the vast amount of options available within this element of storytelling, it seems like writers are skipping over a trove of opportunities to create a rich, character-centric world. It is important to understand the purpose of setting within the story, discover how that applies within the specific requirements of the fantasy genre, and decide how to use setting as a tool to support a vibrant world and characters without distracting the reader from the journey of the story in order to best utilize setting as a story element.

Expectations of Setting in Fantasy

Defining Epic Fantasy

Epic fantasy (or “high fantasy”) is a genre defined by its scope and the heroic adventures of its characters, but it is most thoroughly defined by its setting. There are a wide variety of subgenres within fantasy as a whole, categorized usually by the type of world the story is set inside, type of and scope of the magic system, and types of fantastical creatures. All three of these criteria are related to setting.

While the fantasy genre as a whole dates back to ancient times in mythology and folklore, epic fantasy is a relatively new category of literature, appealing to popular culture only after the 1950s when J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy was published. “[Heroic fantasy] existed before Tolkien...and it is possible to say that it would have existed, and...developed into the genre it has become, without the lead of *The Lord of the Rings*. This seems, however, rather doubtful. When it came out in 1954-5 *The Lord of the Rings* was quite clearly...a one-item category on its own” (Shippey xviii). *Lord of the Rings* marked a shift in epic fantasy as a real and popular subgenre.

Tolkien may not have invented fantasy, but it cannot be argued that he is the father of the subgenre epic fantasy. Today, reading an epic fantasy novel means entering a world set somewhere outside the real world. This world is typically reminiscent of medieval Europe, however, as the genre evolves more epic fantasy settings are rooted in a wider variety of real-world cultures. No matter the cultural setting, a medieval or low-technology world is dominant.

Low-technology is one element that separates fantasy from science fiction, though the two are often grouped together. But fantasy as a broad genre does not necessitate low-

technology, and even epic fantasy has made shifts in recent years to include more technological elements in the worlds. The main difference between fantasy and science fiction is where the novel draws its basis. Science fiction, of course, “is based on science. Science... is naturalistic: it is replicable, depends on material laws, follows a rigorous logic. Fantasy, conversely, looks to the fairy tale for inspiration: It hinges on magic” (McNamee). Because of this, fantasy takes a closer look at religion, and morality, while science fiction usually explores human nature.

Magic may be the most useful worldbuilding element fantasy writers have in terms of character development. Specifically, in epic fantasy, there is usually an amount of magic that the general population is aware of its existence. The less magic there is (and the more ignorant or fearful of magic the general population is) the more a story strays into other fantasy subgenres such as sword and sorcery or dark fantasy, both of which emphasize a grittier world with a modest scope compared to the epics’ continental or global scale.

In epic fantasy, magic is an expected part of the world and likely plays an important role in helping the characters reach their goals. Not only is it a defining characteristic of epic fantasy, it is an extremely useful element of worldbuilding for writers in regard to character development. Most of the time the magic a character uses and their level of skill or control over that magic is tied in some way to their development as a character, so it is a useful tool in worldbuilding as a manifestation of the character’s growth or demise.

Defining Setting

Setting is more than the physical world the characters live inside. In fantasy, it also includes the culture, political climate, religions, and the magic system. Often, these elements are what affects the characters exponentially more than the physical one.

For example, suppose in a particular fictional world there is a mountain that is in the way of a character's path from point A to point B. The physical barrier adds a layer of conflict; the character must either traverse the rough terrain to scale it or add time to their journey by going around. But the conflict is no more than an arbitrary stumbling block, taking no advantage of the opportunity to tie setting-based conflicts to character development.

Adding cultural context to this situation can enhance the conflict, provide the character with an opportunity to develop, and deepen the reader's connection to the world and its people. Suppose it was established that this culture has legends of malicious wraiths that haunt the mountain range the character is crossing. In this case, the clear preference would be to skirt around the mountain. If the character is forced to scale the mountain, the writer can have them encounter one of these wraiths as a physical manifestation of battling his or her inner demons, or the trip can go without a problem in order to shed light on the irrationality of the character's or culture's fears. This one element of cultural significance provides a multitude of options for the writer to implement to best support the development of the character at that point.

Setting also reflects theme and mood in a story. Epic fantasy writers have an incredible amount of freedom in what they describe in the world and how they describe it, but in order for the setting to be truly impactful to the reader it must be grounded in human experience. Yi-Fu Tuan discusses the setting as part of why Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* books have had a lasting impact: "the world of Holmes may have its source in a particular period of European history, but it also has its roots in a common human condition." The progressive yet confusing London in the *Sherlock Holmes* books reflects the way humans see themselves. "We are to ourselves modern metropolises with orderly and clean streets, but in their midst lie

twisting lanes and dark alleys about which we know little and which are the breeding grounds for fear, anxiety, and inadmissible passions” (Tuan). In the same way, setting and characterization can be used together to compliment the themes of the story, no matter what world it is set in but especially in the flexibility epic fantasy offers.

The Balance of Immersion

With the extensive level of control the fantasy genre offers writers, there is an enticing risk to include extraneous details in an attempt to be immersive for the sake of being immersive. It is important to understand the purpose the story world serves both in theory and for the particular project on which the writer is embarking in order to avoid this. Because each project may call for something slightly different, it is most valuable in the context of discussing generalities to consider the rules of setting that can offer guidance to all writers in this area.

John Truby describes setting as “a complex and detailed web in which each element has story meaning and is in some way a physical expression of the character web and especially the hero” (145). The process of worldbuilding does not happen in a vacuum. Creating a new world happens simultaneously as the writer crafts the characters and brainstorms the plot, tying them all intimately together to eventually create the story. No one element can be removed from the others, though for the purposes of this discussion setting is the focus. If the goal is to create a rich setting that supports the story in a meaningful way, then the writer must be continually checking the worldbuilding work he or she does with the other story elements.

Adult and young adult fantasy writer Victoria Schwab (or V.E. Schwab) says “I look at world building and setting as a character. Not only that, I look at it as the first character. A lot of other writers will start with a plot or character, and I might start with seeds...but the thing that I

develop before...anything else in my story is the world” (“On Worldbuilding”). Setting is more than the package the characters exist inside of; it is a dynamic piece of the story that, if a writer wishes to create a well-crafted story, must be given the same attention and forethought as character or plot development.

Suspension of Disbelief

Suspension of disbelief is a term used in discussions of fiction in all forms describing the consumer of the medium’s willingness to temporarily take on the belief that the fictional work is real, despite knowing it is not. For the fantasy writer, it is not only necessary to bring the reader to this state with the characters and plot elements, but with the believability of this new, fantastical world. It could be argued that because fantasy readers enter the story with that expectation of a new world that it is easier for them to reach this place of suspension of disbelief; however, the writer still has the job of keeping the reader in this state throughout the story even as more fantastical things are introduced. This problem is perhaps more difficult in fantasy because of how different from reality it is by nature.

Perhaps the biggest pitfall fantasy writers encounter when writing for suspension of disbelief is exposition. It would make sense that more details mean a clearer picture of the world, however, as discussed, this can result in clunky and boring writing. “In fiction, details matter. Details allow your reader to more fully enter the world you create, to suspend disbelief and, most important, to connect emotionally with your characters,” but they can also encumber the reader if they are not relevant to the story (Nunez). If extra detail does not necessarily make for a richer story, richness must come from something else.

Of course, some of this is a matter of the reader's taste, so it is important for the writer to understand their intended audience. For example, writing epic fantasy for a middle grade or young adult audience would require shorter descriptions that do not encumber the fast pace and forward movement of the story. However, if one's audience is older, more time may be spent describing the story world in more vivid detail. Either way, the details writers choose to include "lay the groundwork on which all the action in your novel takes place" (Nunez). Neither approach is inherently better or worse than the other, as long as the writer is keeping the reader engaged with the story.

Joe Patrouch explains this further in his essay on writing setting for science fiction: "since the reader is being asked to live in a completely different setting than he is used to, the writer uses scientific accuracy as a method of obtaining that 'willing suspension of disbelief' so necessary to fiction" (39). While the fantasy writer is not necessarily relying on "scientific accuracy" to describe the world, the purpose behind this statement is important to understand. The fantasy writer needs to make the world feel like it actually exists with real natural and cultural laws that are consistently obeyed by the physical and societal worlds.

The writer does this by carefully controlling the release of expositional information, communicating to the reader as it is relevant to the characters' progression through the story. "The emotions and conflicts...characters experience can be made more vivid by the setting [writers] choose" (Nunez). The more separated an aspect of setting is from the other story elements, the less invested the reader is in that information. If the reader is not invested, he or she loses the suspension of disbelief, and the story is not doing the work intended.

Therefore, richness in setting is not accomplished by the amount of details used in a story, but by making the details serve multiple functions. These include answering the reader's questions to maintain suspension of disbelief, tying the details closely to character development, and propelling the action of the story. Max Byrd uses the novel *Robinson Crusoe* to discuss his rules for setting:

The reader does not begin by seeing Crusoe's island all at once, as if on a static map or from an aerial view. On the contrary, slowly, inch by inch, we push aside the overhanging leaves and branches, shade our eyes, and follow Crusoe's wary, tentative footsteps deeper and deeper into the island (189).

Writers must guide the reader through the gradual process of learning the world.

Avoiding heavy-handed exposition happens by introducing the reader to the elements of the setting piece by piece as they become relevant to the story. "The selection of focalizers...recurrent symbols...and even the adjectives used to describe a landscape all carry weight in inviting readers to trust or distrust a narrator, or to find a world, and its values, appealing or repellent" (Mills). Trust is the key to suspension of disbelief. When the reader trusts the writer to fill in the right details, they can allow themselves to be immersed into the story.

Translating Character Arcs into Setting

The Iceberg Philosophy

One established fantasy author who has talked extensively on his story crafting methods is New York Times bestseller Brandon Sanderson. In his class Writing for Science Fiction and Fantasy at Brigham Young University, he discusses worldbuilding for fantasy in depth and practical ways to implement the worldbuilding work one does externally into the actual story.

One of these methods that illustrate the philosophy behind most worldbuilding choices is the Iceberg Method, of which Sanderson says:

The iceberg philosophy is you extrapolate...and you build yourself a nice world book and you are then able to answer some of these questions about your culture and setting so that as you're writing, the reader gets the sense [that] 'oh, the author is several steps ahead. I believe that this is real, and the characters are living in a world that exists beyond the page.'

The writer can imply that there is more depth to the world that is actually present on the page based on the details he or she chooses to include.

The Iceberg Method in worldbuilding is an effective method in creating a base from which to work off of when deciding what details about the world to incorporate into the story. The reader sees the top of the "iceberg" as what is clearly visible through the writing and can assume that these are supported by a larger mass of information that he or she does not see clearly in the work. This method also aids the writer in maintaining the suspension of disbelief by prompting the writer to consider what details are necessary.

Similarly, Victoria Schwab describes her method of revealing worldbuilding information as looking through a window. "I give my readers this window through which to see my world and they get a limited perspective into that world but the information that they get allows them to infer things that they cannot see." This allows her to have an "additive creative process" in which she does not "contradict what the reader had in their head" but allows for room to continue building the world later in the novel or novel series (Schwab, "On Worldbuilding").

While not enough believable detail is detrimental to the reader's perception of the world, so is the opposite. The author holds an exponentially more in depth understanding of the setting and must carefully manage these details in order to avoid overwhelming the reader with extraneous details that detract from the story. "The problem with having an iceberg is that often times you want to show it off. You want to be like 'I've got an iceberg, here's the whole thing,' and that gets really boring really fast" (Sanderson, "World Building"). Whether this is a symptom of pride in one's work or insecurity, the writer must understand what to include and what to keep stored away in the notebook.

Deciding What Belongs

The question then becomes which details should the writer include, and which should be left out? The answer to this mostly depends on the unique requirements of the project, but there are a few general things for the writer to keep in mind when considering this.

First, the author must bring it back to character development. What aspects of the worldbuilding relate directly to the character's journey throughout the story? To use the previous example of the wraith infested mountain, perhaps the detail of the wraiths is important because the character's mother was killed by wraiths when she was young. Maybe the character's arc throughout the story involves moving beyond the ghosts in her past, and this fight with ghost-like creatures is a physical manifestation of her struggle, the mountain a symbol for ascending to a higher plane of understanding. Writers must use aspects of setting that stem naturally from the hero's journey.

Another thing to consider is what aspects of worldbuilding will best help in characterizing the characters and their particular likes, dislikes, personality traits, and values.

Anne Lamott describes setting as being about memory. “Every room gives us layers of information about our past and present and who we are, our shrines and quirks and hopes and sorrows,” she writes in her book on the craft of writing, *Bird by Bird*. John Lutz also writes:

“Creating character is one of the more important aspects of setting. Remember, in most cases you are not merely describing background or surroundings; you are describing your protagonist’s perception of those surroundings. The same setting might convey two entirely different moods to two different protagonists, depending on the particular character or story situation.”

The key is to take advantage of the design of the world as a means to more naturally portray both the characters and their values to the reader.

One thing to avoid is including a setting element for the sake of creating a detailed world. This adds nothing to support the story and only serves to muddle the readers mind with purposeless facts about a fictional world. Extraneous details for readers to remember distracts them from the core of the story.

That is not to say every setting detail has to be directly symbolic or related to some element of character development. If an element of the setting serves to create a more believable world and support the reader’s suspension of disbelief, then it is serving a valid purpose. The challenge for the writer is to discern which setting elements are tied with character development, which serve to deepen the world in the mind of the reader, and which are the parts of the iceberg that belong unseen under the surface. Only the parts that are intimately tied to the story, or essential for the reader to have suspension of disbelief are necessary. Too much iceberg becomes overwhelming.

Implementation: From the Shadows

So far, the discussion of crafting setting around character development has been theoretical and based on standard principles that are applicable to most projects. Each story may present its own challenges and questions to the writer, so it is impossible to simplify the process of crafting setting to any sort of “one size fits all” application. However, in order to further exemplify the process, it would be useful to look at a particular story, its unique requirements for the setting, and how those requirements are implemented in a sample from the text.

The Character Arcs

In order to create a setting that is closely tied to the character’s development, first the characters’ arcs must be mapped out. *From the Shadows* is a story about the conflict between duty and desire. The main character Elaine is the princess of the Schadun, a race of peoples who have the ability to manipulate and shape darkness. Now, many of these details are already world building decisions, but it is difficult to think of a character devoid of the culture that created them. As the writer develops the character, little bits of the world will naturally spring up as well. The important thing is to not get attached to something related to setting without critically thinking on how that element adds or detracts from the overall story. For now, these elements of Elaine’s world seem to fit her arc. This will be expanded at the end of this section.

Elaine is a rebellious princess, notorious for skirting her responsibilities. But when there is an assassination attempt on the Schadun royal family’s life, she is left as the ascending heir to the throne. When Elaine learns that her father, the king, was not killed but kidnapped, instead of taking the throne she embarks on a journey to find him, and thus ensues the overarching plot of the story. For the sake of brevity, Elaine’s basic development as a character involves her starting

as a self-centered princess, stifled by her duty to the crown, to a sacrificial Queen who is willing to put aside her own desires to serve her people.

This outlining can be repeated for each of the main characters in the story, including the antagonist. The more detail included the better it will aid the writer in understanding how the characters develop throughout the story. Again, this happens in tandem with the work of building the setting, as characterization and worldbuilding do not happen in a vacuum.

Then, the writer needs to decide how that character views the world around them. “Invent a character who is affected by the fragrance of the breeze and the heft of the light, make that character capable of a few humble poetic insights and observations, then just stand back and let him speak of the world he swims in” (Hall). For Elaine, she resents the oppressive rules that exist in the world of royalty she is surrounded by. The lavish ball the story begins in would be a wonderland to some, but for her it is just another trap keeping her from where she wants to be, with the “free” commoners. This outlook is going to directly affect how the world is described to the reader in the story.

The Worldbuilding

Once the characters’ development has been outlined, and a few world building elements have begun to pop out, it is time to consider the world in which these characters live. This is where it is valuable to return to those elements of the setting that appeared in the outline of Elaine’s development as a character.

First, because her journey is from selfish to responsible, she is placed in one of the hardest backgrounds to be in as a person who values personal freedom: royalty. As a princess thrust into a position she does not want, the story is set up for immediate conflict between her

values and reality. “The first thing any storyteller has to learn is how to create contrast and conflict—drama... And this is the *sine qua non* of setting. If you have a space, divide it into parts and set them in collision with one another” (Byrd 187). Elaine longs for freedom, she can see the village people walking freely below, but she is trapped in the castle tower. Not only this, but the decisions she makes based on this conflict will affect an entire kingdom of people, making it all the more important that she grows into a Queen who takes responsibility for her duty. The first bit of worldbuilding is a monarchical government which values tradition and duty over all else.

Another example from this text is the race of the Schadun. These people have varying levels of control over darkness. This works in conjunction with Elaine’s arc because in trying to find her father she is also hiding from the duty she has to the throne. Darkness and shadows have always held the symbolic weight of concealing things. The dark is something humans have always been afraid of. But Elaine must learn to overcome her fear of the throne and instead emerge “from the shadows” into her rightful place.

Conclusion

Epic fantasy provides the writer with a trove of opportunities to be extremely specific in the worldbuilding work he or she does for the story. The extremes of not including enough detail or including too much can be balanced by using the Iceberg or Window methods to decide what is necessary and what is extraneous.

Writing setting coincides with crafting characters and plot, and the writer must reexamine each story element with the others throughout the writing process in order to create a well-crafted and vivid story. The key is to remember that no story element exists by itself, and that each are tied intimately with one another in order to create the tapestry that is the story. Lastly,

an excerpt from the first chapter of *From the Shadows* has been included below in order to provide a more tangible example of how these setting elements can be implemented in the actual writing.

From the Shadows: Chapter 1

“Where is your crown?”

Elaine had barely walked into the ballroom’s antechamber before her father Laithe noticed her. He had turned from whatever conversation he was having with Lord Owen and scowled at her, his eyes raking over the empty spot on her head. It wasn’t quite surprise on his face, it was at least disbelief. Like he didn’t think even she would make so bold a move.

She sighed. It was an inevitable confrontation, but Elaine had hoped for a bit more time to skirt around his piercing glare.

There were a few Schadun and Varnean servants bustling around the golden room, attending to the nobility of whichever group they belonged to. The Varnean king sat on a spotless white couch on the opposite side of the room, where his daughter, Tova sat next to him. She shared his olive skin and piercing green eyes, and a Varnean man with their same skin tone served his king a glass of water.

Tova held up a hand in greeting and smiled when she saw Elaine had entered. A smile which turned into a grimace when she saw the Schadun king’s expression.

“I left it in my room,” Elaine said to Laithe, and waved a hand in dismissal. “It’s too heavy and I didn’t want to mess up my hair.” She gently patted the intricate braids that pulled all of her long black hair up to a bun at the nape of her neck.

“You cannot sit on that throne without your crown,” Laithe said.

“What a shame. I guess I’ll have to sit this one out then.”

Her father’s jaw clenched, and Elaine could tell he was withholding many choice words unfit for a king to be heard saying in a crowded room. That didn’t mean they wouldn’t come out

later though. When the doors were closed. When the façade of propriety didn't have to be plastered on his face.

For now, Laithe kept his mouth shut and chin high. Only his fiery eyes gave him away.

“You,” he barked, gesturing to one of the Schadun attendants nearby. She jumped and hurried forward keeping her head low lest she incur the king's wrath meant for his daughter. “Go to the princess's room and retrieve her crown,” he said, glaring at Elaine as he finished the command. The woman gave a quick bow and scurried off.

Elaine suffered under his gaze a moment longer, before the diplomatic calm returned to his features. Laithe dismissed her with a nod and turned back to his conversation with Lord Owen.

Elaine rolled her eyes. She saw a servant walking around with drinks and grabbed one, downing the whole thing quickly and welcoming the warmth that flooded her veins.

Soon, the attendant was back, carefully holding a tiara with a midnight jewel shaped like the crescent moon in its center. It was a dainty thing, with thin silver bands looping around themselves holding tiny, glittering gems you would have to squint to see. Like it was dipped in starlight.

The woman held the thing like it was more valuable than her own child and offered it to Elaine with outstretched arms and a bow.

Elaine snatched it out of her hands and shoved the two prongs through the braid that was already looped around the top of her head like a crown of its own.

“That's better,” Laithe said. His own silver crown sat proudly on his head, twice as big as any tiara Elaine owned. Elaine was grateful, at least, that she had been born a woman.

“My head hurts now,” she grumbled.

“You’ll survive.” Laithe turned to Lord Owen once more, and the conversation was over.

Elaine huffed and moved to one of the mirrors hanging on the wall with golden vines crawling up the frame. She smoothed out her dress, the black fabric shimmering as it moved, cascading down to barely brush the mauve rug draped across the floor. Her shoulders were bare, but the dress still had sleeves which hugged her arms down to her elbows where they fanned out.

The collar of the dress was made low enough that the star thinly inked over her heart was on display for all to see. Elaine tugged her dress up, a habit formed the moment she received the tattoo when she was ten, but it didn’t do much to conceal anything more than the black star’s bottom tip.

“You look good,” Tova said, appearing at her right.

“I know.” Elaine tucked a stray hair into her braid. She gave Tova a critical once over. Her satin gown was a silvery grey, yet somehow the Varnean girl still managed to look like the breath of summer. “I suppose you do as well.”

Tova gave a sarcastic laugh in response. “I feel like I’m attending a funeral.” She eyed all the Schaduns’ dark colors. “I don’t know how you people dress so dreary all the time. No offense.”

“None taken,” Elaine said. “Just don’t repeat that around my father. This whole ball is just an excuse to show off.”

Tova raised her eyebrows. “What would your goddess think about that?”

Elaine shrugged. “She’s a goddess, if she has a problem with me, she can do something about it.”

Tova just pressed her lips together in a suppressed smile.

They were interrupted by a Schadun guard approaching in full crisp navy uniform.

“Your Highness,” he said, bowing. “Your announcement will begin shortly.”

Elaine sighed. She turned to Tova and gave her a quick hug. “I’ll see you inside.”

The guard guided Elaine to the tall wooden double doors that led into the ballroom. Her father was there already, his black suit somehow looking darker than the night itself. He gave Elaine a tired smile as she took her place behind him, and for a moment she felt guilty for her stunt earlier.

“Remember to walk with your head up and shoulders back,” he told her under his breath. “I won’t have you slouching in front of everyone.”

The guilt quickly disappeared.

The rest of the room slowly emptied as people joined the party beginning in the next room. After a few minutes, Elaine heard a muffled but loud voice call the ballroom to attention.

“Announcing, His Royal Majesty, Laithe Amarro, King of Clervorn.”

The double doors swung open, and Laithe strode regally forward where he was met by men bowed low and women dipped into curtsies. Elaine was still hidden from the crowd where she stood behind the wall, but she could see the people at the edge of the room, decked out in their most ostentatious outfits. A sea of black and grey and navy.

Elaine pursed her lips, but her heart picked up speed when she heard the guard’s voice again.

“Announcing, Her Royal Highness, Elaine Amarro, Crown Princess of Clervorn.”

Elaine was ushered to the entrance, the doors still open wide. She took practiced steps into the ballroom, blinking for a moment from the bright light of the chandeliers, and walked to the dais at the front of the room where her father was already sitting on his throne, her heels clipping on the marble floor.

Elaine eyed the slightly smaller seat next to his and the carvings on its side. There was the goddess Zaria in the center, her arms held out with swirls that were supposed to be shadows curling around her. Upholding her chosen ruler.

Elaine had always found that symbology a bit sacrilegious. If she was a god, why was she placed beneath the monarchy?

The thrones looked out of place in the bright ballroom, decorated by the Varneans to be light and airy. The Schadun thrones were dark, heavy things, rarely brought out for display in the Varnean castle lest they appear too aggressive to their gracious hosts.

Elaine was glad for it. The throne made her back ache.

She suffered through it as the musicians in the corner played the first few traditional Schadun songs. People danced and laughed below, but above it all Elaine could hear the quiet roar of the celebration happening outside, where the people without important titles and fancy clothes were spending the Solstice.

Finally, her father stood and exited the dais, walking toward a group of Lords speaking near the back of the room.

Elaine didn't waste any more time on her throne once he left, and rushed down the steps onto the main floor. She picked up a glass of wine from a passing servant, and headed to the tall, arched windows that lined the western wall.

Outside, the courtyard was alive. It was pitch black, which meant Elaine could sense everything. Not in detail - she would need more practice before she could sense people's individual features from that far away - but enough to know that the stone courtyard was full of Schadun dancing to music she couldn't hear. Shouting. Drinking. Laughing.

Elaine wished they would snuff the chandelier's candles, but there were too many Varneans in attendance in the ballroom to be able to plunge the room into darkness.

"Your Highness."

Elaine's thoughts were interrupted by a familiar voice. She turned to see Tyvin, his head dipped in respect, but not in a bow. Any lower and it would have been inappropriate coming from a Prince.

Elaine's stomach flipped without her consent and she gave him a small smile. "Ty."

It wasn't nerves at seeing him per se, although he was attractive enough to make any girl swoon. Light brown hair combed back and styled to perfection. Deep green eyes that were always focused on whatever was in front of him. Tonight, he looked immaculate in his light grey suit. It stood out in the crowd of Schadun dressed in the Solstice's dark colors.

No, it was all those unspoken promises between them that made her nervous. The ones made by everyone except the people they affected.

"May I have this dance?" Tyvin asked, extending a hand. When Elaine didn't take it immediately, he shrugged. "Just one? My mother has been pestering me all evening to ask you."

Elaine glanced over to the Varnean queen and caught a glimpse of her sharp gaze before she quickly focused on whatever dignitary she had been talking with instead.

"Fine," Elaine conceded. "Just one."

Taking Tyvin's hand, Elaine followed him out into the mass of dancing people. A path cleared for them as they walked, people stepping aside to let the prince and princess through. The weight of all their eyes left her feeling exposed. A shiver ran down her back.

When they were firmly in the center of the ballroom, Tyvin stopped and turned to her, dipping his head again in a prince's version of a bow. Elaine gave a quick curtsy and stopped herself from rolling her eyes at the formality. This was the boy who teased her relentlessly as a child, who would carry her and Tova on his shoulders and toss them into the lake even as they screamed in protest. And now he was all polite? Amusing.

They came together, Elaine with a hand on his shoulder, Tyvin with one on her waist, their other hands clasped together. Elaine twirled with the music easily, years of lessons allowing her feet to make the right steps without even a thought.

"This isn't so bad, huh?" Tyvin asked.

Elaine shrugged with one shoulder. "Could be better."

Tyvin chuckled at that. They danced for a moment in silence. Elaine was painfully aware of Queen Nura's piercing stare. She caught the eyes of her father, who gave her a curt nod. It was that approval that made Elaine want to drop Ty's hand right there, but she couldn't. Not with so many eyes. There were always so many eyes.

"I've been wanting to talk to you..." Tyvin started, and Elaine's stomach flipped again, knowing exactly where this was going. "But every time I come to your rooms you seem to be off busy somewhere else."

Elaine didn't tell him she had ordered her handmaid to send him away any time he came knocking, but something about the look in his eyes told her that he knew she was avoiding him.

“So, you’ve cornered me at a party instead,” Elaine said.

“You haven’t left me much of a choice.”

“And you’ve left me without much of one right now.” Elaine tried to keep her face neutral.

“As you know, there have been...talks,” Tyvin hedged. Elaine knew. When she was thirteen, a girl with a little crush on an older man, the idea had been exciting.

“More like negotiations,” Elaine grumbled.

“True.” He paused for a moment, and they kept twirling around the ballroom. “I just want you to know that I am open to the idea,” he continued. Elaine couldn’t help the laugh that escaped her.

“What is so funny about that?” Tyvin asked, giving her a hurt look. Elaine could tell he was pretending, though.

“You’re like a brother to me, Ty!”

“And yet, I am not.”

“You’re so much older.”

“Eight years is minuscule for the Varnean. There are a hundred and twelve years between my parents. We’re practically the same age.”

“No, Tova and I are the same age.”

“Besides,” Tyvin continued, ignoring the comment. Elaine thought she saw a faint blush on his cheeks. “You are not a girl anymore.” If Elaine hadn’t been looking him straight in the eyes then, she might have missed how his gaze flicked downward for a brief moment, but came immediately back to her face. Ever the gentleman.

Heat rose to her own cheeks, and Elaine hoped her flush was not too noticeable. Although that seemed like a long shot with her ghostly pale skin.

“I just don’t understand why we should be forced into something neither of us want.” Elaine looked away again and saw Laithe talking to Ty’s father. They seemed to be discussing something important with their heads leaned together, away from the main crowd. Even during a holiday there was always some business to be dealt with.

“Look,” Tyvin said, and she forced herself to meet his gaze again. “I’m not trying to say we should up and volunteer for them. The goddess knows what they’d do then.” Elaine could imagine. The thought made her queasy.

“I’m only saying that we could make it work, if it came to that.” Ty looked away. When he looked back to her, his gaze was suddenly more intense. “I love my people, Elaine. We’re living in scary times. I know you have lost your home, and I am sad for that, but we all know Sundra is coming for mine next. Anything I can do to stop that...”

Tyvin trailed off, ending his little explanation with a shrug and half smile.

And Elaine understood. Really. But she didn’t think she could say the same. She had lost her home. Her mother. Her freedom. She didn’t think she could handle losing this choice as well. He didn’t even argue what she said about neither of them wanting it. How could she tie herself to someone who didn’t even want her?

Thankfully, the song resolved. Elaine took a step back out of his arms.

“Thank you for the dance,” she said, already moving away. “I have to go.”

Elaine dove into the crowd before he could say anything more, but it was no place to hide. As soon as people realized the princess was near, they moved out of the way which only highlighted her presence.

There was nothing else she could do but to return to her throne at the front of the room. At least there, sitting above the party, she could avoid the suffocating thoughts of the inevitable.

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