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HOUSE
of the
BEAST

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HARPER
Voyager



CHAPTER

1

My father's sword of cold black steel, the finest in all of Kugara, hovered over the tender flesh of my left elbow. A sick tempest of uncertainty churned in my stomach, threatening to send the first full meal I'd eaten in weeks all over the temple floor. I had asked for this, but I was beginning to wonder if I had made a mistake.

I mustered up the courage to croak, "Wait."

My father, who I had met for the first time two days ago, frowned at me.

"What is it?" His voice echoed through the dark hall, low and sharp. "The Beast does not appreciate delays."

He was a tall man with an angled face and an air of importance in the way he held himself. He was unlike any of the scruffy uncles and potbellied sailors I grew up around in the slums of Meroy. Beneath the left sleeve of his tailored jacket, his hand was made of polished black metal. When he'd come to collect me, I'd watched the neighbors look at it and then step back quickly in fearful reverence.

I'd been apprehensive too, yet I couldn't help sneaking in my own share of glances throughout the day. After all, I had never expected to see an elder god's vessel up close. I'd spent my whole life believing these things were far beyond my station.

Now here I was, whisked away to the mountainous province of House Avera, one of the Four High Houses of Kugara, kneeling in their private temple, ready to be offered up to a god. The stone floor tiles were cold and hard against my knees. The worn clothes I'd traveled here in did little to protect me against the chilly air. I shivered like a leaf in the wind before the centerpiece of the altar: a monstrous sculpture of the Dread Beast's head, constructed from smooth, dark metal. The sculptor had decided on a lupine form for this depiction, and the Beast's three eyes were each inlaid with mirrors that reflected the temple braziers. If I looked closely, I could see my own eyes mirrored back at me. Inside the sculpture's maw was a shallow basin that held water. My left arm had been placed inside of it, a cuff locking my wrist into place at the bottom. My submerged skin prickled from the cold. The water was pitch-black, like the abyss itself was lapping at my fingers.

"Is there another way?" I stammered.

My father, Lord Zander Avera, Second Hand of the Dread Beast, scoffed at me. "Lest you forget, you were the one who sought a deal with me. Or will you go back on your word and leave your mother to suffer?"

If this were a heroic sort of tale, then this would have been where I steeled myself for the sacrifice. I'd grit my teeth against his blade and honor the deal, so that my mother could have the medicine she needed. I'd been so full of bravado back in Merey, even when she begged me not to go. I'd thought I could sustain that flimsy courage through all that came next.

Instead, I began to cry.

The temple doors slammed open. In stormed a woman with dark hair coiled into an intricate bun and fury twisting her finely

painted eyes and lips. Two attendants dressed in black followed at her heels. She pointed a shaking finger at my father.

"How dare you," she growled. "You would sully House Avera's name by bringing your mongrel to our most sacred temple? Is there no end to your ambition, Zander? Put the sword down at once!"

I wanted nothing more than for my father to obey her—to put down the sword and send me far away. "I want to go home," I sniveled, hoping it would help my cause.

My father looked at me with an eyebrow raised. "Home?" he repeated. "This is your home now, Alma."

He brought the blade down.



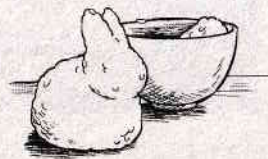
I CAME FROM MEREY, A SMALL PORT TOWN IN THE PROVINCE OF Metia. Here, the people revered the Heavenseer, one of the four elder gods worshipped in Kugara. Fishermen and merchants prayed to the divine vessels of House Metia in hopes that their all-seeing deity would bless their catches, prevent disaster, perhaps even move the weather itself. Every seven days there was a congregation in the local temple to give thanks, attended by almost everyone in town—save for my mother and me.

Our little household was something of an anomaly. My mother had never taught me to worship the Heavenseer, or any of the others: not the Weeping Lady or the Odious Tinkerer or the fearsome Dread Beast. We kept to ourselves, and because we did not worship the old folk deities either, we were thankfully spared from the ritual drownings that were often administered to heretics.

I used to wonder why we never made an effort to join in when the temple bell tolled and the people of Meresy shuffled dutifully to prayer. Then it became apparent that the Seer-Priests of Meresy simply didn't like us. Neither did many of our neighbors. I had been born out of wedlock, and the rumor around town was that my father was a married man.

The Heavenseer Sees all, the aunties on our street used to whisper behind my mother's back. She must be afraid he will See her wicked ways and cast her into the ocean.

I often wanted to tell those thoughtless hypocrites that my mother was the loveliest person in the world. They didn't know that her smile never wavered, even when we struggled to put food on the table. That she would always offer me portions off her plate, even though she needed the energy to work. That when we could eat nothing but plain rice and salt for days, she would ask me, "What shall my sweet Alma feast upon today? A turkey? A boar?" And she would mold the rice into the shape of an animal so that I would smile as I pretended to bite off its head.



But though I never doubted her love for me, the whispers around town did make me wonder about my father. My mother never spoke of him, and she was adamant that we were better off by ourselves. There were times when I, being young and foolish, had found that difficult to believe. It wasn't that I thought her a bad mother. But she worked long hours at the waterside hostel and

often came back to our rickety little apartment after I had already tucked myself into bed.

I was lonely.

I was an only child and had a grand total of zero friends. Parents kept their children away from me as if the scandal of my birth were contagious. I knew it hurt my mother to see this. Once, she had tried to endear me to the neighborhood kids by splurging on a bag of candy for me to share, and then she had somehow charmed them into playing with me despite their parents' warnings.

After they had eaten all my candy (to my consternation) and then included me in a game of catch (which I reluctantly enjoyed), one of the boys asked me, "Do you really not have a dad?"

"I don't need a dad," I told him.

He scrunched up his face. "Everyone needs a dad. My father says your mother can't find a husband because she's a harlot."

"That's not true!" I shouted.

"Yes it is," he screamed back, and then pushed me to the ground.

I remembered the awful, tearful embarrassment as everyone laughed. And then a flash of rage, so incandescent that it burned away my senses. The next thing I knew I was back on my feet and the boy was howling on the ground, cradling a broken arm.

I remembered thinking he deserved it.

There had been a big fuss, the aunties shooing me away as they attended to the boy. After I'd gone home and cried into my mother's skirts, the boy's mother showed up at our door and said some very nasty things to both of us. The rage almost came roaring back, but my mother's endless patience, her fingers stroking my hair as she gracefully apologized on my behalf, kept it at bay. Afterward, she sat me down and treated me to the full might of her disappointment.

"You can't hurt people like that, Alma," she said in a tone that let me know I was really in trouble.

"He said horrible things about you!"

"I'm touched that you wanted to defend my honor. But hateful words don't justify violence. No, don't argue! I don't care what they say. As long as you and I are happy, that's all I need."

Her words brought me to tears again, and she shushed my sobs and kissed me on the head. I could not recall what I had done to that boy, but I did not regret that he was hurt. What I did regret was making my mother sad. She had done her best to help me make friends, but I had ruined everything, proving myself to be as much trouble as everyone believed. *She lacks a father's guidance*, the adults would say. *Her mother cannot control her.*

The boy whose arm I broke turned out to be well-liked, and he made sure his friends all knew of my transgression. No one in our neighborhood would ever play with me again.

I told myself that it didn't matter. I wanted nothing from them; my mother and I were better off on our own. But, to my great frustration, I was still lonely.

So, I made myself a friend.

I decided that he would be a prince. One who had been banished from a far-off land, as much an outcast as I. He was more beautiful than any boy from Merey, with hair like moonlight and eyes like stars. He was sweet and charming and always knew how to make me smile, and he was devoted to me wholly.

Unlike most of our neighbors, my mother knew how to read, and she'd taught me as well. I once heard someone whisper that if she'd never had me, she could have been an educated woman and made something of herself. The heroines in the books she kept reminded me of her. They were kind and forgiving and written to inspire girls like me to become better people. The princes in those stories loved the heroines for being good. I knew I wasn't anything like them. There was violence in me—the part that had taken satisfaction in leaving that boy in agony, even as I lied and promised my mother that I was sorry. No, I was not good.

Instead, I imagined someone who would love me even if I was terrible.

I never told anyone about him—not even my mother. It was foolish. Poor Alma, so pathetic and unlovable that she had to imagine someone who would give her the time of day. I didn't want to disappoint her again. I didn't want her to worry.

So, I kept him a secret. But he would always be close by, ready with a quip to make me smile when the days were bad. He held my hand during thunderstorms when my mother wasn't around and walked with me down the street making faces at the boys sneering at me.

At night, I would scoot over in my bed to make room for my imaginary companion and confess to him all my darkest fears. I told him I was scared I would always be stuck in this hateful town. I was scared that my mother had ruined her life by having me, that maybe she would have been happier if I'd never been born.

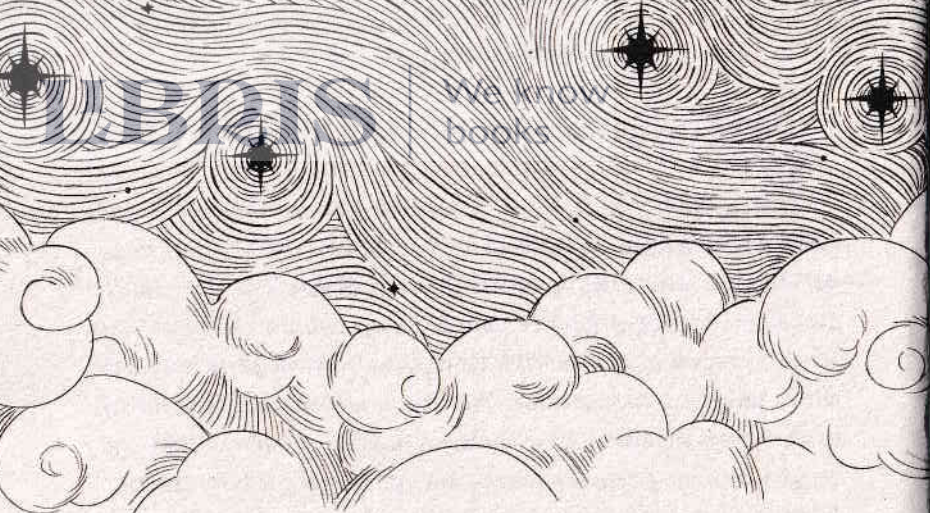
And my prince from the stars would say, so sweetly, "How could you think that, Alma? You are a blessing upon your poor mother's life. Someday, you and I will leave this place for somewhere better, together."

One day, my mother came home early and opened the door to find me chattering away to thin air. I will never forget the look on her face. I hadn't understood the reason for it at the time; I'd only thought that she must pity her poor daughter, talking to someone who wasn't real.

Only later would I realize that it hadn't been pity in her eyes, but caution.

Regardless, I stopped talking to my friend. I forced myself to put him out of my mind, and at some point, I managed to forget him completely. I was alone again, but as long as my mother was happy, I would bear it.

When she took ill, my whole world fell apart.



CHAPTER

2

There was no warning. One day, she simply collapsed.

A neighbor opened our door when she heard my wailing. “Oh, the poor woman!” she exclaimed when she saw my mother on the kitchen floor. I hadn’t been strong enough to move her, and she would not wake. “She must be very sick. Only a Sorrowless Disciple can save her now.”

Healers from the Church of the Weeping Lady often traveled Kugara’s provinces to provide their services to followers of the Four. Unfortunately, the one stationed in Meroy had just been called back to the capital in Sorrowsend. Having given the last of her sorrows to the Lady, and her joy and her fear and everything else in between, she had begun mistaking her patients for willing subjects of medical experimentation, and eventually was deemed no longer fit for duty. Summoning another healer to Meroy would cost more money than I was capable of comprehending. My best hope, the neighbors said, was to ask the local temple for their sponsorship.

I had nowhere else to go.

A Seer-Priest in heavy midnight robes greeted me at the temple entrance. The silver decorations hanging off his shoulders suggested he was of some importance. Though a blindfold covered his eyes, I still felt as though he were somehow regarding me beneath it, and he did not seem very impressed.

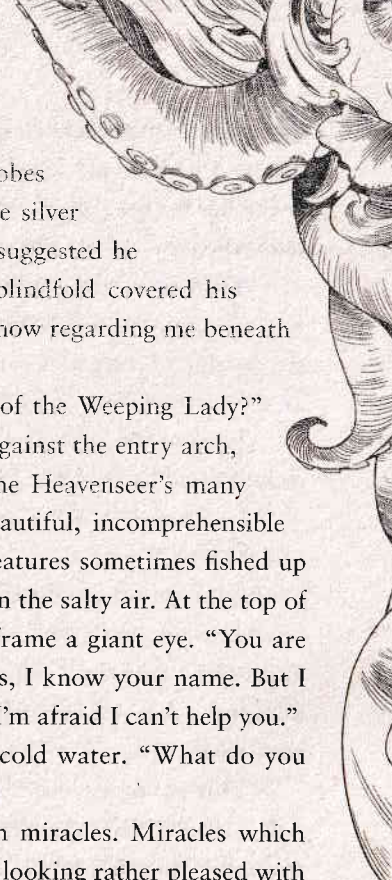
“You wish to contact the Church of the Weeping Lady?” he said. He placed a thoughtful hand against the entry arch, which had been carved to resemble the Heavenseer’s many shadowy limbs twisted together in beautiful, incomprehensible patterns. It reminded me of the sea creatures sometimes fished up by the sailors, their tentacles writhing in the salty air. At the top of the arch, the mass of limbs parted to frame a giant eye. “You are Alma Ven. Your mother is Ira Ven. Yes, I know your name. But I don’t recognize you from my sermons. I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

My stomach sank like a stone in cold water. “What do you mean?”

“A Sorrowless Disciple works with miracles. Miracles which are granted by the gods,” he explained, looking rather pleased with himself. “Yet you do not believe. You do not attend communion, and your mother is unmarried. No, I don’t believe I can help you at all. Good day, child.”

At the time, I could do nothing but gape as one of the town’s holiest men shut the door in my face. Later, I would often think back to that moment. I would lie awake in bed, wishing that the rage that had once reared its head so terribly could have driven me to do something more—force my way through, wring the Seer-Priest’s neck between my hands, knock his stained teeth out of his head one by one until he agreed to help us. But all I did that day was trudge home as hope slipped between my fingers.

It became known that I had been turned away by the temple. The neighbors buzzed with gleeful vindication. Eventually one of



them approached me—an old woman who rarely spoke to anyone but who had always listened while the others gossiped. I used to resent her for her complacency, but that resentment turned to gratitude when she quietly pointed me toward a local physician.

“Your mother is a kind woman,” she told me at the door. It was late, and I had to wonder if she chose this hour to drop by so she wouldn’t be seen. “I believe the gods will want to preserve that kindness, regardless of what the temple says.”

The next day, the physician paid us a visit. He examined my mother from head to toe, looking grimmer by the minute.

“I have seen this before,” he said. “I’m afraid the outlook is rather bleak.”

“Can you do anything?” I asked, my voice trembling as I sat beside my mother’s narrow bed and clutched her hand tightly in mine. Only now did I notice how bony that hand had become. At my touch, she half-opened her glazed eyes, her breath shallow as she looked at me. “The Seer-Priests won’t summon a healer for us.”

“This is not a wound that can be healed by the Weeping Lady’s miracles,” said the physician, wiping at his spectacles as he explained. “There is a school of medicine in the capital. I would advise reaching out to them. They have been corresponding with doctors overseas who are developing something to manage this illness. But as with everything outside of Kugara, the court opposes this vehemently, and I worry for the school’s future. I’m afraid, too, that I will have to stop here. The temple already dislikes my practice.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” said my mother weakly, managing to sound, despite the situation, like she meant it wholeheartedly.

After he left, she patted my hand and smiled at me. “Will you bring me a pen and some paper, my duck? We can write a letter to the school together, and you can help me send it.”

I collected the items for her, and she dictated as I wrote. My penmanship was poor but she still nodded in approval after I

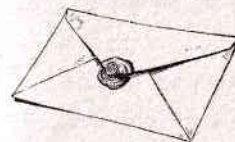
finished each word. The thought of not having these moments with her anymore made my insides feel hollow.

“Alma,” she said as we were finishing the letter. “There’s a box in the bottom drawer of my dresser. I have some money hidden away, and keepsakes that should be of some value. Old Mrs. Dee across the hall is kind and has agreed to take care of you in exchange for them if anything happens to me.”

I didn’t want to hear it. I didn’t want to talk about it. But when I conveyed this to her, she only held my hand very gently.

“There are some things we can’t fight,” she said. “I will do my best to heal, because I will miss you so much if I am gone. But if that happens, I want you to promise me you’ll be strong. You are such a good girl, Alma, and I know you will do so many wonderful things when you grow up. Will you be strong for me?”

Saying yes felt like giving up. She must have known this, because she gave me a weary smile and let it go for the day. Soon after, she fell asleep. She must have been so tired that she completely forgot about what she had been hiding from me.



When I scrounged through that box in the dresser for the money to send the letter with, I came upon the thing that would ruin my life.

Sitting under a sparse assortment of mementos and ornaments was a stiff, heavy envelope with a seal of black wax. The seal had been broken through the middle, and I could not make out the image that had been stamped on it. I should have looked harder, but at the time, I was only curious as to where such a fancy thing had come from.

I shouldn’t have read it. I had been told to respect others’ privacy by the very person whose privacy I was now disregarding. I knew it was wrong, but I opened that envelope anyway and unfolded the letter lying within.

This letter is to advise your discretion in this affair. I'm sure you understand my position—and the allegations the family might visit upon you were you to make any bold claims. Do not write me back. If you seek recompense, you may instead write to the address below, but only within reasonable parameters.

Z.A.

My head spun. My stricken young mind focused only on two words: *affair* and *recompense*.

The rumors must have been true. My father was a married man and, from the looks of it, an important one. He would have the money to cure my mother.

She must have hidden this from me for a reason, but I couldn't think of one that would justify squandering an opportunity to save her.

I sent our letter to the school of medicine that day, and another one of my own, praying to whatever deity was listening that one of them would reply.

I probably shouldn't have done that either.



HE ARRIVED IN A SLEEK BLACK CARRIAGE. I HAD BEEN ON MY way home from the market with a meager crop of barley to be boiled into porridge when I saw the neighborhood children ogling it parked by the grubby stairs leading to our home. It was rare to see anything so luxurious in our area of town, as the wealthy families lived farther north. What would someone like that be doing here?



A second later, it occurred to me who that someone might be, and I nearly dropped the groceries in my haste to barrel up the stairs.

When I slammed open the door to our apartment, a man was standing inside with his back to me. He was wearing a sharp black coat and a hat, his figure casting a shadow across the room to where my mother sat at the small kitchen table.

"Alma!" My mother stood on wobbly feet and rushed to my side. I hadn't seen her walking like this in days. She held me tightly and turned me away from the man as if to shield me. Her face was haggard, and she must have been in terrible pain, but still she stared him grimly down.

"So this is her." The man I already knew to be my father turned to face me. "Alma, was it?"

His black clothes were spotless, absent of the frills and embroidery that the upper class found so fashionable, yet tailored to perfection. He was tall, with a clean-shaven face and skin a few shades lighter than my own. His hair was the same pitch-black color as mine. Strapped to his waist was an exquisitely crafted sword, and the hand that he had resting casually on top of it was made of metal.

I froze.

I'd heard the stories about the Hands of the Dread Beast. Just as the vessels of House Metia offered their sight to the Heavenseer, the vessels of House Avera gave their arms to the Beast, and in return became arbiters of death guided by His touch. They were fearsome swordsmen who had won us every war for the past five hundred years, agents of Kugara's own deity of destruction.

Surely not, I thought. Surely my father could not be one of them. A devout follower, maybe, or a high-ranking guard. It was said that those who heard the Beast eventually succumbed to His bloodlust, and the man in our apartment looked only haughty, not mad.

Rallying myself, I nodded. "Yes. I wrote the letter."

He did not seem very impressed. "Right—the letter. We'll need to get you a proper tutor. Pack your bags now; you're coming with me."