THE GILDED ONES

ARE WE GIRLS OR ARE WE DEMONS?

ARE WE GOING TO DIE OR ARE WE GOING TO SURVIVE?

Deka lives in fear of the blood ceremony that will determine whether she can become a member of her village. If she bleeds red, she will belong. But on the day of the ceremony, her blood runs gold – the colour of impurity, of a demon.

The consequences force Deka to leave her village with a mysterious woman, destined to join an army of girls like her – the alaki, girls who are near-immortals with rare gifts, and the only ones able to stop the empire's greatest threat.

But as she journeys to the capital to train for the battle of her life, Deka discovers the great walled city holds many surprises. Nothing and no one are quite what they seem – not even Deka herself…

To my father, who taught me how to dream.
To my mother, who taught me how to do.
And to my sister, who supported me all the way.

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NAMINA FORNA

THE GILDED ONES *includes scenes of violence, including some graphic violence, which some readers may find distressing.*

Golma
Harukana
Sembugard
Northern Provinces
Nagrabal
Eastern Provinces
Gar Melanis
Zhang-Do
Ebungard
Irfut
Xibal
Hemaira
Gar Suma
Gar Nasim
Gar Sinkarie
Southern Provinces
Western Provinces
Gar Shekou
Hualpa
Gar Satu
N
W
E
S
N'Oyo Mountains
Gar Monyanï
Nibari Desert
Gar Fatu
Unknown Lands
OTERA

ONE

Today is the Ritual of Purity.

The nervous thought circles in my head as I hurry towards the barn, gathering my cloak to ward off the cold. It's early morning, and the sun hasn't yet begun its climb above the snow-dusted trees encircling our small farmhouse. Shadows gather in the darkness, crowding the weak pool of light cast by my lamp. An ominous tingling builds under my skin. It's almost as if there's something there, at the edge of my vision…

It's just nerves, I tell myself. I've felt the tingling many times before and never once seen anything strange.

The barn door is open when I arrive, a lantern hung at the post. Father is already inside, spreading hay. He's a frail figure in the darkness, his tall body sunken into itself. Just three months ago, he was hearty and robust, his blond hair untouched by grey. Then the red pox came, sickening him and Mother. Now he's stooped and faded with the rheumy eyes and wispy hair of someone decades older.

"You're already awake," he says softly, grey eyes flitting over me.

"I couldn't sleep any longer," I reply, grabbing a milk pail and heading towards Norla, our largest cow.

I'm supposed to be resting in isolation, like all the other girls preparing for the Ritual, but there's too much work to do around the farm and not enough hands. There hasn't been since Mother died three months ago. The thought brings tears to my eyes, and I blink them away.

Father forks more hay into the stalls. "'Blessings to he who waketh to witness the glory of the Infinite Father'," he grunts, quoting from the Infinite Wisdoms. "So, are you prepared for today?"

I nod. "Yes, I am."

Later this afternoon, Elder Durkas will test me and all the other sixteen-year-old girls during the Ritual of Purity. Once we're proven pure, we'll officially belong here in the village. I'll finally be a woman – eligible to marry, have a family of my own.

The thought sends another wave of anxiety across my mind.

I glance at Father from the corner of my eye. His body is tense; his movements are laboured. He's worried too. "I had a thought, Father," I begin. "What if…what if…" I stop there, the unfinished question lingering heavily in the air. An unspeakable dread, unfurling in the gloom of the barn.

Father gives me what he thinks is a reassuring smile, but the edges of his mouth are tight. "What if what?" he asks. "You can tell me, Deka."

"What if my blood doesn't run pure?" I whisper, the horrible words rushing out of me. "What if I'm taken away by the priests – banished?"

I have nightmares about it, terrors that merge with my other dreams; the ones where I'm in a dark ocean, Mother's voice calling out to me.

"Is that what you're worried about?"

I nod.

Even though it's rare, everyone knows of someone's sister or relative who was found to be impure. The last time it happened in Irfut was decades ago – to one of Father's cousins. The villagers still whisper about the day she was dragged away by the priests, never to be seen again. Father's family has been shadowed by it ever since.

That's why they're always acting so holy – always the first in temple, my aunts masked so absolutely, even their mouths are hidden from view. The Infinite Wisdoms cautions, "Only the impure, blaspheming, and unchaste woman remains revealed under the eyes of Oyomo," but this warning refers to the top half of the face: forehead to the tip of the nose. My aunts, however, even have little squares of sheer cloth covering their eyes.

When Father returned from his army post with Mother at his side, the entire family disowned him immediately. It was too risky, accepting a woman of unknown purity, and a foreigner at that, into the family.

Then I came along – a child dark enough to be a full Southerner but with Father's grey eyes, cleft chin, and softly curled hair to say otherwise.

I've been in Irfut my entire life, born and raised, and I'm still treated like a stranger – still stared and pointed at, still excluded. I wouldn't even be allowed in the temple if some of Father's

relatives had their way. My face may be the spitting image of his, but that's not enough. I need to be proven for the village to accept me, for Father's family to accept us. Once my blood runs pure, I'll finally belong.

Father walks over, smiles reassuringly at me. "Do you know what being pure means, Deka?" he asks.

I reply with a passage from the Infinite Wisdoms. "'Blessed are the meek and subservient, the humble and true daughters of man, for they are unsullied in the face of the Infinite Father'."

Every girl knows it by heart. We recite it whenever we enter a temple – a constant reminder that women were created to be helpmeets to men, subservient to their desires and commands.

"Are you humble and all the other things, Deka?" Father asks.

I nod. "I think so," I say.

Uncertainty flickers in his eyes, but he smiles and kisses my forehead. "Then all will be well."

He returns to his hay. I take my seat before Norla, that worry still niggling at me. After all, there are other ways I resemble Mother that Father does not know about – ways that would make the villagers despise me even more if they ever found out.

I have to make sure I keep them secret. The villagers must never find out.

Never.

It's still early morning when I reach the village square. There's a slight chill in the air, and the roofs of nearby houses drip with icicles. Even then, the sun is unseasonably bright, its rays

glinting off the high, arching columns of the Temple of Oyomo. Those columns are meant to be a prayer, a meditation on the progress of Oyomo's sun across the sky every day. High priests use them to choose which two days of the year to conduct the spring and winter Rituals. The very sight of them sends another surge of anxiety through me.

"Deka! Deka!" A familiar gawkish figure waves excitedly at me from across the road.

Elfriede hurries over, her cloak pulled so tightly around her, all I can see are her bright green eyes. She and I both always try to cover our faces when we come into the village square – me because of my colouring and Elfriede because of the dull red birthmark covering the left side of her face. Girls are allowed to remain revealed until they go through the Ritual, but there's no point attracting attention, especially on a day like this.

This morning, Irfut's tiny cobblestone square is thronged with hundreds of visitors, more arriving by the cartful every minute.

They're from all across Otera: haughty Southerners with dark brown skin and tightly curled hair; easygoing Westerners, long black hair in topknots, tattoos all over golden skin; brash Northerners, pink skinned, blond hair gleaming in the cold; and quiet Easterners in every shade from deep brown to eggshell, silky straight black hair flowing in glistening rivers down their backs.

Even though Irfut is remote, it's known for its pretty girls, and men come from far distances to look at the eligible ones before they take the mask. Lots of girls will find husbands today – if they haven't already.

"Isn't it exciting, Deka?" Elfriede giggles.

She gestures at the square, which is now festively decorated for the occasion. The doors of all the houses with eligible girls have been painted gleaming red, banners and flags fly cheerfully from windows, and brightly coloured lanterns adorn every entrance. There are even masked stilt dancers and fire breathers, and they thread through the crowd, competing against the merchants selling bags of roasted nuts, smoked chicken legs, and candied apples.

Excitement courses through me at the sight. "It is," I reply with a grin, but Elfriede is already dragging me along.

"Hurry, hurry!" she urges, barrelling past the crowds of visitors, many of whom stop to scowl disapprovingly at our lack of male guardians.

In most villages, women can't leave their homes without a man to escort them. Irfut, however, is small, and men are in scarce supply. Most of the eligible ones have joined the army, as Father did when he was younger. A few have even survived the training to become jatu, the emperor's elite guard. I spot a contingent of them lingering at the edges of the square, watchful in their gleaming red armour.

There are at least twelve today, far more than the usual two or three the emperor sends for the winter Ritual. Perhaps it's true what people have been whispering: that more deathshrieks have been breaking through the border this year.

The monsters have been laying siege to Otera's southern border for centuries, but in the past few years, they've gotten much more aggressive. They usually attack near Ritual day, destroying villages and trying to steal away impure girls.

Rumour is, impurity makes girls much more delicious…

Thankfully, Irfut is in one of the most remote areas of the North, surrounded by snow-capped mountains and impenetrable forests. Deathshrieks will never find their way here.

Elfriede doesn't notice my introspection, she's too busy grinning at the jatu. "Aren't they just so handsome in their reds? I heard they're new recruits, doing a tour of the provinces. How wonderful of the emperor to send them here for the Ritual!"

"I suppose…" I murmur.

Elfriede's stomach grumbles. "Hurry, Deka," she urges, dragging me along. "The line at the bakery will be unmanageable soon."

She pulls me so strongly, I stumble, smacking into a large, solid form. "My apologies," I gasp, glancing up.

One of the visiting men is staring down at me, a thin, wolfish smirk on his lips. "What's this, another sweet morsel?" He grins, stepping closer.

I hurriedly step back. How could I be so stupid? Men from outside villages aren't used to seeing unaccompanied women and can make awful assumptions. "I'm sorry, I must go," I whisper, but he grabs me before I can retreat, his fingers greedily reaching for the button fastening the top of my cloak.

"Don't be that way, little morsel. Be a nice girl, take off the cloak so we can see what we've come—" Large hands wrench him away before he can finish his words.

When I turn, Ionas, the oldest son of Elder Olam, the village head, is glaring down at the man, no trace of his usual easy

smile on his face. "If you want a brothel, there's one down the road, in your town," he warns, blue eyes flashing. "Perhaps you should return there."

The difference in their size is enough to make the man hesitate. Though Ionas is one of the handsomest boys in the village – all blond hair and dimples – he's also one of the largest, massive as a bull and just as intimidating.

The man spits at the ground, annoyed. "Don't be so pissy, boy. I was only having a bit of fun. That one isn't even a Northerner, for Oyomo's sake."

Every muscle in my body strings taut at this unwelcome reminder. No matter how quiet I am, how inoffensive I remain, my brown skin will always mark me as a Southerner, a member of the hated tribes that long ago conquered the North and forced it to join the One Kingdom, now known as Otera. Only the Ritual of Purity can ensure my place.

Please let me be pure, please let me be pure. I send a quick prayer to Oyomo.

I pull my cloak tighter, wishing I could disappear into the ground, but Ionas steps even closer to the man, a belligerent look in his eyes. "Deka was born and raised here, same as the rest of us," he growls. "You'll not touch her again."

I gape at Ionas, shocked by this unexpected defence. The man huffs. "Like I said, I was only having a bit of fun." He turns to his friends. "C'mon, then, let's go get a drink."

The group retreats, grumbling under their breath.

Once they're gone, Ionas turns to me and Elfriede. "You all right?" he asks, a worried expression on his face.

"Fine. A bit startled is all," I manage to say.

"But not hurt." His eyes are on me now, and it's all I can do not to squirm under their sincerity.

"No." I shake my head.

He nods. "My apologies for what just happened. Men can be animals, especially around girls as pretty as you."

Girls as pretty as you…

The words are so heady, it takes me a few moments to realize he's speaking again. "Where are you off to?" he asks.

"The baker," Elfriede replies, since I'm still tongue-tied. She nods at the small, cosy building just across the street from us.

"I'll watch you from here," he says. "Make sure you're safe."

Again his eyes remain on me.

My cheeks grow hotter.

"My thanks," I say, hurrying over to the bakery as Elfriede giggles.

True to his words, Ionas continues staring at me the entire way.

The bakery is already packed, just as Elfriede said it would be. Women crowd every corner of the tiny store, their masks gleaming in the low light as they buy delicate pink purity cakes and sun-shaped infinity loaves to celebrate the occasion. Usually, masks are plain things, made out of the thinnest bits of wood or parchment and painted with prayer symbols for good luck. On feast days like this, however, women wear their most extravagant ones, the ones modelled after the sun, moon, and stars and adorned with geometric precision in gold or silver. Oyomo is not only the god of the sun but also the god of

mathematics. Most women's masks feature the divine symmetry to please His eye.

After today, I'll begin wearing a mask as well, a sturdy white half mask made out of heavy parchment and thin slivers of wood that will cover my face from forehead to nose. It's not much, but it's the best Father could afford. Perhaps Ionas will ask to court me once I wear it.

I immediately dismiss the ridiculous thought.

No matter what I wear, I'll never be as pretty as the other girls in the village, with their willowy figures, silken blonde hair, and pink cheeks. My own frame is much more sturdy, my skin a deep brown, and the only thing I have to my advantage is my soft black hair, which curls in clouds around my face.

Mother once told me that girls who look like me are considered pretty in the Southern provinces, but she's the only one who's ever thought that. All everyone else ever sees is how different I look from them. I'll be lucky if I get a husband from one of the nearby villages, but I have to try. If anything should ever happen to Father, his relatives would find any reason they could to abandon me.

A cold sweat washes over me as I think of what would happen then: a life of enforced piety and backbreaking labour as a temple maiden or, worse, being forced into the pleasure houses of the Southern provinces.

Elfriede turns to me. "Did you see the way Ionas looked at you?" she whispers. "I thought he was going to whisk you away. So romantic."

I pat my cheeks to cool them as a small smile tugs at my lips. "Don't be silly, Elfriede. He was just being polite."

"The way he was looking at you, it was—"

"What? What was it, Elfriede?" a mincing sweet voice interrupts, titters following in its wake.

My entire body goes cold. *Please, not today…*

I turn to find Agda standing behind us, a group of village girls accompanying her. I know immediately she must have seen me talking to Ionas, because her posture is brittle with rage. Agda may be the prettiest girl in the village, with her pale skin and white-blonde hair, but those delicate features hide a venomous heart and a spiteful nature.

"You think that just because you might be proven today, boys will suddenly start thinking you're pretty?" she sniffs. "No matter how hard you wish otherwise, Deka, a mask will never be able to hide that ugly Southern skin of yours. I wonder what you'll do when no man wants you in his house and you're an ugly, desperate spinster without a husband or family."

I clench my fists so hard, my fingernails dig into my flesh.

Don't reply, don't reply, don't reply…

Agda flicks her eyes dismissively towards Elfriede. "That one, at least, can cover her face, but even if you cover your entire body, everyone knows what's under—"

"Mind your tongue now, Agda," a prim voice calls from the front of the store, cutting her off.

It belongs to Mistress Norlim, her mother. She walks over, the numerous gems on her golden mask glittering sharply enough to blind. Mistress Norlim is the wife of Elder Norlim, the richest man in the village. Unlike the other women, who can afford only gold half masks or full silvers, she wears a formal gold mask that covers her entire face, a sunburst pattern

replicated around pale blue eyes. Her hands are also decorated, swirls of gold and semi-precious stones pasted onto the skin.

"'The words of a woman should be as sweet as fruit and honey'," she reminds Agda. "So sayeth the Infinite Wisdoms."

Agda bows her head, sheepish. "Yes, Mother," she replies.

"Besides," her mother adds, the pity in her eyes at odds with her cheerfully grinning mask, "Deka can't help that her skin is as dirty as her mother's was, any more than Elfriede can hide her birthmark. That's the way they were born, poor things."

My gratitude curdles to anger, the blood boiling in my veins. Dirty? Poor things? She should just call me impure and be done with it. It's all I can do to keep my face docile as I walk towards the door, but I somehow manage. "Thank you for your kind words, Mistress Norlim," I force myself to grit out before I exit.

It takes every last bit of my strength not to slam the door.

Then I'm outside, and I'm inhaling and exhaling rapidly, trying to regain my composure, trying to push back the tears of rage pricking at my eyes. I barely notice Elfriede following behind me.

"Deka?" she asks. "You all right?"

"I'm fine," I whisper, hugging my cloak closer so she won't see my tears.

My fury.

It doesn't matter what Mistress Norlim and the others say, I tell myself silently. I will be pure. Doubts surge, reminding me that I have the same uncanny differences Mother did. I push

them away. Mother managed to hide hers until the day she died, and I'll do the same. All I have to do is make it through the next few hours and I'll be proven pure.

Then I'll finally be safe.