

Ooligan Press Editorial Department

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Kristin Burchell
Court of Venom
Developmental Edit

Dear Kristin,

I want to begin this letter by thanking you for trusting the editorial team at Ooligan Press to work on *Court of Venom*. You've written an intriguing and thoroughly entertaining fantasy, complete with a memorable cast of characters and an exciting fantastical world filled with Witches, ghosts, poison, and magic. My team of editors and I have had such a fun time immersing ourselves in the world you've created and working to make the story the best it can be, and I'm so excited to see how it turns out once you've made your revisions.

This developmental edit focuses on big-picture concerns related to worldbuilding, character development, narrative, and overall structure. To conduct the edit, I assembled a team of eleven editors, all of whom read through the manuscript carefully and then submitted their reactions, questions, and suggestions to me. This helped me get a variety of perspectives on what was working well in the manuscript and what could be improved. This letter represents my synthesis of the team's feedback. Be aware that this is our only opportunity to make large-scale changes to the manuscript; after this, it will enter the copyediting stage, where we will focus mainly on language and grammar.

You'll notice that the bulk of suggestions fall under the categories **Worldbuilding** and **Characters**, since those are perhaps the two most vital pieces of the manuscript and the ones that drive the narrative. These were also the two sections my team of editors had the most notes on, and I think we've come up with some really excellent ideas for how to add to the incredible foundation you've built here and take the manuscript to the next level. I'm sure you have some ideas of your own for ways you want to shape and build the story, and I'm looking forward to hearing your thoughts.

WORLDBUILDING

As you know, there are few aspects of a fantasy title as important as worldbuilding. The setting takes on a life of its own and becomes a character in and of itself. The amount of myth, history, and culture you have already considered is vast, and it's clear that you have put much time and thought into the world you've created with Mera to the east, Tanera to the west, the Ash Mountains to the north, the swamp to the south, and the Lost and Aran at the center. A few editors commented that they would love to see a map of the world in the front matter of the book before the first chapter, which would be a truly fun addition to the story that would help orient readers to the world you've created before diving into the narrative. This is something we'll certainly consider during the design process, so let me know if you have any ideas!

The language you use to describe the world is beautiful and in many places gives the reader a vivid picture of what it looks like. Here are a few of my favorite examples of the excellent worldbuilding you've already done:

The description of the fountain of Aran on page 8 perfectly encapsulates how the city is declining: “At the center of the city the fountain bubbles with the famed water, supposedly enchanted, that gives Aran its radiance, its citizens unusual youth and beauty. But now the walls are cracked and faded from centuries of relentless sunlight. The grass is brown and sharp against bare feet; the city’s famed horses are finding less and less to eat. And the water that bubbles in the fountain no longer tastes sweet and cold, but warm and gritty.”

This description of Badriya’s chamber on page 16 gives the reader a wonderful picture of her private space: “Inside my chamber, I light a candle and sweep it through the room, peering into each corner for any surprises, a habit I’ve gotten into since finding a dead rat on my pillow years before. I see only my bed, draped in rich thick cloth, and the armoire that holds my gowns. A few vials of cosmetics stand on my vanity. In the corner is the table where I create my potions, piled with blossoms and roots and leaves. Lying next to them is my mother’s knife, its blade stained crimson and emerald. A long jagged crack runs along its handle, made of shells from the Turquoise Sea, and it has grown dull from use. But its blade holds my mother’s blood; it is all I have left of her. On a shelf above are lined jars full of different color liquids, pastes, and powders. A poisonous odor fills the room, sweet and biting at once.”

With those examples in mind, there are also a few areas and concepts of the world which could be expanded and clarified to really make the setting jump off the page. Read through the categories and questions below to jog your imagination, focusing on the ones which most excite you and inspire you to write. If you don’t already have one, it might be helpful to keep a Word document or a notebook just for information about the world you can draw upon later when you write, like a reference text. Note that I certainly don’t expect you to answer every question I’ve posted, in fact, much of the information I ask for might not end up in the manuscript at all. But creating the world as fully as possible in your mind will help the descriptions you do choose to include be more vibrant. We want readers to leave the story feeling as if they’ve just been transported to another place and another time, and worldbuilding is the first step in making that happen.

Aran

My one suggestion when it comes to the description of Aran in the story is one that should hopefully be fun: Write more! A few editors on the team expressed that they were unsure of how large Aran actually is and noted that it feels small only because not enough details about its size, layout, and citizens were included. For a city that’s been around for three hundred years, there is surely more to it than what is currently mentioned. The tricky part here is to make sure these descriptions are included in a way that feels natural to the story and not like simple exposition, since that can quickly pull the reader out of the story.

Perhaps the most organic way to incorporate more description of the city would be to add little bits of descriptive phrases between scenes when Badriya is walking from one place to the next. There are several places in the first few chapters where the scenes jump quickly from one to another where this could work. For example, on page 49, Solena tells Badriya not to go too far, and then Badriya is suddenly in her room. I’d recommend describing her walk back to her chambers here. Describe what Badriya sees and smells—perhaps she sees people congregating at a small market or watching a street performer, or perhaps she smells the cooking coming from a house or a restaurant. What streets does she pass or avoid? What sorts of people?

A couple of other details about Aran that need to be ironed out are whether the Lost and the desert are the same thing (it’s unclear if the two terms are synonymous in the current draft) and how many visitors Aran gets. It’s said that the desert is treacherous throughout, including whole

caravans having been lost, as is described on page 90, but there are also enough visitors that people know about Solena's recent ascendancy and the two caravans that come during the span of the story are within two days of each other (page 46). Because much of Badriya's conflict is that she has no clear way to leave the city, it's suggested some level of affluence or skill is required to cross (either by hiring a Witch or having some know-how, like Sireen). When Arlo's party shows up, little comment is given to how they made it to the city until Badriya asks on page 51, which seemed odd considering the danger. Khalen's response, "What kind of trouble might we have found?" was also confusing because it seemed like he was being coy about an overwhelmingly present danger.

People

Where does everyone in the city live and what are their homes like? Are people either part of the Favorites or the Lesser, or are there more designations outside the area where the royals live? Where do the artisans, farmers, and other ordinary citizens live and work? Are there parts of the city for recreation other than the gambling hall? While it was mentioned that there are some goats grazing where the Aran horses used to, is there another place where livestock is kept and bred? Why is there a stable if there is nowhere to ride but the Lost, where no one ventures due to the danger there? Is there a market? If Aran used to have a trade route, it may have also had a marketplace. Perhaps it has fallen into disuse and the people do something else with it now, but I'm curious where people in the city buy their goods. There are guards, so is there a guardhouse? Barracks of some sort? What about a school? There must be more people, and these people would be of a wide variety, escaping the Lost from each corner of the world: the swamp, the mountains, coast of Mera, and the hills and forests of Tanera. Aran would likely be a place of immigrants mixed with the original people who settled with the first King, and seeing more of them will help the world feel as big and full as it can.

Clothing

How do the clothes in Aran differ from the clothes in Mera and in Tanera? We know that Badriya wears gowns because we see them hanging above her bed on page 16, but we don't get a description of what they look like: "I see only my bed, draped in rich thick cloth, and the armoire that holds my gowns." How do the climates and geographies of each area affect the types of clothing produced and worn there? Perhaps wearing tunics is a commonality among them all, but maybe there are certain plants in Tanera that allow for dyes that are unavailable in Aran or Mera. Does the availability of certain metals make jewelry different?

Music

Music plays a large role in the story and though it was portrayed beautifully, the descriptions of it could benefit from greater detail. For example, there was no explicit distinction between the music in Mera and the music in Aran. Are different instruments used in Aran than other parts of the world and do they play different types of songs? Is there folk music native to Mera or even particular instruments played there that Badriya misses? Did Sireen find it difficult to adjust to the different beats and melodies of Aran music when they first arrived there?

Cosmetics

Badriya's use of poisoned cosmetics in the story is certainly one of its strengths. This is such a fascinating and unique idea, and many editors on this project expressed wanting to see more of it and to understand it better. Do non-poisonous cosmetics exist in this world, or only poisonous ones? If they do, how do people feel about the use of the type of cosmetics Badriya makes versus

everyday cosmetics? Are people even aware that cosmetics can be poisoned?

Language

Do the people of all the areas speak the same language with the same accent? Oftentimes, when groups are separated for a long period of time, even if they speak the same language, the language will change, be it slang or accent or dialect. Perhaps Badriya has a certain slang word or two from her homeland that she can't quite rid herself of, or maybe there are slang words in Aran that she doesn't really like to use. Perhaps we only see her use some words when she's talking to other people, but never in her inner voice.

Tradespeople

Are there craftspeople there? Who makes clothing and where does the food in Aran come from? Are there weavers, tailors, jewelers, blacksmiths, metal smiths, glassblowers, or cobblers? Is it that Aran used to have more trade when there were more of their fabled horses around? How did they cope with the loss of imports when the trade routes dried up? Glassblowing would be perfect for Aran, surrounded by sand as it is, but something else that could be interesting is the Fairy Green. What is it made out of? Is that substance available everywhere? Perhaps that is another unique thing about Aran that was exported long ago, and now only royalty have access to it because no one makes it anymore since it's become unsustainable.

Magic

I truly enjoyed reading about all the various ways magic is at work in the story and the ways Badriya both uses it to her advantage and is beholden to its power. You hit the nail on the head with the concept that magic has its price, and that every magical action will have consequences. As I read though, I sometimes found myself getting a little confused about exactly how magic operates within the world and what its limitations are, especially as it relates to poison. Here are some questions for you to consider:

Who has magic? Just Witches and those with merblood? Is the magic here something one can learn and perform through study? Or must they have magical blood in order to perform it? For those who do have magic, what exactly can they do, and—perhaps more importantly—what *can't* they? For example, if Badriya has magic, couldn't she use it somehow to help heal the spring of Aran? To clarify these ideas, it would be good to make a list of rules for the magic of the world that you can apply to situations to make them clearer.

On that note, how are the poisons affected by magic? For example, would the cosmetics have the same poisonous effects if Badriya and Siren didn't add their blood to the mixtures? Or does that just give them more control over the usages of the cosmetics? Does Najma have any magical abilities since she was able to make the poison that Solena drank? Or was it just that any poison Najma acquired was already mixed by Badriya with her own blood?

By being a bit more explicit with the rules of magic in your story, even by trickling in little tidbits of information among Badriya's conversations with her mother in her past or with Najma as they discuss legends and history, your readers will have a better understanding of the world, which increases its believability and ultimately draws in the reader that much more.

Stardust & Poison

The concept of Stardust is such a fascinating one, and I love how it adds some darkness and

depth to the type of magic that exists in the world. However, exactly what Stardust is made of is a little murky in the manuscript at present. On page 44, Badriya says Stardust is made from “seaweed, the kind with a silver sheen,” but on page 144, she says it’s made from roots, which would explain why she’s able to grow it in Aran from the collection of “sprigs and roots she’d brought from Mera,” (page 21). The effect of Stardust certainly seems magical, but it’s not clear whether it’s due to Badriya and Sireen’s magical merblood (which is what I suspect) or if it’s due to the ingredient of the seaweed itself.

To remedy this issue, I’d recommend for Stardust to be made from either roots or seaweed, not both. Note that if you choose the seaweed route, you would need to explicitly state how much seaweed Sireen and Badriya took with them from Mera, and how there’s a limited supply of it unless Badriya is able to grow more of it somewhere in Aran, perhaps in the water of the well or something similar.

There is a scene on page 147 where Badriya puts on some stardust to impress Rumin. He responds by remarking that he feels like he’s talking to someone else and that she’s beautiful without makeup. While this is a nice sentiment, due to the prevalence of cosmetics in the book, it feels as if this one scene paints anyone who uses makeup in a negative light, and this message might be harmful to young readers. To avoid this, Rumin could tell her instead that she does look pretty and that he appreciates the effort she put into looking nice for him. Rather than focusing on the Stardust, he would then treat her the same way he always does. Badriya could hear the Bones say the same thing, that he isn’t swayed by magic, and the scene stays mostly the same without undue judgement of cosmetics and those who choose to wear them.

The poisons, tinctures, and salves are one of my favorite parts of this story. I love the images you paint of Badriya in her room, grabbing jars and bottles of fantastical ingredients and mixing them together skillfully and with intention. I want this very special part of Badriya’s identity to shine through the manuscript and be memorable for the reader, but as it stands now, many of the poisons seemed to blur together and it is sometimes confusing when she makes a new poison or vows to make one we already know about. It was a little unclear which potions had what effects and what plants had what effects when mixed with what ingredients, and while it isn’t necessary for the reader to know every single ingredient Badriya uses and its effects, many editors expressed an interest in knowing more details about Badriya’s poison making. After all, it’s what makes her a unique protagonist, so don’t be shy about letting the reader into this part of her.

I would recommend listing the ingredients and describing the preparation when Badriya is making her poisons and potions. One of the editors on this project expressed that she wanted Badriya to almost be teaching the readers how to make them (with fictional ingredients or real), so that the audience gets a good feel for what Badriya is doing and how the poisons actually work. For example, it would be wonderful to see Badriya actually recite the ingredients she references on page 9: “To distract myself I recite the ingredients for the sleeping draught I plan to create.”

This description on page 32 is another excellent place to add a little more detail: “So I return to my chamber, where I attempt to grind some of the ruby red powder I already have gathered, for Solena’s rouge.” What is the ruby red powder made of? Does she add anything else to it, like her blood, to poison it?

On the subject of poison, there are a couple of instances where Badriya and Khalen seem to insinuate that there are many who know how to make poisons and do so frequently, such as on page 21: “Someone’s forgotten scarf is draped over its edge. Foolish. It would be too easy for the

owner's enemy to sprinkle poison into its fabric." Another example is on page 75: "It seems risky to base your entire city's welfare on a spring. It would take only a few drops of poison in the fountain..." Do many deal in poisons, or are many just aware of their presence in the world? Are others gifted with the blood of merfolk and are able to make poisons just as effective as Badriya? For the sake of preserving Badriya's uniqueness and her power within the story, I would recommend clarifying that only Sireen and Badriya are able to make and use poison because of their unique lineage. Solena and Najma would be poisonous only because of their use of Badriya's mixtures, not because they are capable of creating their own.

Ghosts

At times it is difficult to discern if the ghosts that Badriya and Sireen see in the desert are due to the effects of the poison or if they were truly there. There are also hints that others could see their own ghosts, like Khalen and Petra. To avoid confusion or leaving the reader wondering, the ghosts' presence should be explained a bit more clearly. Who can see ghosts and why? Do they require magical blood, or do they just need to have lost someone in order to see them? This could be addressed through Badriya's memories with Sireen in the desert, or perhaps Najma sees ghosts and she and Badriya can have a conversation about them—she did like to spend time in the crypt, where she seemed unusually quiet (page 114).

CHARACTERS

Badriya

The characters in this manuscript are certainly one of its greatest strengths, and many editors let me know how much they came to truly love and root for Badriya over the course of the story. She is such an incredible protagonist—spunky and driven, and yet also insecure and unsure of herself at times. Her vulnerability, humor, and determination humanize her so well, and her relationships with characters like Najma and Khalen endear her to the audience very effectively.

However, there are a few parts of her characterization that felt unrealistic or contrary to her identity. The first is her open insolence to Solena in public. Badriya is often short with Solena, despite Solena being a hot-headed and dangerous ruler who can kill whomever she likes without consequence and does so regularly (often by Badriya's own hand). Repeated instances of Badriya's impertinence make it difficult for the reader to take Solena seriously as the villain since her orders seem easily dismissed and she is often easily outwitted.

On the other hand, it aligns well with Badriya's characterization that she would defy or criticize Solena in private or under her breath, and I would even encourage more of that. But it doesn't seem realistic that she would be able to flout that insolence in public and in front of other royalty—especially in Aran where Solena's influence is so strong. This robs Solena of the power she needs to have to create satisfying and effective tension between the two; it leaves her threats empty. An example of this is on page 53 where Badriya directly contradicts Solena in front of everyone seated at the table including Prince Arlo and Khalen. Would she really have been able to speak out against her like this in front of other royalty? Or would this comment have been one she made under her breath? Another, smaller example is that Badriya wears this to Solena's and Arlo's betrothal, "...the same earth colored tunic and shapeless pants [she'd] slept in. A stain blooms on the knee of the pants," (page 130).

Though we want Badriya to retain her rebellious spirit, the power dynamics between Solena and those within her court will be more believable and impactful if Badriya is otherwise forced to bend to Solena's will. In this case, she may not have the choice to refuse a conversation with

Solena when she feels the time is not opportune. Another option to remedy the power imbalance between Badriya and Solena would be to simply include more of a power struggle in which Solena pushes back against Badriya's rebuttals. Consider what feels the most realistic for Badriya from your perspective.

Perhaps the most pressing issue with Badriya that needs to be addressed is her lack of a clear, distinct voice that feels separate from other characters in the manuscript. While her character has a strong foundation and remarkable qualities, her voice tends to blend into the voices of other characters and the voice of the text itself. In fact, many characters in the manuscript tend to speak very similarly and without much distinction from one another, including Badriya. While this does make all the characters feel like they exist in the same world, it also stops them from fully developing the richness of their unique roles in the narrative they might otherwise be able to do if they sounded more distinct from one another.

What I would urge you to do to remedy this and make Badriya feel more whole is to start by mapping out Badriya's personality as well as what she actually looks like. Providing a short physical description somewhere within the first chapter will help readers visualize her, and getting to know her personality will help them connect with her and root for her as she faces and overcomes challenges. Some questions to consider: Is she sarcastic with an undercurrent of playfulness, merely serious and distanced as a defense mechanism? Or is she stoic and formidable with a softer, more humorous side that only comes out around those she's comfortable with? Consider her life story—how did her formative years in Mera affect her? What about her journey across the desert with her mother? How has Solena's bullying affected her? Najma's affection? We know she is independent, determined, and courageous, but what are her unique quirks that make her memorable?

The most important question to ask yourself is this: What truly drives Badriya forward, other than escaping Aran and freeing her mother's soul? We only care that Badriya saves her mother and leaves Aran as much as we care about Badriya herself. The reader needs to see even more interiority from her to truly connect with her and to feel motivated to keep reading beyond the first few chapters. What is it that Badriya really wants out of life? We know that she wants to return to Mera—but what does she want to do when she gets there? Would she be interested in traveling elsewhere? Having been at the mercy of others her whole life, does she have any inkling of what is out there for her? Is she interested in love at all?

Once you have figured out what Badriya's wants and what her distinct personality traits are, I would encourage you to inject more of that personality into her interactions with other characters as well as into her internal dialogue. There is a hint that Badriya has a sense of humor, and little quirks like rolling her eyes, making an off-handed comment under her breath, or feigning nonchalance when she plays cards really bring her to life. In your revision, I would strongly encourage you to continue to add these little displays of her personality, since they make her feel less like a character and more like a real person.

One more thing I'd like to address with Badriya is her relationships with the other prominent women in this tale—specifically with Solena and Najma, though it could extend to Petra as well. A few editors on the project expressed that they craved to see more of the sisterhood, as corrupted and twisted as it is for Badriya, Solena, and Najma. With the King's relationship to Badriya and her mother, it would have made sense for them to be forced together more often, even with Solena acting as the tormentor. But instead, Badriya and Solena (the girls closest in age) seem to only interact peripherally, so that Solena can mock her, up until the death of the King.

It would be great for the reader to see one or two more interactions between Solena and Badriya before the deaths of their parents to get a sense of what their relationship was like, perhaps in a “Then” chapter. Would they ever have been nice to one another, or has Solena always been a bully? Though it would make sense that Solena never really opened up to Badriya because she saw her as a threat and a symbol of her father’s promiscuity, it would also make sense for Solena to have been vulnerable with Badriya at some point. For example, maybe she had a bad day—a fight with her father that turned him against her, if only for a night, or maybe she could be attacked by some guard or stranger to Aran—which forces Badriya and Solena together, even if this bond shatters once the moment passes. This would provide some excellent depth to Solena’s character as well, which I’ll touch on a bit later.

Additionally, since Sireen becomes such a symbol of love lost too soon to the King and he saints her memory and builds a statue of her, what if the King formally adopts Badriya after her mother’s death? This would force closeness between the sisters, even if it were unwanted by Solena and Badriya, and would provide the protection that Badriya essentially already receives after Sireen’s death, but wouldn’t necessarily make Badriya an heir to the throne. However you choose to approach it, Badriya and Solena’s opposition in the story’s current timeline and Solena’s role as antagonist would be made more satisfying and complex by a closeness they shared when they were younger, if only for a time.

Solena

Solena makes a good antagonist for the story, and there are things I really enjoy about her as a character. She’s cruel and vain from Badriya’s arrival in Aran onward, and the way she speaks to Badriya as well as the way she so casually disposes of people makes her easily dislikeable. She devolves into a more callous, cruel, and vengeful ruler as the novel progresses, and successfully represents the trope of the evil queen in a way readers will find engaging and satisfying. However, Solena’s character also feels the most one dimensional out of all the women portrayed in this story, and I’d like to point out a few missed opportunities to add some depth and authenticity to her character.

It’s essential for the audience to care about Solena as a complex villain deserving of denouement and perhaps even a certain amount of empathy. People are nuanced, and we want readers to grapple with their connection to Solena as a villain, so don’t be afraid to let moments of weakness or tenderness seep through all of her anger, cruelty, and greed. One way to do this would be to add a scene or a few moments where Solena is truly vulnerable—as in the above example of a scene from the past where she goes to Badriya for comfort in a flashback—so that her relationship with Badriya is more complex.

The complicated sister dynamic between her and Najma is another possible in-road to depicting moments of Solena’s vulnerability. Solena’s attachment to Najma is only mentioned once prior to the climactic scene of Solena’s death when she decides not to execute Badriya for her father’s murder, but before and after this, Najma is only treated as a pawn to whom Solena has no real attachment. What if she did have a sisterly connection with Najma, even if it was only in her youth? Consider who she turned to in her grief of losing both her parents. Could it have been Najma? Does Solena provide any emotional support for her younger sister following their parents’ deaths? Does Solena actually grieve over her father’s death, or is she just happy to be queen? What was her relationship with her parents like? Did she have issues with her father?

Furthermore, how does Solena feel about the obvious bond that exists between Badriya and Najma? Is she jealous of it, leading her to hate Badriya even more? Or is she just relieved that it doesn’t have to be her to comfort Najma? I’d encourage you to address a few of these questions,

providing answers either in dialogue between Solena and Badriya, or even in a short new scene from when they were younger in a “Then” chapter. Perhaps Badriya could overhear a conversation between Solena and Najma, or maybe Solena could walk in on Najma and Badriya bonding and become agitated that Najma looked up to Badriya. The three of them as a twisty, dark trio would work well as a focal point for the story, and would really drive home the moral gray that we see in both Najma and Badriya. Perhaps Solena is morally gray too, but becomes more corrupt than her sisters out of grief, jealousy, and pride.

One final note about Solena is that she does not necessarily strike the reader as a nineteen-year-old until this is mentioned on page 48. Her personality seems more congruous with a shrewd, jaded, middle-aged queen clashing with her younger, more beautiful rivals. As with her moments of vulnerability, consider possibly allowing moments of teenage naivety to shine through to remind us of her age, humanity, and age-related ignorance.

Najma

On the subject of sisterhood, Najma is the closest thing Badriya has to a real sister. Their relationship is so special in this book, and one of the editors working on this project admitted to actually crying during the goodbye scene between Najma and Badriya! She had this to say: “It was so moving, I cried. This was her love that she had to leave, it wasn’t Khalen or even Rumin, it was Najma, her sister. It was absolutely my favorite scene and it truly moved me.”

That being said, Badriya and Najma’s relationship could be even stronger to evoke those feelings in every reader. You might consider adding a “Then” section that depicts a moment or two where Badriya raises Najma so the reader understands how much responsibility Badriya felt for her. For example, a moment where Solena rejects Najma and Badriya has to pick up the pieces would be quite effective. Another example would be a scene where Badriya finds Najma all alone and coming to terms with something as she grows up without a mother or a sister to teach her, so Badriya steps in. Since the bond of their relationship is what the climax of the story hinges on, their relationship needs to be stronger and more believable, which will be achieved most effectively through scenes in which Badriya cares for Najma or raises her.

As with Badriya, I also wondered what Najma really wanted in the story. She’s still young, of course, so she may not have a clear picture yet of what she wants her future to look like. However, she’s also precocious and bold, qualities Badriya both admires and nurtures in her. Badriya often finds her sneaking around so she can hear and observe what’s happening all around her, and Najma knows more than she lets on. A few editors expressed wanting to see more scenes with Najma where we learn more about her characteristics, interest, and goals.

With that in mind, what does Najma intend to do to solve the issue of Aran’s spring drying up? Does she intend to simply dig for more water at the source like she suggests to Badriya, or would she trade a life for another three hundred years of flowing water? Whose life would it be since Solena is dead? According to the legend, the first king of Aran traded his daughter to a Witch for the water, who was then married to a Wind Demon. It is her cry that echoes across the Lost nearly every night. Is it possible that the soul of this first princess could be saved, like Badriya saves her mother’s? Would saving her soul mean anything for the fate of Aran? How would Khalen address the issue since he agrees to assist Najma in her rule and form an alliance with her on behalf of Tanera? You might consider addressing at least one or two of these questions in Badriya and Khalen’s conversations, either when they’re playing cards, in the crypt, or in the last scene before Badriya rides off into the Lost, though it would need to be a quick mention if it were in the latter conversation.

Petra

While it's made evident that Petra is Badriya's only real friend in Aran, their friendship still feels a bit underdeveloped. It isn't clear why they are tentative allies, and it seems like Petra mostly feels sorry for the way Badriya is treated by Solena and others. The scene on page 93 where Petra shows Badriya kindness in the wake of being bullied by Solena reinforces this, since Petra doesn't actually show that she likes Badriya nor does she stand up for her. Rather, she simply tells her to leave since the bullying will only worsen if she sticks around. Another scene or two (like the one on page 93 or the one that begins on page 191 where Petra comes by Badriya's room to chat and play cards) that lays the foundation for and explains their alliance and friendship feels necessary, especially since Petra plays a major role in the resolution by preparing the horse for Badriya's grand exit on page 234. An additional scene where we learn more about Petra and Badriya's background will make this ending more emotionally satisfying for readers.

Consider these questions: Why would Petra befriend Badriya when everyone at court is so bent against her? What was in it for Petra—perhaps they are united in their dislike of Solena, but Petra doesn't openly defy Solena either. What kinship or tenderness did she feel for Badriya, and how can we see more of this, especially in flashbacks to their youth?

Safiya, Sarah, and Yadira

To make these characters stand out from one another even more, adding a physical description of Safiya would be helpful. Additionally, you might consider changing Safiya and Sarah's names. "Safiya" almost sounds like a combination of Sarah and Yadira, and "Sarah" feels slightly too grounded in reality compared to all the wonderfully creative names in the manuscript. A few editors mentioned they wished Sarah's name had been equally creative and special.

Yadira, on the other hand, is Solena's "favorite lady in waiting," and—more importantly—serves as an example of what Stardust is capable of and what happens to those who use it too much. Although Badriya feels guilt over enabling Yadira's drug addiction to serve her own goals and wrestles with her feelings on Yadira's situation, Yadira as a whole reads as somewhat one dimensional without independent feelings or motivations (page 108). She later betrays Badriya and steals her money and escape route, which is surprising. Her motivations for doing so are unclear, as Yadira still has Solena's favor and has no explicit reason to leave Aran, let alone leave Badriya—her Stardust supplier. It is also never established where she's going. Yadira's anger at Badriya for refusing to give her Stardust is too simple a motivation for such a significant action, especially since The Lost is a dangerous place and a sole traveler isn't likely to survive, even with enough money to bribe a Witch.

To remedy this, Yadira needs a pre-established reason why she might want to run away. Does she know of another Stardust supplier she can use Badriya's gold to buy from? Or, if Badriya is the only known supplier of Stardust, does Yadira hope to finally break her cycle of addiction by fleeing Aran altogether? Does she have family or a love interest in a different area of the world she misses or might flee to if she were trying to save herself from her Stardust addiction? If so, a detail like this needs to be incorporated subtly during a conversation between Yadira and Badriya. For example, something in Badriya's room might remind Yadira of a far-off loved one and she might make a comment about how she hopes to see them again someday.

Khalen

The closest thing Badriya gets to a love interest in the story (other than Rumin, of course), Khalen is a distinctly likeable character. He's suave and well-spoken, and his interest in Badriya

early on after his arrival with the Prince in Aran piques the reader's interest. I certainly found myself hoping there would be some romance there, as I know many other editors were, but there's also something satisfying about the way Badriya seems to like Khalen well enough but doesn't get too attached. She seems to view him as a sort of distraction from her ultimate goal, and she won't let anything or anyone get in the way saving her mother's soul and escaping Aran.

Khaleen's role in helping Badriya escape even after he leaves her in the crypt was such an excellent aspect of her escape and one that felt satisfying. Though it was a little difficult to understand why Khaleen leaves her in the crypt after discovering her role in killing Prince Arlo, the way he helps her escape redeems their relationship. My only suggestion for Khaleen's character is to allow Badriya to consider what a romance or relationship with him might look like. The hints that they might be interested in one another are exciting, and there's an implied promise that something might happen between them. But even in their interactions, the memory of Rumin still looms large, and I'd recommend showing the reader that, although Badriya enjoys Khaleen's company and might imagine what a romantic relationship with him would be like, she still thinks of Rumin. This would nicely set up what I recommend for the potential epilogue I suggest later on in this letter.

Sireen

Sireen is such a captivating character and one I wanted more of in the story. She made Badriya who she is, from their idyllic former life on the seas of Mera to her tragic suicide after they reach Aran. The stronger her characterization is, the stronger Badriya's will be in turn, and I have a few recommendations for how you can make Sireen an even stronger supporting character.

One of the first things I want to address is why Sireen actually decides to commit suicide. If the Queen wanted her gone, it seems like she could have just left the city. However, the story also seems to hint that Sireen had been dealing with bouts of depression and suicidal ideation for some time before she actually committed suicide: "I belong in the desert" (page 60), "It's my chance to see him again" (page 64), and even before Cayo's death when she said "I don't plan to live long enough for that to happen to me" (page 40). An explanation of these feelings and thoughts feels necessary, since they could either be attributed to poor mental health or the effects of the poisons and cosmetics, like Stardust, that she used on herself (even Badriya wonders whether the poisons were taking their toll on page 96). An explanation of Sireen's choice for acquiescing to the Queen's wishes for her to die, perhaps in the goodbye letter that she leaves for Badriya, seems like a good way to remedy this. Because suicide is a hefty, serious theme in this novel, we want to be sure to do it and Sireen's choices justice, and with the utmost care for real mental health issues that readers may be facing themselves or who have had experiences with through loved ones.

A little more description about the exile from Mera would also be helpful to add, since Badriya intends to return there after her escape. Was Sireen's exile all encompassing, meaning Badriya too? If so, how will that affect her return there? It sounds like Sireen had a certain reputation among enchanting men, so do more wives speak up in the city against her? Will this affect Badriya as well, since she will return as an adult who looks just like her mother? Is it just Sireen's grief over Cayo that causes her to accept her exile, or is there more of a depressing history in Mera that causes Sireen to want to leave, such as something that happened with Badriya's father? On that note, it would also be interesting to learn more about Sireen's past. Does she have siblings or parents who are still alive? Did she grow up in Mera, or did she end up there?

Finally, on a much smaller note, one editor noted that the connection between Sireen's mermaid lineage and the derivation of her name from the word "siren" was a little bit too on the nose. This could be rectified by simply adding a letter to Sireen's name (Shireen, Sirheen), or, if you would prefer the name stay unchanged, establish it well before dropping the information about having merblood, instead of one page before (58, 59) so it's less obvious to the reader.

Prince Arlo and His Witch

The Prince's blissful ignorance is well-illustrated and rightfully distasteful, as intended. However, not much is known about the Prince or his personality, and he is rather quick to declare his arrival to court Solena. He, like the Duke of Dorros, is portrayed as a drunken fool, something that quickly becomes a trope of male royalty throughout the book. Is this intentional? If so, is this a sort of social commentary? Intentional or not, I'd encourage you to change the wording of two particular scenes that currently feel almost identical: Chapter 6, page 98, Arlo: "The Prince finishes yet another goblet of wine, then jostles the table, everyone's drinks sloshing out of their glasses. Beside me, Petra rolls her eyes and curses beneath her breath as a servant fills the Prince's goblet. Oblivious, he tilts back his head and drains it, then belches mightily, slamming it back to the table. Everyone's hand darts for their drinks before they can spill again." Chapter 1, page 2 the Duke: "The Duke's round belly knocks the table and everyone's drink sloshes from their goblets. Petra curses beneath her breath. Oblivious, the Duke tilts back his head and drains his glass, then belches, slamming the goblet back to the table. Everyone's hand darts for their drink before they spill again."

Brooding, shrill, and intense, the Duke's Witch demands that Badriya repay her for lost wages after Badriya poisons the Duke on the Witch's watch. This scene progresses rather rapidly and seemingly inconsequentially to the rest of the plot. Its magnitude becomes a bit skewed by this rapid pace and the overall lack of the Witch's characterization. This is also not revisited for quite some time; consequently, the Witch doesn't seem memorable and some editors were confused about why Badriya becomes indebted to two different Witches who feel somewhat similar to one another. To remedy this and to grant this scene the importance it deserves, consider personalizing the Duke's Witch and her demeanor: What does she look like, and what is she wearing? (See sensitivity notes when working on this description.) What does her voice sound like? Her tone? Her inflection? What sort of energy does she exude? How does she make Badriya feel in this moment?

NARRATIVE & STRUCTURE

Pacing

Though the main plot unfolds rather slowly, moments of quick pacing are sometimes to the detriment of clarity. For example, there are some faulty transitions between scenes and some scenes that don't end satisfyingly, like on page 32 when Badriya is making rouge and then gets tired of her room and leaves. It leads us to another scene, but in a way that makes it feel that the scene before it wasn't closed or satisfied.

Another issue that affects the pacing is that eight different characters are introduced to the reader within the first ten pages of the story: Badriya, Solena and her bodyguard Darien, the Duke of Dorros, his Witch, Petra, Yadira, and Najma. While many of these characters are later integral to the plot, such as our main players Badriya and Solena, others' introductions, like those of Safiya and Sarah, end up confusing the scene and leaving the reader trying to keep track

of all the new names.

To remedy this, consider focusing on a few major players. When introducing minor characters within the first few chapters, ask yourself whether the character is truly integral to the scene at hand. If not, consider revising how this character can be more effectively and clearly introduced at a later point. This will help the character become more memorable and purposeful.

Another aspect of the pacing that should be addressed in revision is the timeline of the book. Currently, there are a few sections of the book that seem to occur over periods that seem too short or too long, for example, Solena's betrothal to Arlo. It isn't clear how long Arlo was there and how long it took for them to be wed. Clarifying that timeline and filling in the gaps with some of the scenes I've suggested adding would help the pacing tremendously.

I'd recommend sitting down and mapping out the timeline of your story with events from start to finish. Start with the big events including how long they take, and then add smaller events to the timeline as well until you have a clear vision of when things occur in the story and how long they take. It would also help to consider how time actually passes in the story. Does time flow the same way it does for us according to days, weeks, months, and years, or is it different? Badriya sometimes refers to the constellations in the sky as markers for the passage of time, and I would encourage you to consider how that could be utilized more in the story to help the reader understand how much time is passing.

“Then” Chapters

The “Then” parts of the story, from when Badriya was a child in Mera with Sireen, begin in chapter three. Your instinct to separate these parts of the story into their own sections was spot-on, since incorporating them into the existing chapters could be confusing for readers and could also create some very lengthy chapters. My one piece of advice for these chapters is to bring them into the story even earlier so the reader isn't caught off guard by them. I would recommend even including one directly after the first or second chapter. If you choose to add a few scenes to the backstory based on suggestions from this letter and to make them their own standalone chapters punctuating the overarching narrative, adding a few more “Then” chapters and introducing them earlier on as well as including them even later in the story will give you the necessary space to do so.

Prologue and Epilogue

Fantasy books will often use a prologue to set the stage for their protagonist and their reader's expectations of where the story will go. The prologue, usually a couple paragraphs to a couple of pages long, will drop the reader into the mind of the protagonist at a critical moment, usually during an ordeal or leading up to a climax, where the protagonist is still in danger. This initial moment stirs the reader's immediate interest, and convinces them to continue reading. This tone of raising the stakes for your character is a useful tool to keep in mind for the last moment of every chapter, as it pushes your reader along. It can be a cliffhanger, or a realization, a plan of agency, or foreshadowing—anything that effectively suspends your reader's attention and makes it difficult to put the book down in a good stopping place. If you decide to include a prologue to capture the reader's attention and introduce them to Badriya off the bat, I have a few suggestions for where to start. As a reader, I would love to see Badriya in the middle of performing an assassination for Solena. We might see her in her room carefully mixing together a potion before she sneaks out to deliver it to whatever unwitting person Solena wants killed that night. Seeing her in action in this way introduces her most interesting qualities to the

reader right off the bat, and will entice the reader to go on.

As for the end of the book, as it stands it feels incredibly fast paced and, at times, confusing. To remedy this and answer the questions that still linger after the story closes, I propose adding an epilogue. We want the reader to reach complete catharsis: a physiological reaction from the climax of the book, followed by a slow moment of relief at the end. By the end of the manuscript, the reader is experiencing an adrenaline rush (a good thing), and we don't want to leave them quite so worked up. We wait alongside Badriya the whole story for her to get back to Mera, her home, but never get to see her there.

These are the questions that feel unanswered: Does she reach Mera? Does she find herself welcome, or at least, unnoticed? Will she continue to sell potions? Will she find Rumin and speak to him? Will they be able to forgive the past and pick back up where they left off? We don't need all the answers—these are just to prompt you to imagine what Badriya will find in Mera. There's an implied promise that we'll get to see her succeed in reaching Mera once she has saved her mother's soul and escaped Aran, and delivering on that promise will help the ending—and thereby the whole book—be as satisfying as possible for the reader. One editor offered this example for what she hoped to see in a potential epilogue: "I imagine seeing [Badriya] on the beach, picking up a shell and releasing it into the waves. I imagine her turning away, walking back up to Rumin, but looking back once more to see the Lights of Mera spreading green fingers across the sky and the ocean. Maybe she dances. Maybe she smiles."

AUTHENTICITY AND SENSITIVITY

I asked each editor who worked on this developmental edit to keep any eye out for any aspects of the story that might need to be adjusted to ensure sensitivity and authenticity of representation. It's not uncommon for harmful stereotypes to make their way into a story, often completely unintentionally, and we want to make sure to avoid doing any harm with the language or representation in this book.

Middle Eastern Influences

While *Court of Venom* has a fantasy setting, there does seem to be a lot of Middle Eastern influence, specifically within the walls of Aran. The oud, for instance, is a real instrument with Arabic origin. Is there a culture in particular that you are basing the citizens of Aran on? Do they differ from the people of Mera? In what ways? How do the people of Aran view the people of Mera, and vice versa?

With that in mind, I would also be curious to know more about what the cultural inspirations of this story are, especially with regard to the mythology. It will be important to make those inspirations clear to the reader, and to respect and do justice to the particular cultures or mythologies that were drawn from for inspiration. We want to avoid sensationalizing or exoticising Middle Eastern culture, so departing from any direct references to real Middle Eastern culture might be in the story's best interest, such as replacing the name of the oud for one that you create.

Witches

One editor expressed that they found similarities between the characterization of the Witches (particularly, this description on page 2: "wearing a dress made of rough, dust colored cloth, coins woven into her greasy hair") and harmful stereotypes of Romani people. Historic stereotypes of the Romani include being traveling, mystical fortune-tellers who are often

dangerous or duplicitous in nature. At present, the Witches do bear some similarities to these stereotypes.

A possible remedy for this would be to avoid relying on those common tropes to describe the Witches in this tale. The Duke's Witch already needs some more characterization to be well-developed in the story, so this is a great opportunity to expand the descriptions of the Witches beyond stereotypes that might align with Romani people.

Weight and Appearance

For the description of bodies in the manuscript, it would be prudent to avoid positive connotations of thinness and negative connotations of fatness, especially when these connotations exist in the text outside of a character's dialogue or opinion. If possible, neutral descriptions of bodies should always be used. For example, Yadira is described as "thin and slight," on page 18, which is neutral, but on page 48, she is described as a "graceful phantom." On page 2, Badriya narrates that "her frailty gives her a lovely haunted look," and this pairing of "lovely" and "haunted," as well as "graceful" with "phantom" create an unnecessary and potentially harmful connection between thinness and beauty.

Similarly, Polina is described as "plump." Her weight has no other relevance, and is only mentioned as a character description, though Polina is a character the reader is not meant to have sympathy for. In fact, Polina can be viewed as the reason Sireen and Badriya end up exiled from Mera since she calls for them to leave once she learns about Sireen's hand in Cayo's death. In that same vein, Solena thinks negatively of Arlo's weight and eating habits. Solena says of him, "The man is a pig. No, a cow. The way he eats, and drinks, as if we were animals in a pen!" (page 196) and later says, after killing him, "he is overweight," and shudders (page 207). Solena's disgust is reasonable for her character and makes sense for her cruel, unlikeable characterization as she is obsessed with her own appearance and appearances in general. However, Arlo is supposed to be a sympathetic character, and none of Solena's negative comments about his weight or appearance are contradicted or criticized by other characters. This could be resolved by having Badriya internally or externally contradict Solena's assessments, as well as relegating Arlo being a fool explicitly to his blind trust in Solena rather than his actions at a dinner table or his weight.

It's clear that your descriptions of characters don't focus on skin color, making race in the manuscript a bit ambiguous. This is totally fine, however, you can certainly describe the color of characters' skin if you'd like to, since it can add some verisimilitude to the world. Remember that the people who exist in the world you've created probably don't all have the same skin color. One thing to keep in mind when describing people's skin color is to avoid making comparisons to foods, since that can sometimes come across as offensive. For example, on page 2, the witch's skin is not specifically noted, but it's said to be "cocoa colored." Instead, I'd recommend just using colors when describing what a character's skin looks like.

The King and Sexual Assault

A few editors on the project expressed dissatisfaction with the way the King ultimately saves Badriya at the end of the story. What some might read as a redemption arc, others have viewed as a justification of his actions. Some editors also took issue with the way Solena more or less asserts that Badriya brought the assault upon herself, since it brings the narrative close to common slut-shaming dialogues. Though the narrative suggests that the Queen and Solena are in the wrong, Badriya herself seems to agree that she is at fault. Noting that the King was

thinking of Sireen and drinking and then also allowing him to have a heroic sacrifice upon which the solution of the narrative hinges might seem to excuse his actions to some readers.

Here are some questions to help you think through potential fixes to this issue: How can the King apologize without needing to be forgiven? Would it be better to remove Badriya's intent to seduce the King before she kills him, and make it more of a defensive accident (which would also further justify Sireen's insistence that Badriya eats poison to protect herself)? Could she wear her mother's dress in memory of Sireen, and have just eaten her daily poison while she gardened so that the sexual assault seems less purposefully provoked? This would change her guilt a bit due to the lack of initial intention, but may still be open to enough interpretation that Solena's reactionary blackmail is still completely valid (Badriya would still carry the King's death on her hands, so would still feel the guilt), though some tweaking of the dialogue in the scene where Solena makes Badriya tell Najma what really happened at the end of the story would be necessary.

CONCLUSION

And there you have it: we've finally reached the end! These editorial letters can run quite long, and it's understandable if you're feeling overwhelmed after wading through all those suggestions. But I want to make it clear that you're starting from a good place: *Court of Venom* is already a unique and entertaining fantasy, and all of our editors really enjoyed reading it. All the basic structures are there, and the writing is solid—now it's just a matter of expanding some things, trimming others, and adding that final polish to the world and its characters. Though it may seem like a lot at first, many of these revisions can be accomplished by simply adding or adjusting a few lines here and there; others may require longer additions.

I would suggest making a plan for your revisions before you dive in. It would likely be easiest to start with the bigger changes. The next step could be writing in any new scenes you deem necessary, and then you could work your way down to the more nitty-gritty changes. Some authors even opt to print out their editorial letter and color-code the changes they need to make, selecting different colors for easy fixes, changes that will require adding a line or two, and finally changes that require some rewriting or writing additional scenes. You could also keep a little notebook near you for the first few days after reading this letter and jot things down as they come to you, rereading it periodically before you go to actually make changes to the manuscript. Of course, however you choose to do your revisions is up to you!

Working on this edit has truly been a pleasure. I've grown so attached to the story and the characters, and I can't wait to see what changes you make in this round. If you have any questions during the revision process or want to talk through anything, please don't hesitate to reach out to me.

All the best,

Erica Wright
Copy Chief
Ooligan Press