



BEFORE



THE SERVANTS CALLED them *malenchki*, little ghosts, because they were the smallest and the youngest, and because they haunted the Duke's house like giggling phantoms, darting in and out of rooms, hiding in cupboards to eavesdrop, sneaking into the kitchen to steal the last of the summer peaches.

The boy and the girl had arrived within weeks of each other, two more orphans of the border wars, dirty-faced refugees plucked from the rubble of distant towns and brought to the Duke's estate to learn to read and write, and to learn a trade. The boy was short and stocky, shy but always smiling. The girl was different, and she knew it.

Huddled in the kitchen cupboard, listening to the grown-ups gossip, she heard the Duke's housekeeper, Ana Kuya,

say, “She’s an ugly little thing. No child should look like that. Pale and sour, like a glass of milk that’s turned.”

“And so skinny!” the cook replied. “Never finishes her supper.”

Crouched beside the girl, the boy turned to her and whispered, “Why *don’t* you eat?”

“Because everything she cooks tastes like mud.”

“Tastes fine to me.”

“You’ll eat anything.”

They bent their ears back to the crack in the cupboard doors.

A moment later the boy whispered, “I don’t think you’re ugly.”

“Shhhh!” the girl hissed. But hidden by the deep shadows of the cupboard, she smiled.

IN THE SUMMER, they endured long hours of chores followed by even longer hours of lessons in stifling classrooms. When the heat was at its worst, they escaped into the woods to hunt for birds’ nests or swim in the muddy little creek, or they would lie for hours in their meadow, watching the sun pass slowly overhead, speculating on where they would build their dairy farm and whether they would have two white cows or three. In the winter, the Duke left for his city house in Os Alta, and as the days grew shorter and colder, the teachers grew lax in their duties, preferring

to sit by the fire and play cards or drink *kvas*. Bored and trapped indoors, the older children doled out more frequent beatings. So the boy and the girl hid in the disused rooms of the estate, putting on plays for the mice and trying to keep warm.

On the day the Grisha Examiners came, the boy and the girl were perched in the window seat of a dusty upstairs bedroom, hoping to catch a glimpse of the mail coach. Instead, they saw a sleigh, a troika pulled by three black horses, pass through the white stone gates onto the estate. They watched its silent progress through the snow to the Duke's front door.

Three figures emerged in elegant fur hats and heavy wool *kefta*: one in crimson, one in darkest blue, and one in vibrant purple.

“Grisha!” the girl whispered.

“Quick!” said the boy.

In an instant, they had shaken off their shoes and were running silently down the hall, slipping through the empty music room and darting behind a column in the gallery that overlooked the sitting room where Ana Kuya liked to receive guests.

Ana Kuya was already there, birdlike in her black dress, pouring tea from the samovar, her large key ring jangling at her waist.

“There are just the two this year, then?” said a woman's low voice.



They peered through the railing of the balcony to the room below. Two of the Grisha sat by the fire: a handsome man in blue and a woman in red robes with a haughty, refined air. The third, a young blond man, ambled about the room, stretching his legs.

“Yes,” said Ana Kuya. “A boy and a girl, the youngest here by quite a bit. Both around eight, we think.”

“You think?” asked the man in blue.

“When the parents are deceased . . .”

“We understand,” said the woman. “We are, of course, great admirers of your institution. We only wish more of the nobility took an interest in the common people.”

“Our Duke is a very great man,” said Ana Kuya.

Up in the balcony, the boy and the girl nodded sagely to each other. Their benefactor, Duke Keramsov, was a celebrated war hero and a friend to the people. When he had returned from the front lines, he converted his estate into an orphanage and a home for war widows. They were told to keep him nightly in their prayers.

“And what are they like, these children?” asked the woman.

“The girl has some talent for drawing. The boy is most at home in the meadow and the wood.”

“But what are they *like*?” repeated the woman.

Ana Kuya pursed her withered lips. “What are they like? They are undisciplined, contrary, far too attached to each other. They—”

“They are listening to every word we say,” said the young man in purple.

The boy and the girl jumped in surprise. He was staring directly at their hiding spot. They shrank behind the column, but it was too late.

Ana Kuya’s voice lashed out like a whip. “Alina Starkov! Malyen Oretsev! Come down here at once!”

Reluctantly, Alina and Mal made their way down the narrow spiral staircase at the end of the gallery. When they reached the bottom, the woman in red rose from her chair and gestured them forward.

“Do you know who we are?” the woman asked. Her hair was steel gray. Her face lined, but beautiful.

“You’re witches!” blurted Mal.

“Witches?” she snarled. She whirled on Ana Kuya. “Is that what you teach at this school? Superstition and lies?”

Ana Kuya flushed with embarrassment. The woman in red turned back to Mal and Alina, her dark eyes blazing. “We are not witches. We are practitioners of the Small Science. We keep this country and this kingdom safe.”

“As does the First Army,” Ana Kuya said quietly, an unmistakable edge to her voice.

The woman in red stiffened, but after a moment she conceded, “As does the King’s Army.”

The young man in purple smiled and knelt before the children. He said gently, “When the leaves change color, do you call it magic? What about when you cut your hand and

it heals? And when you put a pot of water on the stove and it boils, is it magic then?”

Mal shook his head, his eyes wide.

But Alina frowned and said, “Anyone can boil water.”

Ana Kuya sighed in exasperation, but the woman in red laughed.

“You’re very right. Anyone can boil water. But not just anyone can master the Small Science. That’s why we’ve come to test you.” She turned to Ana Kuya. “Leave us now.”

“Wait!” exclaimed Mal. “What happens if we’re Grisha? What happens to us?”

The woman in red looked down at them. “If, by some small chance, *one* of you is Grisha, then that lucky child will go to a special school where Grisha learn to use their talents.”

“You will have the finest clothes, the finest food, whatever your heart desires,” said the man in purple. “Would you like that?”

“It is the greatest way that you may serve your King,” said Ana Kuya, still hovering by the door.

“That is very true,” said the woman in red, pleased and willing to make peace.

The boy and the girl glanced at each other and, because the adults were not paying close attention, they did not see the girl reach out to clasp the boy’s hand or the look that passed between them. The Duke would have recognized that look. He had spent long years on the ravaged northern borders,

where the villages were constantly under siege and the peasants fought their battles with little aid from the King or anyone else. He had seen a woman, barefoot and unflinching in her doorway, face down a row of bayonets. He knew the look of a man defending his home with nothing but a rock in his hand.





CHAPTER
I

STANDING ON THE EDGE of a crowded road, I looked down onto the rolling fields and abandoned farms of the Tula Valley and got my first glimpse of the Shadow Fold. My regiment was two weeks' march from the military encampment at Poliznaya and the autumn sun was warm overhead, but I shivered in my coat as I eyed the haze that lay like a dirty smudge on the horizon.

A heavy shoulder slammed into me from behind. I stumbled and nearly pitched face-first into the muddy road.

“Hey!” shouted the soldier. “Watch yourself!”

“Why don’t you watch your fat feet?” I snapped, and took some satisfaction from the surprise that came over his broad face. People, particularly big men carrying big rifles,

don't expect lip from a scrawny thing like me. They always look a bit dazed when they get it.

The soldier got over the novelty quickly and gave me a dirty look as he adjusted the pack on his back, then disappeared into the caravan of horses, men, carts, and wagons streaming over the crest of the hill and into the valley below.

I quickened my steps, trying to peer over the crowd. I'd lost sight of the yellow flag of the surveyors' cart hours ago, and I knew I was far behind.

As I walked, I took in the green and gold smells of the autumn wood, the soft breeze at my back. We were on the Vy, the wide road that had once led all the way from Os Alta to the wealthy port cities on Ravka's western coast. But that was before the Shadow Fold.

Somewhere in the crowd, someone was singing. *Singing? What idiot is singing on his way into the Fold?* I glanced again at that smudge on the horizon and had to suppress a shudder. I'd seen the Shadow Fold on many maps, a black slash that had severed Ravka from its only coastline and left it landlocked. Sometimes it was shown as a stain, sometimes as a bleak and shapeless cloud. And then there were the maps that just showed the Shadow Fold as a long, narrow lake and labeled it by its other name, "the Unsea," a name intended to put soldiers and merchants at their ease and encourage crossings.

I snorted. That might fool some fat merchant, but it was little comfort to me.

I tore my attention from the sinister haze hovering in the distance and looked down onto the ruined farms of the Tula. The valley had once been home to some of Ravka's richest estates. One day it was a place where farmers tended crops and sheep grazed in green fields. The next, a dark slash had appeared on the landscape, a swath of nearly impenetrable darkness that grew with every passing year and crawled with horrors. Where the farmers had gone, their herds, their crops, their homes and families, no one knew.

Stop it, I told myself firmly. You're only making things worse. People have been crossing the Fold for years . . . usually with massive casualties, but all the same. I took a deep breath to steady myself.

"No fainting in the middle of the road," said a voice close to my ear as a heavy arm landed across my shoulders and gave me a squeeze. I looked up to see Mal's familiar face, a smile in his bright blue eyes as he fell into step beside me. "C'mon," he said. "One foot in front of the other. You know how it's done."

"You're interfering with my plan."

"Oh really?"

"Yes. Faint, get trampled, grievous injuries all around."

"That sounds like a brilliant plan."

"Ah, but if I'm horribly maimed, I won't be able to cross the Fold."

Mal nodded slowly. “I see. I can shove you under a cart if that would help.”

“I’ll think about it,” I grumbled, but I felt my mood lifting all the same. Despite my best efforts, Mal still had that effect on me. And I wasn’t the only one. A pretty blond girl strolled by and waved, throwing Mal a flirtatious glance over her shoulder.

“Hey, Ruby,” he called. “See you later?”

Ruby giggled and scampered off into the crowd. Mal grinned broadly until he caught my eye roll.

“What? I thought you liked Ruby.”

“As it happens, we don’t have much to talk about,” I said drily. I actually had liked Ruby—at first. When Mal and I left the orphanage at Keramzin to train for our military service in Poliznaya, I’d been nervous about meeting new people. But lots of girls had been excited to befriend me, and Ruby had been among the most eager. Those friendships lasted as long as it took me to figure out that their only interest in me lay in my proximity to Mal.

Now I watched him stretch his arms expansively and turn his face up to the autumn sky, looking perfectly content. There was even, I noted with some disgust, a little bounce in his step.

“What is wrong with you?” I whispered furiously.

“Nothing,” he said, surprised. “I feel great.”

“But how can you be so . . . so jaunty?”



“Jaunty? I’ve never been jaunty. I hope never to be jaunty.”

“Well, then what’s all this?” I asked, waving a hand at him. “You look like you’re on your way to a really good dinner instead of possible death and dismemberment.”

Mal laughed. “You worry too much. The King’s sent a whole group of Grisha pyros to cover the skiffs, and even a few of those creepy Heartrenders. We have our rifles,” he said, patting the one on his back. “We’ll be fine.”

“A rifle won’t make much difference if there’s a bad attack.”

Mal gave me a bemused glance. “What’s with you lately? You’re even grumpier than usual. And you look terrible.”

“Thanks,” I grouched. “I haven’t been sleeping well.”

“What else is new?”

He was right, of course. I’d never slept well. But it had been even worse over the last few days. Saints knew I had plenty of good reasons to dread going into the Fold, reasons shared by every member of our regiment who had been unlucky enough to be chosen for the crossing. But there was something else, a deeper feeling of unease that I couldn’t quite name.

I glanced at Mal. There had been a time when I could have told him anything. “I just . . . have this feeling.”

“Stop worrying so much. Maybe they’ll put Mikhael on the skiff. The volcra will take one look at that big juicy belly of his and leave us alone.”

Unbidden, a memory came to me: Mal and I, sitting side by side in a chair in the Duke's library, flipping through the pages of a large leather-bound book. We'd happened on an illustration of a volcra: long, filthy claws; leathery wings; and rows of razor-sharp teeth for feasting on human flesh. They were blind from generations spent living and hunting in the Fold, but legend had it they could smell human blood from miles away. I'd pointed to the page and asked, "What is it holding?"

I could still hear Mal's whisper in my ear. "I think—I think it's a foot." We'd slammed the book shut and run squealing out into the safety of the sunlight. . . .

Without realizing it, I'd stopped walking, frozen in place, unable to shake the memory from my mind. When Mal realized I wasn't with him, he gave a great beleaguered sigh and marched back to me. He rested his hands on my shoulders and gave me a little shake.

"I was kidding. No one's going to eat Mikhael."

"I know," I said, staring down at my boots. "You're hilarious."

"Alina, come on. We'll be fine."

"You can't know that."

"Look at me." I willed myself to raise my eyes to his. "I know you're scared. I am, too. But we're going to do this, and we're going to be fine. We always are. Okay?" He smiled, and my heart gave a very loud thud in my chest.

I rubbed my thumb over the scar that ran across the

palm of my right hand and took a shaky breath. “Okay,” I said grudgingly, and I actually felt myself smiling back.

“Madam’s spirits have been restored!” Mal shouted. “The sun can once more shine!”

“Oh will you shut up?”

I turned to give him a punch, but before I could, he’d grabbed hold of me and lifted me off my feet. A clatter of hooves and shouts split the air. Mal yanked me to the side of the road just as a huge black coach roared past, scattering people before it as they ran to avoid the pounding hooves of four black horses. Beside the whip-wielding driver perched two soldiers in charcoal coats.

The Darkling. There was no mistaking his black coach or the uniform of his personal guard.

Another coach, this one lacquered red, rumbled past us at a more leisurely pace.

I looked up at Mal, my heart racing from the close call. “Thanks,” I whispered. Mal suddenly seemed to realize that he had his arms around me. He let go and hastily stepped back. I brushed the dust from my coat, hoping he wouldn’t notice the flush on my cheeks.

A third coach rolled by, lacquered in blue, and a girl leaned out the window. She had curling black hair and wore a hat of silver fox. She scanned the watching crowd and, predictably, her eyes lingered on Mal.

You were just mooning over him, I chided myself. *Why shouldn’t some gorgeous Grisha do the same?*

Her lips curled into a small smile as she held Mal's gaze, watching him over her shoulder until the coach was out of sight. Mal goggled dumbly after her, his mouth slightly open.

"Close your mouth before something flies in," I snapped. Mal blinked, still looking dazed.

"Did you see that?" a voice bellowed. I turned to see Mikhael loping toward us, wearing an almost comical expression of awe. Mikhael was a huge redhead with a wide face and an even wider neck. Behind him, Dubrov, reedy and dark, hurried to catch up. They were both trackers in Mal's unit and never far from his side.

"Of course I saw it," Mal said, his dopey expression evaporating into a cocky grin. I rolled my eyes.

"She looked right at you!" shouted Mikhael, clapping Mal on the back.

Mal gave a casual shrug, but his smile widened. "So she did," he said smugly.

Dubrov shifted nervously. "They say Grisha girls can put spells on you."

I snorted.

Mikhael looked at me as if he hadn't even known I was there. "Hey, Sticks," he said, and gave me a little jab on the arm. I scowled at the nickname, but he had already turned back to Mal. "You know she'll be staying at camp," he said with a leer.

"I hear the Grisha tent's as big as a cathedral," added Dubrov.

“Lots of nice shadowy nooks,” said Mikhael, and actually waggled his brows.

Mal whooped. Without sparing me another glance, the three of them strode off, shouting and shoving one another.

“Great seeing you guys,” I muttered under my breath. I readjusted the strap of the satchel slung across my shoulders and started back down the road, joining the last few stragglers down the hill and into Kribirsk. I didn’t bother to hurry. I’d probably get yelled at when I finally made it to the Documents Tent, but there was nothing I could do about it now.

I rubbed my arm where Mikhael had punched me. *Sticks*. I hated that name. *You didn’t call me Sticks when you were drunk on kvas and trying to paw me at the spring bonfire, you miserable oaf*, I thought spitefully.

Kribirsk wasn’t much to look at. According to the Senior Cartographer, it had been a sleepy market town in the days before the Shadow Fold, little more than a dusty main square and an inn for weary travelers on the Vy. But now it had become a kind of ramshackle port city, growing up around a permanent military encampment and the dry-docks where the sandskiffs waited to take passengers through the darkness to West Ravka. I passed taverns and pubs and what I was pretty sure were brothels meant to cater to the troops of the King’s Army. There were shops selling rifles and crossbows, lamps and torches, all necessary equipment for a trek across the Fold. The little church with its

whitewashed walls and gleaming onion domes was in surprisingly good repair. *Or maybe not so surprising*, I considered. Anyone contemplating a trip across the Shadow Fold would be smart to stop and pray.

I found my way to where the surveyors were billeted, deposited my pack on a cot, and hurried over to the Documents Tent. To my relief, the Senior Cartographer was nowhere in sight, and I was able to slip inside unseen.

Entering the white canvas tent, I felt myself relax for the first time since I'd caught sight of the Fold. The Documents Tent was essentially the same in every camp I'd seen, full of bright light and rows of drafting tables where artists and surveyors bent to their work. After the noise and jostle of the journey, there was something soothing about the crackle of paper, the smell of ink, and the soft scratching of nibs and brushes.

I pulled my sketchbook from my coat pocket and slid onto a workbench beside Alexei, who turned to me and whispered irritably, "Where have you been?"

"Nearly getting trampled by the Darkling's coach," I replied, grabbing a clean piece of paper and flipping through my sketches to try to find a suitable one to copy. Alexei and I were both junior cartographers' assistants and, as part of our training, we had to submit two finished sketches or renderings at the end of every day.

Alexei drew in a sharp breath. "Really? Did you actually see him?"

“Actually, I was too busy trying not to die.”

“There are worse ways to go.” He caught sight of the sketch of a rocky valley I was about to start copying. “Ugh. Not that one.” He flipped through my sketchbook to an elevation of a mountain ridge and tapped it with his finger. “There.”

I barely had time to put pen to paper before the Senior Cartographer entered the tent and came swooping down the aisle, observing our work as he passed.

“I hope that’s the second sketch you’re starting, Alina Starkov.”

“Yes,” I lied. “Yes, it is.”

As soon as the Cartographer had passed on, Alexei whispered, “Tell me about the coach.”

“I have to finish my sketches.”

“Here,” he said in exasperation, sliding one of his sketches over to me.

“He’ll know it’s your work.”

“It’s not that good. You should be able to pass it off as yours.”

“Now there’s the Alexei I know and tolerate,” I grumbled, but I didn’t give back the sketch. Alexei was one of the most talented assistants and he knew it.

Alexei extracted every last detail from me about the three Grisha coaches. I was grateful for the sketch, so I did my best to satisfy his curiosity as I finished up my elevation of the mountain ridge and worked in my thumb measurements of some of the highest peaks.

By the time we were finished, dusk was falling. We handed in our work and walked to the mess tent, where we stood in line for muddy stew ladled out by a sweaty cook and found seats with some of the other surveyors.

I passed the meal in silence, listening to Alexei and the others exchange camp gossip and jittery talk about tomorrow's crossing. Alexei insisted that I retell the story of the Grisha coaches, and it was met by the usual mix of fascination and fear that greeted any mention of the Darkling.

"He's not natural," said Eva, another assistant; she had pretty green eyes that did little to distract from her piglike nose. "None of them are."

Alexei sniffed. "Please spare us your superstition, Eva."

"It was a Darkling who made the Shadow Fold to begin with."

"That was hundreds of years ago!" protested Alexei. "And that Darkling was completely mad."

"This one is just as bad."

"Peasant," Alexei said, and dismissed her with a wave. Eva gave him an affronted look and deliberately turned away from him to talk to her friends.

I stayed quiet. I was more a peasant than Eva, despite her superstitions. It was only by the Duke's charity that I could read and write, but by unspoken agreement, Mal and I avoided mentioning Keramzin.

As if on cue, a raucous burst of laughter pulled me from

my thoughts. I looked over my shoulder. Mal was holding court at a rowdy table of trackers.

Alexei followed my glance. “How did you two become friends anyway?”

“We grew up together.”

“You don’t seem to have much in common.”

I shrugged. “I guess it’s easy to have a lot in common when you’re kids.” Like loneliness, and memories of parents we were meant to forget, and the pleasure of escaping chores to play tag in our meadow.

Alexei looked so skeptical that I had to laugh. “He wasn’t always the Amazing Mal, expert tracker and seducer of Grisha girls.”

Alexei’s jaw dropped. “He seduced a Grisha girl?”

“No, but I’m sure he will,” I muttered.

“So what *was* he like?”

“He was short and pudgy and afraid of baths,” I said with some satisfaction.

Alexei glanced at Mal. “I guess things change.”

I rubbed my thumb over the scar in my palm. “I guess they do.”

We cleared our plates and drifted out of the mess tent into the cool night. On the way back to the barracks, we took a detour so that we could walk by the Grisha camp. The Grisha pavilion really was the size of a cathedral, covered in black silk, its blue, red, and purple pennants flying high above. Hidden somewhere behind it were the Darkling’s

tents, guarded by Corporalki Heartrenders and the Darkling's personal guard.

When Alexei had looked his fill, we wended our way back to our quarters. Alexei got quiet and started cracking his knuckles, and I knew we were both thinking about tomorrow's crossing. Judging by the gloomy mood in the barracks, we weren't alone. Some people were already on their cots, sleeping—or trying to—while others huddled by lamplight, talking in low tones. A few sat clutching their icons, praying to their Saints.

I unfurled my bedroll on a narrow cot, removed my boots, and hung up my coat. Then I wriggled down into the fur-lined blankets and stared up at the roof, waiting for sleep. I stayed that way for a long time, until the lamplights had all been extinguished and the sounds of conversation gave way to soft snores and the rustle of bodies.

Tomorrow, if everything went as planned, we would pass safely through to West Ravka, and I would get my first glimpse of the True Sea. There, Mal and the other trackers would hunt for red wolves and sea foxes and other coveted creatures that could only be found in the west. I would stay with the cartographers in Os Kervo to finish my training and help draft whatever information we managed to glean in the Fold. And then, of course, I'd have to cross the Fold again in order to return home. But it was hard to think that far ahead.

I was still wide awake when I heard it. *Tap tap*. Pause. *Tap*. Then again: *Tap tap*. Pause. *Tap*.

“What’s going on?” mumbled Alexei drowsily from the cot nearest mine.

“Nothing,” I whispered, already slipping out of my bedroll and shoving my feet into my boots.

I grabbed my coat and crept out of the barracks as quietly as I could. As I opened the door I heard a giggle, and a female voice called from somewhere in the dark room, “If it’s that tracker, tell him to come inside and keep me warm.”

“If he wants to catch *tsifil*, I’m sure you’ll be his first stop,” I said sweetly, and slipped out into the night.

The cold air stung my cheeks and I buried my chin in my collar, wishing I’d taken the time to grab my scarf and gloves. Mal was sitting on the rickety steps, his back to me. Beyond him, I could see Mikhael and Dubrov passing a bottle back and forth beneath the glowing lights of the footpath.

I scowled. “Please tell me you didn’t just wake me up to inform me that you’re going to the Grisha tent. What do you want, advice?”

“You weren’t sleeping. You were lying awake worrying.”

“Wrong. I was planning how to sneak into the Grisha pavilion and snag myself a cute Corporalnik.”

Mal laughed. I hesitated by the door. This was the hardest part of being around him—other than the way he made my heart do clumsy acrobatics. I hated hiding how much the stupid things he did hurt me, but I hated the idea of him finding out even more. I thought about just turning around

and going back inside. Instead, I swallowed my jealousy and sat down beside him.

“I hope you brought me something nice,” I said. “Alina’s *Secrets of Seduction* do not come cheap.”

He grinned. “Can you put it on my tab?”

“I suppose. But only because I know you’re good for it.”

I peered into the dark and watched Dubrov take a swig from the bottle and then lurch forward. Mikhael put his arm out to steady him, and the sounds of their laughter floated back to us on the night air.

Mal shook his head and sighed. “He always tries to keep up with Mikhael. He’ll probably end up puking on my boots.”

“Serves you right,” I said. “So what *are* you doing here?” When we’d first started our military service a year ago, Mal had visited me almost every night. But he hadn’t come by in months.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. You looked so miserable at dinner.”

I was surprised he’d noticed. “Just thinking about the crossing,” I said carefully. It wasn’t exactly a lie. I *was* terrified of entering the Fold, and Mal definitely didn’t need to know that Alexei and I had been talking about him. “But I’m touched by your concern.”

“Hey,” he said with a grin, “I worry.”

“If you’re lucky, a volcra will have me for breakfast tomorrow and then you won’t have to fret anymore.”

“You know I’d be lost without you.”

“You’ve never been lost in your life,” I scoffed. I was the mapmaker, but Mal could find true north blindfolded and standing on his head.

He bumped his shoulder against mine. “You know what I mean.”

“Sure,” I said. But I didn’t. Not really.

We sat in silence, watching our breath make plumes in the cold air.

Mal studied the toes of his boots and said, “I guess I’m nervous, too.”

I nudged him with my elbow and said with confidence I didn’t feel, “If we can take on Ana Kuya, we can handle a few volcra.”

“If I remember right, the last time we crossed Ana Kuya, you got your ears boxed and we both ended up mucking out the stables.”

I winced. “I’m trying to be reassuring. You could at least pretend I’m succeeding.”

“You know the funny thing?” he asked. “I actually miss her sometimes.”

I did my best to hide my astonishment. We’d spent more than ten years of our lives in Keramzin, but usually I got the impression that Mal wanted to forget everything about the place, maybe even me. There he’d been another lost refugee, another orphan made to feel grateful for every mouthful of food, every used pair of boots. In the army,

he'd carved out a real place for himself where no one needed to know that he'd once been an unwanted little boy.

"Me too," I admitted. "We could write to her."

"Maybe," Mal said.

Suddenly, he reached out and took hold of my hand. I tried to ignore the little jolt that went through me. "This time tomorrow, we'll be sitting in the harbor at Os Kervo, looking out at the ocean and drinking *kvas*."

I glanced at Dubrov weaving back and forth and smiled. "Is Dubrov buying?"

"Just you and me," Mal said.

"Really?"

"It's always just you and me, Alina."

For a moment, it seemed like it was true. The world was this step, this circle of lamplight, the two of us suspended in the dark.

"Come on!" bellowed Mikhael from the path.

Mal started like a man waking from a dream. He gave my hand a last squeeze before he dropped it. "Gotta go," he said, his brash grin sliding back into place. "Try to get some sleep."

He hopped lightly from the stairs and jogged off to join his friends. "Wish me luck!" he called over his shoulder.

"Good luck," I said automatically and then wanted to kick myself. *Good luck? Have a lovely time, Mal. Hope you find a pretty Grisha, fall deeply in love, and make lots of gorgeous, disgustingly talented babies together.*

I sat frozen on the steps, watching them disappear down the path, still feeling the warm pressure of Mal's hand in mine. *Oh well*, I thought as I got to my feet. *Maybe he'll fall into a ditch on his way there.*

I edged back into the barracks, closed the door tightly behind me, and gratefully snuggled into my bedroll.

Would that black-haired Grisha girl sneak out of the pavilion to meet Mal? I pushed the thought away. It was none of my business, and really, I didn't want to know. Mal had never looked at me the way he'd looked at that girl or even the way he looked at Ruby, and he never would. But the fact that we were still friends was more important than any of that.

For how long? said a nagging voice in my head. Alexei was right: things change. Mal had changed for the better. He'd gotten handsomer, braver, cockier. And I'd gotten . . . taller. I sighed and rolled onto my side. I wanted to believe that Mal and I would always be friends, but I had to face the fact that we were on different paths. Lying in the dark, waiting for sleep, I wondered if those paths would just keep taking us further and further apart, and if a day might come when we would be strangers to each other once again.

A highly decorative, symmetrical graphic for a chapter title. It features a central dark circular area with the word "CHAPTER" in a serif font at the top and the number "2" in a larger serif font below it. The central circle is surrounded by intricate, ornate scrollwork, floral patterns, and what appear to be stylized architectural elements like domes or spires at the top. The overall style is reminiscent of traditional woodcut or engraved book ornamentation.

CHAPTER 2

THE MORNING PASSED in a blur: breakfast, a brief trip to the Documents Tent to pack additional inks and paper, then the chaos of the drydock. I stood with the rest of the surveyors, waiting our turn to board one of a small fleet of sandskiffs. Behind us, Kribirsk was waking up and going about its business. Ahead lay the strange, shifting darkness of the Fold.

Animals were too noisy and scared too easily for travel on the Unsea, so crossings were made on sandskiffs, shallow sleds rigged with enormous sails that let them skate almost soundlessly over the dead gray sands. The skiffs were loaded with grain, timber, and raw cotton, but on the trip back they would be stocked with sugar, rifles, and all manner of finished goods that passed through the seaports of West

Ravka. Looking out at the skiff's deck, equipped with little more than a sail and a rickety railing, all I could think was that it offered no place to hide.

At the mast of each sled, flanked by heavily armed soldiers, stood two Grisha Etherealki, the Order of Summoners, in dark blue *kefta*. The silver embroidery at their cuffs and the hems of their robes indicated that they were Squallers, Grisha who could raise or lower the pressure of the air and fill the skiffs' sails with wind that would carry us across the long miles of the Fold.

Soldiers armed with rifles and overseen by a grim officer lined the railings. Between them stood more Etherealki, but their blue robes bore the red cuffs that indicated they could raise fire.

At a signal from the skiff's captain, the Senior Cartographer herded me, Alexei, and the rest of the assistants onto the skiff to join the other passengers. Then he took his place beside the Squallers at the mast, where he would help them navigate through the dark. He had a compass in his hand, but it would be of little use once we were on the Fold. As we crowded on deck, I caught a glimpse of Mal standing with the trackers on the other side of the skiff. They were also armed with rifles. A row of archers stood behind them, the quivers on their backs bristling with arrows tipped in Grisha steel. I fingered the hilt of the army-issue knife tucked into my belt. It didn't give me much confidence.

A shout rang out from the foreman on the docks, and

crews of burly men on the ground began pushing the skiffs into the colorless sand that marked the farthest reaches of the Fold. They stepped back hurriedly, as if that pale, dead sand would burn their feet.

Then it was our turn, and with a sudden jolt our skiff lurched forward, creaking against the earth as the dockworkers heaved. I grabbed the railing to steady myself, my heart beating wildly. The Squallers lifted their arms. The sails billowed open with a loud snap, and our skiff surged forward into the Fold.

At first, it was like drifting into a thick cloud of smoke, but there was no heat, no smell of fire. Sounds seemed to dampen and the world became still. I watched the sand-skiffs ahead of us slide into the darkness, fading from view, one after another. I realized that I could no longer see the prow of our skiff and then that I could not see my own hand on the railing. I looked back over my shoulder. The living world had disappeared. Darkness fell around us, black, weightless, and absolute. We were in the Fold.

It was like standing at the end of everything. I held tight to the railing, feeling the wood dig into my hand, grateful for its solidity. I focused on that and the feel of my toes in my boots, gripping the deck. To my left, I could hear Alexei breathing.

I tried to think about the soldiers with their rifles and the blue-robed Grisha pyros. The hope in crossing the Fold was that we would pass through silently and unnoticed; no

shot would sound, no fire would be summoned. But their presence comforted me all the same.

I don't know how long we went on that way, the skiffs floating forward, the only sound the gentle rasp of sand on their hulls. It seemed like minutes, but it might have been hours. *We're going to be okay*, I thought to myself. *We're going to be okay*. Then I felt Alexei's hand fumbling for mine. He seized hold of my wrist.

"Listen!" he whispered, and his voice was hoarse with terror. For a moment, all I heard was his ragged breathing and the steady hiss of the skiff. Then, somewhere out in the darkness, another sound, faint but relentless: the rhythmic flapping of wings.

I grabbed Alexei's arm with one hand and clutched the hilt of my knife with the other, my heart pounding, my eyes straining to see something, anything in the blackness. I heard the sound of triggers being cocked, the tap of arrows being notched. Someone whispered, "Be ready." We waited, listening to the sound of wings beating the air, growing louder as they drew nearer, like the drums of an oncoming army. I thought I could feel the wind stir against my cheek as they circled closer, closer.

"Burn!" The command rang out, followed by the crackle of flint striking stone and an explosive *whoosh* as rippling blooms of Grisha flame erupted from each of the skiffs.

I squinted into the sudden brightness, waiting for my vision to adjust. In the firelight, I saw them. Volcra were

supposed to move in small flocks, but there they were . . . not tens but hundreds, hovering and swooping in the air around the skiff. They were more frightening than anything I had ever seen in any book, than any monster I could have imagined. Shots rang out. The archers let fly, and the shrieks of volcra split the air, high and horrible.

They dove. I heard a shrill wail and watched in horror as a soldier was lifted from his feet and carried into the air, kicking and struggling. Alexei and I huddled together, crouched low against the railing, clinging to our flimsy knives and muttering our prayers as the world dissolved into nightmare. All around us, men shouted, people screamed, soldiers were locked in combat with the massive, writhing forms of winged beasts, and the unnatural darkness of the Fold was broken in fits and starts by bursts of golden Grisha flame.

Then a cry rent the air beside me. I gasped as Alexei's arm was yanked from mine. In a spurt of flame, I saw him clutching at the railing with one hand. I saw his howling mouth, his wide, terrified eyes, and the monstrous thing that held him in its glistening gray arms, its wings beating the air as it lifted him from his feet, its thick claws sunk deep into his back, its talons already wet with his blood. Alexei's fingers slipped on the railing. I lunged forward and grabbed his arm.

"Hold on!" I cried.

Then the flame vanished, and in the darkness I felt Alexei's fingers pulled from mine.

“Alexei!” I shouted.

His screams faded into the sounds of battle as the volcra carried him into the dark. Another burst of flame lit the sky, but he was gone.

“Alexei!” I yelled, leaning over the side of the railing.
“Alexei!”

The answer came in a gust of wings as another volcra swooped down on me. I careened backward, barely avoiding its grasp, my knife held out before me with trembling hands. The volcra lunged forward, the firelight glinting off its milky, sightless eyes, its gaping mouth crowded with rows of sharp, crooked black teeth. I saw a flash of powder from the corner of my eye, heard a rifle shot, and the volcra stumbled, yowling in rage and pain.

“Move!” It was Mal, rifle in hand, face streaked with blood. He grabbed my arm and pulled me behind him.

The volcra was still coming, clawing its way across the deck, one of its wings hanging at a crooked angle. Mal was trying to reload in the firelight, but the volcra was too fast. It rushed at us, claws slashing, its talons tearing across Mal’s chest. He screamed in pain.

I grabbed hold of the volcra’s broken wing and stabbed my knife deep between its shoulders. Its muscled flesh felt slimy beneath my hands. It screeched and thrashed free of my grip, and I fell backward, hitting the deck hard. It lunged at me in a frenzy of rage, its huge jaws snapping.

Another shot rang out. The volcra stumbled and fell in

a grotesque heap, black blood pouring from its mouth. In the dim light, I saw Mal lowering his rifle. His torn shirt was dark with blood. The rifle slid from his fingers as he swayed and fell to his knees, then collapsed onto the deck.

“Mal!” I was at his side in an instant, my hands pressing down on his chest in a desperate attempt to stop the bleeding. “Mal!” I sobbed, the tears streaming down my cheeks.

The air was thick with the smell of blood and gunpowder. All around us, I heard rifle fire, people weeping . . . and the obscene sound of something feeding. The flames of the Grisha were growing weaker, more sporadic, and worst of all, I realized the skiff had stopped moving. *This is it*, I thought hopelessly. I bent low over Mal, keeping pressure on the wound.

His breathing was labored. “They’re coming,” he gasped.

I looked up and saw, in the feeble, fading glow of Grisha fire, two volcra swooping down upon us.

I huddled over Mal, shielding his body with mine. I knew it was futile, but it was all I could offer. I smelled the fetid stench of the volcra, felt the air gusting from their wings. I pressed my forehead to Mal’s and heard him whisper, “I’ll meet you in the meadow.”

Something inside me gave way, in fury, in hopelessness, in the certainty of my own death. I felt Mal’s blood beneath my palms, saw the pain in his beloved face. A volcra screeched in triumph as its talons sank into my shoulder. Pain shot through my body.

And the world went white.

I closed my eyes as a sudden, piercing flood of light exploded across my vision. It seemed to fill my head, blinding me, drowning me. From somewhere above, I heard a horrible shriek. I felt the volcra's claws loosen their grip, felt the thud as I fell forward and my head connected with the deck, and then I felt nothing at all.



CHAPTER
3

IWOKE WITH A START. I could feel the rush of air on my skin, and I opened my eyes to see what looked like dark clouds of smoke. I was on my back, on the deck of the skiff. It took me only a moment to realize that the clouds were getting thinner, giving way to dark wisps and, between them, a bright autumn sun. I closed my eyes again, feeling relief wash over me. *We're on our way out of the Fold*, I thought. *Somehow, we made it through.* Or had we? Memories of the volcra attack flooded back to me in a frightening rush. Where was Mal?

I tried to sit up and a bolt of pain shot through my shoulders. I ignored it and pushed myself up. I found myself looking down a rifle barrel.

“Get that thing away from me,” I snapped, batting it aside.

The soldier swung the rifle back around, jabbing it threateningly at me. “Stay where you are,” he commanded.

I stared at him, stunned. “What’s wrong with you?”

“She’s awake!” he shouted over his shoulder. He was joined by two more armed soldiers, the captain of the skiff, and a Corporalnik. With a thrum of panic, I saw that the cuffs of her red *kefta* were embroidered in black. What did a Heartrender want with me?

I looked around. A Squaller still stood by the mast, arms raised, driving us forward on a strong wind, a single soldier by his side. The deck was slick with blood in places. My stomach turned as I remembered the horror of the battle. A Corporalki Healer was tending to the wounded. Where was Mal?

There were soldiers and Grisha standing by the railings, bloodied, singed, and considerably fewer in number than when we had set out. They were all watching me warily. With growing fear, I realized that the soldiers and the Corporalnik were actually guarding me. Like a prisoner.

I said, “Mal Oretsev. He’s a tracker. He was injured during the attack. Where is he?” No one said anything. “Please,” I begged. “Where is he?”

There was a jolt as the skiff came aground. The captain gestured at me with his rifle. “Up.”

I thought about simply refusing to get up until they told

me what had happened to Mal, but a glance at the Heartrender made me reconsider. I got to my feet, wincing at the pain in my shoulder, then I stumbled as the skiff started to move again, pulled forward by the drydock workers on land. Instinctively, I reached out to steady myself, but the soldier I touched shrank back from me as if burned. I managed to find my footing, but my thoughts were reeling.

The skiff halted again.

“Move,” the captain commanded.

The soldiers led me at riflepoint from the skiff. I passed the other survivors, acutely aware of their curious and frightened stares, and caught sight of the Senior Cartographer babbling excitedly to a soldier. I wanted to stop to tell him what had happened to Alexei, but I didn’t dare.

As I stepped onto the drydock, I was surprised to see that we were back in Kribirsk. We hadn’t even made it across the Fold. I shuddered. Better to be marching through camp with a rifle at my back than to be on the Unsea.

But not much better, I thought anxiously.

As the soldiers marched me up the main road, people turned from their work to gawk. My mind was whirring, searching for answers and finding nothing. Had I done something wrong in the Fold? Broken some kind of military protocol? And how had we gotten out of the Fold, anyway? The wounds near my shoulder throbbed. The last thing I remembered was the terrible pain of the volcra’s claws piercing my back, that searing burst of light. How had we survived?

These thoughts were driven from my mind as we approached the Officers' Tent. The captain called the guards to a halt and stepped toward the entrance.

The Corporalnik reached out a hand to stop him. "This is a waste of time. We should proceed immediately to—"

"Take your hand off me, bloodletter," the captain snapped and shook his arm free.

For a moment, the Corporalnik stared at him, her eyes dangerous, then she smiled coldly and bowed. "*Da, kapitan.*"

I felt the hair on my arms rise.

The captain disappeared inside the tent. We waited. I glanced nervously at the Corporalnik, who had apparently forgotten her feud with the captain and was scrutinizing me once again. She was young, maybe even younger than I was, but that hadn't stopped her from confronting a superior officer. Why would it? She could kill the captain where he stood without ever raising a weapon. I rubbed my arms, trying to shake the chill that had settled over me.

The tent flap opened, and I was horrified to see the captain emerge followed by a stern Colonel Raevsky. What could I possibly have done that would require the involvement of a senior officer?

The colonel peered at me, his weathered face grim. "What are you?"

"Assistant Cartographer Alina Starkov. Royal Corps of Surveyors—"

He cut me off. "*What* are you?"

I blinked. “I . . . I’m a mapmaker, sir.”

Raevsky scowled. He pulled one of the soldiers aside and muttered something to him that sent the soldier sprinting back toward the drydocks. “Let’s go,” he said tersely.

I felt the jab of a rifle barrel in my back and marched forward. I had a very bad feeling about where I was being taken. *It can’t be*, I thought desperately. *It makes no sense*. But as the huge black tent loomed larger and larger before us, there could be no doubt about where we were headed.

The entrance to the Grisha tent was guarded by more Corporalki Heartrenders and charcoal-clad *oprichniki*, the elite soldiers who made up the Darkling’s personal guard. The *oprichniki* weren’t Grisha, but they were just as frightening.

The Corporalnik from the skiff conferred with the guards at the front of the tent, then she and Colonel Raevsky disappeared inside. I waited, my heart racing, aware of the whispers and stares behind me, my anxiety rising.

High above, four flags fluttered in the breeze: blue, red, purple, and above them all, black. Just last night, Mal and his friends had been laughing about trying to get into this tent, wondering what they might find inside. And now it seemed I would be the one to find out. *Where is Mal?* The thought kept returning to me, the only clear thought I seemed to be able to form.

After what seemed an eternity, the Corporalnik returned and nodded at the captain, who led me into the Grisha tent.

For a moment, all my fear disappeared, eclipsed by the beauty that surrounded me. The tent's inner walls were draped with cascades of bronze silk that caught the glimmering candlelight from chandeliers sparkling high above. The floors were covered in rich rugs and furs. Along the walls, shimmering silken partitions separated compartments where Grisha clustered in their vibrant *kefta*. Some stood talking, others lounged on cushions drinking tea. Two were bent over a game of chess. From somewhere, I heard the strings of a balalaika being plucked. The Duke's estate had been beautiful, but it was a melancholy beauty of dusty rooms and peeling paint, the echo of something that had once been grand. The Grisha tent was like nothing I had ever seen before, a place alive with power and wealth.

The soldiers marched me down a long carpeted aisle at the end of which I could see a black pavilion on a raised dais. A ripple of curiosity spread through the tent as we passed. Grisha men and women stopped their conversations to gape at me; a few even rose to get a better look.

By the time we reached the dais, the room was all but silent, and I felt sure that everyone must hear my heart hammering in my chest. In front of the black pavilion, a few richly attired ministers wearing the King's double eagle and a group of Corporalki clustered around a long table spread with maps. At the head of the table was an ornately carved, high-backed chair of blackest ebony, and upon it lounged a figure in a black *kefta*, his chin resting on one pale hand.

Only one Grisha wore black, was *permitted* to wear black. Colonel Raevsky stood beside him, speaking in tones far too low for me to hear.

I stared, torn between fear and fascination. *He's too young*, I thought. This Darkling had been commanding the Grisha since before I was born, but the man seated above me on the dais didn't look much older than I did. He had a sharp, beautiful face, a shock of thick black hair, and clear gray eyes that glimmered like quartz. I knew that the more powerful Grisha were said to live long lives, and Darklings were the most powerful of them all. But I felt the wrongness of it and I remembered Eva's words: *He's not natural. None of them are.*

A high, tinkling laugh sounded from the crowd that had formed near me at the base of the dais. I recognized the beautiful girl in blue, the one from the Etherealki coach who had been so taken with Mal. She whispered something to her chestnut-haired friend, and they both laughed again. My cheeks burned as I imagined what I must look like in a torn, shabby coat, after a journey into the Shadow Fold and a battle with a flock of hungry volcra. But I lifted my chin and looked the beautiful girl right in the eye. *Laugh all you want*, I thought grimly. *Whatever you're whispering, I've heard worse.* She held my gaze for a moment and then looked away. I enjoyed a brief flash of satisfaction before Colonel Raevsky's voice brought me back to the reality of my situation.

"Bring them," he said. I turned to see more soldiers

leading a battered and bewildered group of people into the tent and up the aisle. Among them, I spotted the soldier who had been beside me when the volcra attacked and the Senior Cartographer, his usually tidy coat torn and dirty, his face frightened. My distress grew as I realized that they were the survivors from my sandskiff and that they had been brought before the Darkling as witnesses. What had happened out there on the Fold? What did they think I had done?

My breath caught as I recognized the trackers in the group. I saw Mikhael first, his shaggy red hair bobbing above the crowd on his thick neck, and leaning on him, bandages peeking out from his bloodied shirt, was a very pale, very tired-looking Mal. My legs went weak and I pressed a hand to my mouth to stifle a sob.

Mal was alive. I wanted to push through the crowd and throw my arms around him, but it was all I could do to stay standing as relief flooded through me. Whatever happened here, we would be all right. We had survived the Fold, and we would survive this madness, too.

I looked back at the dais and my elation withered. The Darkling was looking directly at me. He was still listening to Colonel Raevsky, his posture just as relaxed as it had been before, but his gaze was focused, intent. He turned his attention back to the colonel and I realized that I had been holding my breath.

When the bedraggled group of survivors reached the base of the dais, Colonel Raevsky ordered, "*Kapitan*, report."

The captain stood at attention and answered in an expressionless voice: “Approximately thirty minutes into the crossing, we were set upon by a large flock of volcra. We were pinned down and sustaining heavy casualties. I was fighting on the starboard side of the skiff. At that point, I saw . . .” The soldier hesitated, and when he spoke again, his voice sounded less sure. “I don’t know exactly what I saw. A blaze of light. Bright as noon, brighter. Like staring into the sun.”

The crowd erupted into murmurs. The survivors from the skiff were nodding, and I found myself nodding along with them. I had seen the blaze of light, too.

The soldier snapped back to attention and continued, “The volcra scattered and the light disappeared. I ordered us back to drydock immediately.”

“And the girl?” asked the Darkling.

With a cold stab of fear, I realized he was talking about me.

“I didn’t see the girl, *moi soverenyi*.”

The Darkling raised an eyebrow, turning to the other survivors. “Who actually saw what happened?” His voice was cool, distant, almost disinterested.

The survivors broke into muttered discussion with one another. Then slowly, timidly, the Senior Cartographer stepped forward. I felt a keen twinge of pity for him. I’d never seen him so disheveled. His sparse brown hair was standing at all angles on his head; his fingers plucked nervously at his ruined coat.

“Tell us what you saw,” said Raevsky.

The Cartographer licked his lips. “We . . . we were under attack,” he said tremulously. “There was fighting all around. Such noise. So much blood. . . . One of the boys, Alexei, was taken. It was terrible, terrible.” His hands fluttered like two startled birds.

I frowned. If the Cartographer had seen Alexei attacked, then why hadn’t he tried to help?

The old man cleared his throat. “They were everywhere. I saw one go after her—”

“Who?” asked Raevsky.

“Alina . . . Alina Starkov, one of my assistants.”

The beautiful girl in blue smirked and leaned over to whisper to her friend. I clenched my jaw. How nice to know that the Grisha could still maintain their snobbery in the midst of hearing about a volcra attack.

“Go on,” Raevsky pressed.

“I saw one go after her and the tracker,” the Cartographer said, gesturing to Mal.

“And where were you?” I asked angrily. The question was out of my mouth before I could think better of it. Every face turned to look at me, but I didn’t care. “You saw the volcra attack us. You saw that thing take Alexei. Why didn’t you help?”

“There was nothing I could do,” he pleaded, his hands spread wide. “They were everywhere. It was chaos!”

“Alexei might still be alive if you’d gotten off your bony ass to help us!”

There was a gasp and a burble of laughter from the crowd. The Cartographer flushed angrily and I felt instantly sorry. If I got out of this mess, I was going to be in very big trouble.

“Enough!” boomed Raevsky. “Tell us what you saw, Cartographer.”

The crowd hushed and the Cartographer licked his lips again. “The tracker went down. She was beside him. That thing, the volcra, was coming at them. I saw it on top of her and then . . . she lit up.”

The Grisha erupted into exclamations of disbelief and derision. A few of them laughed. If I hadn’t been so scared and baffled, I might have been tempted to join them. *Maybe I shouldn’t have been so hard on him*, I thought, looking at the rumpled Cartographer. *The poor man clearly took a bump to the head during the attack.*

“I saw it!” he shouted over the din. “Light came *out* of her!”

Some of the Grisha were jeering openly now, but others were yelling, “Let him speak!” The Cartographer looked desperately to his fellow survivors for support, and to my amazement, I saw some of them nod. Had everyone gone mad? Did they actually think *I* had chased off the volcra?

“This is absurd!” said a voice from the crowd. It was

the beautiful girl in blue. “What are you suggesting, old man? That you’ve found us a Sun Summoner?”

“I’m not suggesting anything,” he protested. “I’m only telling what I saw!”

“It’s not impossible,” said a heavysset Grisha. He wore the purple *kefia* of a Materialnik, a member of the Order of Fabrikators. “There are stories—”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the girl laughed, her voice thick with scorn. “The man’s had his wits rattled by the volcra!”

The crowd erupted into loud argument.

I suddenly felt very tired. My shoulder throbbed where the volcra had dug its talons into me. I didn’t know what the Cartographer or any of the others on the skiff thought they had seen. I just knew this was all some kind of terrible mistake, and at the end of this farce, I would be the one looking foolish. I cringed when I thought of the teasing I would take when this was over. And hopefully, it would be over soon.

“Quiet.” The Darkling barely seemed to raise his voice, but the command sliced through the crowd and silence fell.

I suppressed a shiver. He might not find this joke so funny. I just hoped he wouldn’t blame me for it. The Darkling wasn’t known for mercy. Maybe I should be worrying less about being teased and more about being exiled to Tsibeya. Or worse. Eva said that the Darkling had once ordered a Corporalki Healer to seal a traitor’s mouth shut permanently. The man’s lips had been grafted together and he had starved

to death. At the time, Alexei and I had laughed and dismissed it as another of Eva's crazy stories. Now I wasn't so sure.

"Tracker," the Darkling said softly, "what did you see?"

As one, the crowd turned toward Mal, who looked uneasily at me and then back at the Darkling. "Nothing. I didn't see anything."

"The girl was right beside you."

Mal nodded.

"You must have seen something."

Mal glanced at me again, his look weighted with worry and fatigue. I'd never seen him so pale, and I wondered how much blood he had lost. I felt a surge of helpless anger. He was badly hurt. He should be resting instead of standing here answering ridiculous questions.

"Just tell us what you remember, tracker," commanded Raevsky.

Mal shrugged slightly and winced at the pain from his wounds. "I was on my back on the deck. Alina was next to me. I saw the volcra diving, and I knew it was coming for us. I said something and—"

"What did you say?" The Darkling's cool voice cut through the room.

"I don't remember," Mal said. I recognized the stubborn set of his jaw and knew he was lying. He did remember. "I smelled the volcra, saw it swooping down on us. Alina screamed and then I couldn't see anything. The world was just . . . shining."

“So you didn’t see where the light was coming from?”
Raevsky asked.

“Alina isn’t . . . She couldn’t . . .” Mal shook his head. “We’re from the same . . . village.” I noticed that tiny pause, the orphan’s pause. “If she could do anything like that, I would know.”

The Darkling looked at Mal for a long moment and then glanced back at me.

“We all have our secrets,” he said.

Mal opened his mouth as if to say more, but the Darkling put up a hand to silence him. Anger flashed across Mal’s features but he shut his mouth, his lips pressed into a grim line.

The Darkling rose from his chair. He gestured and the soldiers stepped back, leaving me alone to face him. The tent seemed eerily silent. Slowly, he descended the steps.

I had to fight the urge to back away from him as he came to a halt in front of me.

“Now, what do *you* say, Alina Starkov?” he asked pleasantly.

I swallowed. My throat was dry and my heart was careening from beat to beat, but I knew I had to speak. I had to make him understand that I’d had no part in any of this. “There’s been some kind of mistake,” I said hoarsely. “I didn’t do anything. I don’t know how we survived.”

The Darkling appeared to consider this. Then he crossed his arms, cocked his head to one side. “Well,” he said, his

voice bemused. “I like to think that I know everything that happens in Ravka, and that if I had a Sun Summoner living in my own country, I’d be aware of it.” Soft murmurs of assent rose from the crowd, but he ignored them, watching me closely. “But *something* powerful stopped the volcra and saved the King’s skiffs.”

He paused and waited as if he expected me to solve this conundrum for him.

My chin rose stubbornly. “I didn’t do anything,” I said. “Not one thing.”

The side of the Darkling’s mouth twitched, as if he were repressing a smile. His eyes slid over me from head to toe and back again. I felt like something strange and shiny, a curiosity that had washed up on a lake shore, that he might kick aside with his boot.

“Is your memory as faulty as your friend’s?” he asked and bobbed his head toward Mal.

“I don’t . . .” I faltered. What *did* I remember? Terror. Darkness. Pain. Mal’s blood. His life flowing out of him beneath my hands. The rage that filled me at the thought of my own helplessness.

“Hold out your arm,” said the Darkling.

“What?”

“We’ve wasted enough time. Hold out your arm.”

A cold spike of fear went through me. I looked around in panic, but there was no help to be had. The soldiers stared forward, stone-faced. The survivors from the skiff

looked frightened and tired. The Grisha regarded me curiously. The girl in blue was smirking. Mal's pale face seemed to have gone even whiter, but there was no answer in his worried eyes.

Shaking, I held out my left arm.

“Push up your sleeve.”

“I didn't do anything.” I'd meant to say it loudly, to proclaim it, but my voice sounded frightened and small.

The Darkling looked at me, waiting. I pushed up my sleeve.

He spread his arms and terror washed through me as I saw his palms filling with something black that pooled and curled through the air like ink in water.

“Now,” he said in that same soft, conversational voice, as if we were sitting together drinking tea, as if I did not stand before him shaking, “let's see what you can do.”

He brought his hands together and there was a sound like a thunderclap. I gasped as undulating darkness spread from his clasped hands, spilling in a black wave over me and the crowd.

I was blind. The room was gone. Everything was gone. I cried out in terror as I felt the Darkling's fingers close around my bare wrist. Suddenly, my fear receded. It was still there, cringing like an animal inside me, but it had been pushed aside by something calm and sure and powerful, something vaguely familiar.

I felt a call ring through me and, to my surprise, I felt

something in me rise up to answer. I pushed it away, pushed it down. Somehow I knew that if that thing got free, it would destroy me.

“Nothing there?” the Darkling murmured. I realized how very close he was to me in the dark. My panicked mind seized on his words. *Nothing there. That’s right, nothing. Nothing at all. Now leave me be!*

And to my relief, that struggling thing inside me seemed to lie back down, leaving the Darkling’s call unanswered.

“Not so fast,” he whispered. I felt something cold press against the inside of my forearm. In the same moment that I realized it was a knife, the blade cut into my skin.

Pain and fear rushed through me. I cried out. The thing inside me roared to the surface, speeding toward the Darkling’s call. I couldn’t stop myself. I answered. The world exploded into blazing white light.

The darkness shattered around us like glass. For a moment, I saw the faces of the crowd, their mouths wide with shock as the tent filled with shining sunlight, the air shimmering with heat. Then the Darkling released his grip, and with his touch went that peculiar sense of certainty that had possessed me. The radiant light disappeared, leaving ordinary candlelight in its place, but I could still feel the warm and inexplicable glow of sunshine on my skin.

My legs gave way and the Darkling caught me up against his body with one surprisingly strong arm.

“I guess you only look like a mouse,” he whispered in

my ear, and then beckoned to one of his personal guard. “Take her,” he said, handing me over to the *oprichnik* who reached out his arm to support me. I felt myself flush at the indignity of being handed over like a sack of potatoes, but I was too shaky and confused to protest. Blood was running down my arm from the cut the Darkling had given me.

“Ivan!” shouted the Darkling. A tall Heartreuder rushed from the dais to the Darkling’s side. “Get her to my coach. I want her surrounded by an armed guard at all times. Take her to the Little Palace and stop for nothing.” Ivan nodded. “And bring a Healer to see to her wounds.”

“Wait!” I protested, but the Darkling was already turning away. I grabbed hold of his arm, ignoring the gasp that rose from the Grisha onlookers. “There’s been some kind of mistake. I don’t . . . I’m not . . .” My voice trailed off as the Darkling turned slowly to me, his slate eyes drifting to where my hand gripped his sleeve. I let go, but I wasn’t giving up that easily. “I’m not what you think I am,” I whispered desperately.

The Darkling stepped closer to me and said, his voice so low that only I could hear, “I doubt you have any idea what you are.” Then he nodded to Ivan. “Go!”

The Darkling turned his back on me and walked swiftly toward the raised dais, where he was swarmed by advisers and ministers, all talking loudly and rapidly.

Ivan grabbed me roughly by the arm. “Come on.”

“Ivan,” called the Darkling, “mind your tone. She is Grisha now.”

Ivan reddened slightly and gave a small bow, but his grip on my arm didn't slacken as he pulled me down the aisle.

“You have to listen to me,” I gasped as I struggled to keep up with his long strides. “I'm not Grisha. I'm a mapmaker. I'm not even a very good mapmaker.”

Ivan ignored me.

I looked back over my shoulder, searching the crowd. Mal was arguing with the captain from the sandskiff. As if he felt my eyes on him, he looked up and met my gaze. I could see my own panic and confusion mirrored in his white face. I wanted to cry out to him, to run to him, but the next moment he was gone, swallowed up by the crowd.

A decorative graphic for a chapter title. It features a central dark circular area with the word "CHAPTER" in a serif font at the top and the number "4" in a large, stylized font in the center. The circle is surrounded by intricate, symmetrical floral and scrollwork patterns in a light gray color. At the top of the circle, there are small, dark, onion-dome-like structures, possibly representing a building or a crown.

CHAPTER 4

TEARS OF FRUSTRATION welled in my eyes as Ivan dragged me out of the tent and into the late-afternoon sun. He pulled me down a low hill to the road where the Darkling's black coach was already waiting, surrounded by a ring of mounted Grisha Etherealki and flanked by lines of armed cavalry. Two of the Darkling's gray-clad guards waited by the door to the coach with a woman and a fair-haired man, both of whom wore Corporalki red.

"Get in," commanded Ivan. Then, seeming to remember the Darkling's order, he added, "if you please."

"No," I said.

"What?" Ivan seemed genuinely surprised. The other Corporalki looked shocked.

“No!” I repeated. “I’m not going anywhere. There’s been some kind of mistake. I—”

Ivan cut me off, taking a firmer grip on my arm. “The Darkling doesn’t make mistakes,” he said through gritted teeth. “Get in the coach.”

“I don’t want—”

Ivan lowered his head until his nose was just inches from mine and practically spat, “Do you think I care what you want? In a few hours’ time, every Fjerdan spy and Shu Han assassin will know what happened on the Fold, and they’ll be coming for you. Our only chance is to get you to Os Alta and behind the palace walls before anyone else realizes what you are. Now, *get in the coach.*”

He shoved me through the door and followed me inside, throwing himself down on the seat opposite me in disgust. The other Corporalki joined him, followed by the *oprichniki* guards, who settled on either side of me.

“So I’m the Darkling’s prisoner?”

“You’re under his protection.”

“What’s the difference?”

Ivan’s expression was unreadable. “Pray you never find out.”

I scowled and slumped back on the cushioned seat, then hissed in pain. I’d forgotten my wounds.

“See to her,” Ivan said to the female Corporalnik. Her cuffs were embroidered in Healer’s gray.

The woman switched places with one of the *oprichniki* so that she could sit beside me.

A soldier ducked his head inside the door. “We’re ready,” he said.

“Good,” replied Ivan. “Stay alert and keep moving.”

“We’ll only stop to change horses. If we stop before then, you’ll know something is wrong.”

The soldier disappeared, closing the door behind him. The driver didn’t hesitate. With a cry and the snap of a whip, the coach lurched forward. I felt an icy tumble of panic. What was happening to me? I thought about just throwing open the coach door and making a run for it. But where would I run? We were surrounded by armed men in the middle of a military camp. And even if we weren’t, where could I possibly go?

“Please remove your coat,” said the woman beside me.

“What?”

“I need to see to your wounds.”

I considered refusing, but what was the point? I shrugged awkwardly out of my coat and let the Healer ease my shirt over my shoulders. The Corporalki were the Order of the Living and the Dead. I tried to focus on the *living* part, but I’d never been healed by a Grisha and every muscle in my body tensed with fear.

She took something out of a little satchel and a sharp chemical scent filled the coach. I flinched as she cleaned the

wounds, my fingers digging into my knees. When she was done, I felt a hot, prickling sensation between my shoulders. I bit down hard on my lip. The urge to scratch my back was almost unbearable. Finally, she stopped and pulled my shirt back into place. I flexed my shoulders carefully. The pain was gone.

“Now the arm,” she said.

I’d almost forgotten the cut from the Darkling’s knife, but my wrist and hand were sticky with blood. She wiped the cut clean and then held my arm up to the light. “Try to stay still,” she said, “or there will be a scar.”

I did my best, but the jostling of the coach made it difficult. The Healer passed her hand slowly over the wound. I felt my skin throb with heat. My arm began to itch furiously and, as I watched in amazement, my flesh seemed to shimmer and move as the two sides of the cut knit together and the skin sealed shut.

The itching stopped and the Healer sat back. I reached out and touched my arm. There was a slightly raised scar where the cut had been, but that was all.

“Thank you,” I said in awe.

The Healer nodded.

“Give her your *kefta*,” Ivan said to her.

The woman frowned but hesitated only a moment before she shrugged out of her red *kefta* and handed it to me.

“Why do I need this?” I asked.

“Just take it,” Ivan growled.

I took the *kefta* from the Healer. She kept her face blank, but I could tell it pained her to part with it.

Before I could decide whether or not to offer her my bloodstained coat, Ivan tapped the roof and the coach began to slow. The Healer didn’t even wait for it to stop moving before she opened the door and swung outside.

Ivan pulled the door shut. The *oprichnik* slipped back into the seat beside me, and we were on our way once more.

“Where is she going?” I asked.

“Back to Kribirsk,” replied Ivan. “We’ll travel faster with less weight.”

“You look heavier than she does,” I muttered.

“Put on the *kefta*,” he said.

“Why?”

“Because it’s made with Materialki corecloth. It can withstand rifle fire.”

I stared at him. Was that even possible? There were stories of Grisha withstanding direct gunshots and surviving what should have been fatal wounds. I’d never taken them seriously, but maybe Fabrikator handiwork was the truth behind those peasant tales.

“Do you all wear this stuff?” I asked as I pulled on the *kefta*.

“When we’re in the field,” said an *oprichnik*. I nearly jumped. It was the first time either of the guards had spoken.

“Just don’t get shot in the head,” Ivan added with a condescending grin.

I ignored him. The *kefta* was far too large. It felt soft and unfamiliar, the fur lining warm against my skin. I chewed my lip. It didn’t seem fair that *oprichniki* and Grisha wore corecloth while ordinary soldiers went without. Did our officers wear it, too?

The coach picked up speed. In the time it had taken for the Healer to do her work, dusk had begun to fall and we had left Kribirsk behind. I leaned forward, straining to see out the window, but the world outside was a twilight blur. I felt tears threatening again and blinked them back. A few hours ago, I’d been a frightened girl on my way into the unknown, but at least I’d known who and what I was. With a pang, I thought of the Documents Tent. The other surveyors might be at their work right now. Would they be mourning Alexei? Would they be talking about me and what had happened on the Fold?

I clutched the crumpled army-issue coat I had bundled up on my lap. Surely this all had to be a dream, some crazy hallucination brought on by the terrors of the Shadow Fold. I couldn’t really be wearing a Grisha’s *kefta*, sitting in the Darkling’s coach—the same coach that had almost crushed me only yesterday.

Someone lit a lamp inside the coach, and in the flickering light I could better see the silken interior. The seats

were heavily cushioned black velvet. On the windows, the Darkling's symbol had been cut into the glass: two overlapping circles, the sun in eclipse.

Across from me, the two Grisha were studying me with open curiosity. Their red *kefta* were of the finest wool, embroidered lavishly in black and lined in black fur. The fair-haired Heartrender was lanky and had a long, melancholy face. Ivan was taller, broader, with wavy brown hair and sun-bronzed skin. Now that I bothered to look, I had to admit he was handsome. *And knows it, too. A big handsome bully.*

I shifted restlessly in my seat, uncomfortable with their stares. I looked out the window, but there was nothing to see except the growing darkness and my own pale reflection. I looked back at the Grisha and tried to quash my irritation. They were still gawking at me. I reminded myself that these men could make my heart explode in my chest, but eventually I just couldn't stand it.

"I don't do tricks, you know," I snapped.

The Grisha exchanged a glance.

"That was a pretty good trick back in the tent," Ivan said.

I rolled my eyes. "Well, if I plan on doing anything exciting, I promise to give fair warning so just . . . take a nap or something."

Ivan looked affronted. I felt a little snap of fear, but the fair-haired Corporalnik let out a bark of laughter.

“I am Fedyor,” he said. “And this is Ivan.”

“I know,” I replied. Then, picturing Ana Kuya’s disapproving glare, I added, “Very pleased to meet you.”

They exchanged an amused glance. I ignored them and wriggled back in my seat, trying to get comfortable. It wasn’t easy with two heavily armed soldiers taking up most of the room.

The coach hit a bump and jolted forward.

“Is it safe?” I asked. “To be traveling at night?”

“No,” Fedyor said. “But it would be considerably more dangerous to stop.”

“Because people are after me now?” I said sarcastically.

“If not now, then soon.”

I snorted. Fedyor raised his eyebrows and said, “For hundreds of years, the Shadow Fold has been doing our enemies’ work, closing off our ports, choking us, making us weak. If you’re truly a Sun Summoner, then your power could be the key to opening up the Fold—or maybe even destroying it. Fjerda and the Shu Han won’t just stand by and let that happen.”

I gaped at him. What did these people expect from me? And what would they do to me when they realized I couldn’t deliver? “This is ridiculous,” I muttered.

Fedyor looked me up and down and then smiled slightly. “Maybe,” he said.

I frowned. He was agreeing with me, but I still felt insulted.

“How did you hide it?” Ivan asked abruptly.

“What?”

“Your power,” Ivan said impatiently. “How did you hide it?”

“I didn’t hide it. I didn’t know it was there.”

“That’s impossible.”

“And yet here we are,” I said bitterly.

“Weren’t you tested?”

A dim memory flashed through my mind: three cloaked figures in the sitting room at Keramzin, a woman’s haughty brow.

“Of course I was tested.”

“When?”

“When I was eight.”

“That’s very late,” commented Ivan. “Why didn’t your parents have you tested earlier?”

Because they were dead, I thought but didn’t say. And no one paid much attention to Duke Keramsov’s orphans. I shrugged.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” Ivan grumbled.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you!” I leaned forward, looking desperately from Ivan to Fedyor. “I’m not what you think I am. I’m not Grisha. What happened in the Fold . . . I don’t know what happened, but I didn’t do it.”

“And what happened in the Grisha tent?” asked Fedyor calmly.

“I can’t explain that. But it wasn’t my doing. The Darkling did something when he touched me.”

Ivan laughed. “He didn’t *do* anything. He’s an amplifier.”
“A what?”

Fedyor and Ivan exchanged another glance.

“Forget it,” I snapped. “I don’t care.”

Ivan reached inside his collar and removed something on a thin silver chain. He held it out for me to examine.

My curiosity got the best of me, and I edged forward to get a better view. It looked like a cluster of sharp black claws.

“What are they?”

“My amplifier,” Ivan said with pride. “The claws from the forepaw of a Sherborn bear. I killed it myself when I left school and joined the Darkling’s service.” He leaned back in his seat and tucked the chain into his collar.

“An amplifier increases a Grisha’s power,” said Fedyor. “But the power must be there to begin with.”

“Do all Grisha have them?” I asked.

Fedyor stiffened. “No,” he said. “Amplifiers are rare and hard to obtain.”

“Only the Darkling’s most favored Grisha have them,” Ivan said smugly. I was sorry I’d asked.

“The Darkling is a living amplifier,” Fedyor said. “That’s what you felt.”

“Like the claws? That’s his power?”

“*One* of his powers,” corrected Ivan.

I pulled the *kefta* tighter around me, feeling suddenly cold. I remembered the surety that had flooded through me with the Darkling’s touch, and that strangely familiar

sensation of a call echoing through me, a call that demanded an answer. It had been frightening, but exhilarating, too. In that moment, all my doubt and fear had been replaced by a kind of absolute certainty. I was no one, a refugee from an unnamed village, a scrawny, clumsy girl hurtling alone through the gathering dark. But when the Darkling had closed his fingers around my wrist, I'd felt different, like something more. I shut my eyes and tried to focus, tried to remember that feeling of certainty, to bring that sure and perfect power into blazing life. But nothing happened.

I sighed and opened my eyes. Ivan looked highly amused. The urge to kick him was almost overwhelming.

“You’re all in for a big disappointment,” I muttered.

“For your sake, I hope you’re wrong,” said Ivan.

“For all our sakes,” said Fedyor.

I LOST TRACK OF TIME. Night and day passed through the windows of the coach. I spent most of my time staring out at the landscape, searching for landmarks to give me some sense of the familiar. I'd expected that we would take side roads, but instead we stuck to the Vy, and Fedyor explained that the Darkling had opted for speed over stealth. He was hoping to get me safe behind Os Alta's double walls before rumor of my power spread to the enemy spies and assassins who operated within Ravka's borders.

We kept a brutal pace. Occasionally, we stopped to

change horses and I was allowed to stretch my legs. When I was able to sleep, my dreams were plagued by monsters.

Once, I awoke with a start, my heart pounding, to find Fedyor watching me. Ivan was asleep beside him, snoring loudly.

“Who’s Mal?” he asked.

I realized I must have been talking in my sleep. Embarrassed, I glanced at the *oprichniki* guards flanking me. One stared impassively forward. The other was dozing. Outside, the afternoon sun shone through a grove of birch-wood trees as we rumbled past.

“No one,” I said. “A friend.”

“The tracker?”

I nodded. “He was with me on the Shadow Fold. He saved my life.”

“And you saved his.”

I opened my mouth to disagree, but stopped. Had I saved Mal’s life? The thought brought me up short.

“It’s a great honor,” said Fedyor. “To save a life. You saved many.”

“Not enough,” I murmured, thinking of the terrified look on Alexei’s face as he was pulled into the darkness. If I had this power, why hadn’t I been able to save him? Or any of the others who had perished on the Fold? I looked at Fedyor. “If you really believe that saving a life is an honor, then why not become a Healer instead of a Heartrender?”

Fedyor considered the passing scenery. “Of all Grisha,

Corporalki have the hardest road. We require the most training and the most study. At the end of it all, I felt I could save more lives as a Heartrender.”

“As a killer?” I asked in surprise.

“As a soldier,” Fedyor corrected. He shrugged. “To kill or to cure?” he said with a sad smile. “We each have our own gifts.” Abruptly, his expression changed. He sat up straight and jabbed Ivan in the side. “Wake up!”

The coach had stopped. I looked around in confusion. “Are we—,” I began, but the guard beside me clapped a hand over my mouth and put a finger to his lips.

The coach door flew open and a soldier ducked his head in.

“There’s a fallen tree across the road,” he said. “But it could be a trap. Be alert and—”

He never finished his sentence. A shot rang out and he fell forward, a bullet in his back. Suddenly, the air was full of panicked cries and the teeth-rattling sound of rifle fire as a volley of bullets struck the coach.

“Get down!” yelled the guard beside me, shielding my body with his own as Ivan kicked the dead soldier out of the way and pulled the door closed.

“Fjerdans,” said the guard, peering outside.

Ivan turned to Fedyor and the guard beside me. “Fedyor, go with him. You take this side. We’ll take the other. At all costs, defend the coach.”

Fedyor pulled a large knife from his belt and handed it to me. “Stay close to the floor and stay quiet.”

The Grisha waited with the guards, crouching by the windows, then at a signal from Ivan they leapt from either side of the coach, slamming the doors behind them. I huddled on the floor, clutching the knife’s heavy hilt, my knees to my chest, my back pressed against the base of the seat. Outside, I could hear the sounds of fighting, metal on metal, grunts and shouts, horses whinnying. The coach shook as a body slammed against the glass of the window. I saw with horror that it was one of my guards. His body left a red smear against the glass as he slid from view.

The coach door flew open and a man with a wild, yellow-bearded face appeared. I scrambled to the other side of the coach, the knife held out before me. He barked something to his compatriots in his strange Fjerdan tongue and reached for my leg. As I kicked out at him, the door behind me opened and I nearly tumbled into another bearded man. He grabbed me under the arms, pulling me roughly from the coach as I howled and slashed out with the knife.

I must have made contact, because he cursed and loosened his grip on me. I struggled to my feet and ran. We were in a wooded glen where the Vy narrowed to pass between two sloping hills. All around me, soldiers and Grisha were fighting with bearded men. Trees burst into flames, caught in the line of Grisha fire. I saw Fedyor throw his hand out,

and the man before him crumpled to the ground, clutching his chest, blood trickling from his mouth.

I ran without direction, clambering up the nearest hill, my feet slipping on the fallen leaves that covered the forest floor, my breath coming in gasps. I made it halfway up the slope before I was tackled from behind. I fell forward, the knife flying from my hands as I put my arms out to break my fall.

I twisted and kicked as the yellow-bearded man grabbed hold of my legs. I looked desperately down to the glen, but the soldiers and Grisha below me were fighting for their lives, clearly outnumbered and unable to come to my aid. I struggled and thrashed, but the Fjerdan was too strong. He climbed on top of me, using his knees to pin my arms to my sides, and reached for his knife.

“I’ll gut you right here, witch,” he snarled in a heavy Fjerdan accent.

At that moment, I heard the pounding of hooves and my attacker turned his head to look down at the road.

A group of riders roared into the glen, their *kefta* streaming red and blue, their hands blazing fire and thunder. The lead rider was dressed in black.

The Darkling slid from his mount and threw his hands wide, then brought them together with a resounding boom. Skeins of darkness shot from his clasped hands, snaking through the glen, finding the Fjerdan assassins, then slithering up their bodies to swathe their faces in seething shadow.

They screamed. Some dropped their swords; others waved them blindly.

I watched in mingled awe and horror as the Ravkan fighters seized the advantage, cutting down the blinded, helpless men with ease.

The bearded man on top of me muttered something I did not understand. I thought it might be a prayer. He was staring, frozen, at the Darkling, his terror palpable. I took my chance.

“I’m here!” I called down the hillside.

The Darkling’s head turned. He raised his hands.

“*Nej!*” bleated the Fjerdan, his knife held high. “I don’t need to see to put my knife through her heart!”

I held my breath. Silence fell in the glen, broken only by the moans of dying men. The Darkling dropped his hands.

“You must realize that you’re surrounded,” he said calmly, his voice carrying through the trees.

The assassin’s gaze darted right and left, then up to the crest of the hill where Ravkan soldiers were emerging, rifles at the ready. As the Fjerdan looked around frantically, the Darkling edged a few steps up the slope.

“No closer!” the man shrieked.

The Darkling stopped. “Give her to me,” he said, “and I’ll let you scurry back to your king.”

The assassin gave a crazed little giggle. “Oh no, oh no. I don’t think so,” he said, shaking his head, his knife held high above my pounding heart, its cruel point gleaming in

the sun. “The Darkling doesn’t spare lives.” He looked down at me. His lashes were light blond, almost invisible. “He will not have you,” he crooned softly. “He will not have the witch. He will not have this power, too.” He raised the knife higher and yowled, “*Skirden Fjerda!*”

The knife plunged down in a shining arc. I turned my head, squeezing my eyes shut in terror, and as I did, I glimpsed the Darkling, his arm slashing through the air in front of him. I heard another crack like thunder and then . . . nothing.

Slowly, I opened my eyes and took in the horror before me. I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound would come. The man on top of me had been cut in two. His head, his right shoulder, and his arm lay on the forest floor, his white hand still clasping the knife. The rest of him swayed for a moment above me, a dark wisp of smoke fading in the air beside the wound that ran the length of his severed torso. Then what remained of him fell forward.

I found my voice and screamed. I crawled backward, scrambling away from the mutilated body, unable to get to my feet, unable to look away from the awful sight, my body shaking uncontrollably.

The Darkling hurried up the hill and knelt beside me, blocking my view of the corpse. “Look at me,” he instructed.

I tried to focus on his face, but all I could see was the assassin’s severed body, his blood pooling in the damp

leaves. “What . . . what did you do to him?” I asked, my voice quavering.

“What I had to do. Can you stand?”

I nodded shakily. He took my hands and helped me to my feet. When my gaze slid back to the corpse, he took hold of my chin and drew my eyes back to his. “At me,” he commanded.

I nodded and tried to keep my eyes trained on the Darkling as he led me down the hill and called out orders to his men.

“Clear the road. I need twenty riders.”

“The girl?” Ivan asked.

“Rides with me,” said the Darkling.

He left me by his horse as he went to confer with Ivan and his captains. I was relieved to see Fedyor with them, clutching his arm but looking otherwise uninjured. I patted the horse’s sweaty flank and breathed in the clean leather smell of the saddle, trying to slow the beating of my heart and to ignore what I knew lay behind me on the hillside.

A few minutes later, I saw soldiers and Grisha mounting their horses. Several men had finished clearing the tree from the road, and others were riding out with the much-battered coach.

“A decoy,” said the Darkling, coming up beside me. “We’ll take the southern trails. It’s what we should have done in the first place.”

“So you do make mistakes,” I said without thinking.

He paused in the act of pulling on his gloves, and I pressed my lips together nervously. “I didn’t mean—”

“Of course I make mistakes,” he said. His mouth curved into a half smile. “Just not often.”

He raised his hood and offered me his hand to help me onto the horse. For a moment, I hesitated. He stood before me, a dark rider, cloaked in black, his features in shadow. The image of the severed man loomed up in my mind, and my stomach turned.

As if he’d read my thoughts, he repeated, “I did what I had to, Alina.”

I knew that. He had saved my life. And what other choice did I have? I put my hand in his and let the Darkling help me into the saddle. He slid up behind me and kicked the horse into a trot.

As we left the glen, I felt the reality of what had just happened sink into me.

“You’re shaking,” he said.

“I’m not used to people trying to kill me.”

“Really? I hardly notice anymore.”

I turned to look at him. That trace of a smile was still there, but I wasn’t entirely sure he was kidding. I turned back around and said, “And I did just see a man get sliced in half.” I kept my voice light, but I couldn’t hide the fact that I was still trembling.

The Darkling switched his reins to one hand and pulled

off one of his gloves. I stiffened as I felt him slide his bare palm under my hair and rest it on the nape of my neck. My surprise gave way to calm as that same sense of power and surety flooded through me. With one hand cupping my head, he kicked the horse into a canter. I closed my eyes and tried not to think, and soon, despite the movement of the horse, despite the terrors of the day, I fell into a troubled sleep.



CHAPTER
5

THE NEXT FEW DAYS passed in a blur of discomfort and exhaustion. We stayed off of the Vy and kept to side roads and narrow hunting trails, moving as quickly as the hilly and sometimes treacherous terrain would allow. I lost all sense of where we were or how far we had gone.

After the first day, the Darkling and I had ridden separately, but I found that I was always aware of where he was in the column of riders. He didn't say a word to me, and as the hours and days wore on, I started to worry that I'd somehow offended him. (Though, given how little we'd spoken, I wasn't sure how I could have managed it.) Occasionally, I caught him looking at me, his eyes cool and unreadable.

I'd never been a particularly good rider, and the pace

the Darkling set was taking its toll. No matter which way I shifted in my saddle, some part of my body ached. I stared listlessly at my horse's twitching ears and tried not to think of my burning legs or the throbbing in my lower back. On the fifth night, when we stopped to make camp at an abandoned farm, I wanted to leap from my horse in joy. But I was so stiff that I settled for sliding awkwardly to the ground. I thanked the soldier who saw to my mount and waddled slowly down a small hill to where I could hear the soft gurgle of a stream.

I knelt by the bank on shaky legs and washed my face and hands in the cold water. The air had changed over the last couple of days, and the bright blue skies of autumn were giving way to sullen gray. The soldiers seemed to think that we would reach Os Alta before any real weather came on. And then what? What would happen to me when we reached the Little Palace? What would happen when I couldn't do what they wanted me to do? It wasn't wise to disappoint kings. Or Darklings. I doubted they'd just send me back to the regiment with a pat on the back. I wondered if Mal was still in Kribirsk. If his wounds had healed, he might already have been sent back across the Fold or on to some other assignment. I thought of his face disappearing into the crowd in the Grisha tent. I hadn't even had a chance to say goodbye.

In the gathering dusk, I stretched my arms and back and tried to shake the feeling of gloom that had settled over

me. *It's probably for the best*, I told myself. How would I have said goodbye to Mal anyway? *Thanks for being my best friend and making my life bearable. Oh, and sorry I fell in love with you for a while there. Make sure to write!*

“What are you smiling at?”

I whirled, peering into the gloom. The Darkling's voice seemed to float out of the shadows. He walked down to the stream, crouching on the bank to splash water on his face and through his dark hair.

“Well?” he asked, looking up at me.

“Myself,” I admitted.

“Are you that funny?”

“I'm hilarious.”

The Darkling regarded me in what remained of the twilight. I had the disquieting sensation that I was being studied. Other than a bit of dust on his *kefta*, our trek seemed to have taken little toll on him. My skin prickled with embarrassment as I became keenly aware of my torn, too-large *kefta*, my dirty hair, and the bruise the Fjerdan assassin had left on my cheek. Was he looking at me and regretting his decision to drag me all this way? Was he thinking that he'd made another of his infrequent mistakes?

“I'm not Grisha,” I blurted.

“The evidence suggests otherwise,” he said with little concern. “What makes you so certain?”

“Look at me!”

“I'm looking.”

“Do I look like a Grisha to you?” Grisha were beautiful. They didn’t have spotty skin and dull brown hair and scrawny arms.

He shook his head and rose. “You don’t understand at all,” he said, and began walking back up the hill.

“Are you going to explain it to me?”

“Not right now, no.”

I was so furious I wanted to smack him on the back of his head. And if I hadn’t seen him cut a man in half, I might have done just that. I settled for glaring at the space between his shoulder blades as I followed him up the hill.

Inside the farm’s broken-down barn, the Darkling’s men had cleared a space on the earthen floor and built a fire. One of them had caught and killed a grouse and was roasting it over the flames. It made a poor meal shared among all of us, but the Darkling did not want to send his men ranging into the woods for game.

I took a place by the fire and ate my small portion in silence. When I’d finished, I hesitated for only a moment before wiping my fingers on my already filthy *kefta*. It was probably the nicest thing I’d ever worn or would wear, and something about seeing the fabric stained and torn made me feel particularly low.

In the light from the fire, I watched the *oprichniki* sitting side by side with the Grisha. Some of them had already drifted away from the fire to bed down for the night. Others had been posted to the first watch. The rest sat talking as the

flames ebbed, passing a flask back and forth. The Darkling sat with them. I'd noticed that he had taken no more than his share of the grouse. And now he sat beside his soldiers on the cold ground, a man second in power only to the King.

He must have felt my gaze, because he turned to look at me, his granite eyes glimmering in the firelight. I flushed. To my dismay, he rose and came to sit beside me, offering me the flask. I hesitated and then took a sip, grimacing at the taste. I'd never liked *kvas*, but the teachers at Keramzin had drunk it like water. Mal and I had stolen a bottle once. The beating we'd taken when we were caught had been nothing compared to how miserably sick we'd been.

Still, it burned going down, and the warmth was welcome. I took another sip and handed the flask back to him. "Thank you," I said with a little cough.

He drank, staring into the fire, and then said, "All right. Ask me."

I blinked at him, taken aback. I wasn't sure where to begin. My tired mind had been brimming with questions, whirring in a state between panic and exhaustion and disbelief since we'd left Kribirsk. I wasn't sure that I had the energy to form a thought, and when I opened my mouth, the question that came out surprised me.

"How old are you?"

He glanced at me, bemused.

"I don't know exactly."

“How can you not know?”

The Darkling shrugged. “How old are *you* exactly?”

I flashed him a sour look. I didn’t know the date of my birth. All the orphans at Keramzin were given the Duke’s birthday in honor of our benefactor. “Well, then, roughly how old are you?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because I’ve heard stories about you since I was a child, but you don’t look much older than I am,” I said honestly.

“What kind of stories?”

“The usual kind,” I said with some annoyance. “If you don’t want to answer me, just say so.”

“I don’t want to answer you.”

“Oh.”

Then he sighed and said, “One hundred and twenty. Give or take.”

“What?” I squeaked. The soldiers sitting across from me glanced over. “That’s impossible,” I said more quietly.

He looked into the flames. “When a fire burns, it uses up the wood. It devours it, leaving only ash. Grisha power doesn’t work that way.”

“How does it work?”

“Using our power makes us stronger. It feeds us instead of consuming us. Most Grisha live long lives.”

“But not one hundred and twenty years.”

“No,” he admitted. “The length of a Grisha’s life is

proportional to his or her power. The greater the power, the longer the life. And when that power is amplified . . .” He trailed off with a shrug.

“And you’re a living amplifier. Like Ivan’s bear.”

The hint of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “Like Ivan’s bear.”

An unpleasant thought occurred to me. “But that means—”

“That my bones or a few of my teeth would make another Grisha very powerful.”

“Well, that’s completely creepy. Doesn’t that worry you a little bit?”

“No,” he said simply. “Now you answer my question. What kind of stories were you told about me?”

I shifted uncomfortably. “Well . . . our teachers told us that you strengthened the Second Army by gathering Grisha from outside of Ravka.”

“I didn’t have to gather them. They came to me. Other countries don’t treat their Grisha so well as Ravka,” he said grimly. “The Fjerdans burn us as witches, and the Kerch sell us as slaves. The Shu Han carve us up seeking the source of our power. What else?”

“They said you were the strongest Darkling in generations.”

“I didn’t ask you for flattery.”

I fingered a loose thread on the cuff of my *kefta*. He watched me, waiting.

“Well,” I said, “there was an old serf who worked on the estate . . .”

“Go on,” he said. “Tell me.”

“He . . . he said that Darklings are born without souls. That only something truly evil could have created the Shadow Fold.” I glanced at his cold face and added hastily, “But Ana Kuya sent him packing and told us it was all peasant superstition.”

The Darkling sighed. “I doubt that serf is the only one who believes that.”

I said nothing. Not everyone thought like Eva or the old serf, but I’d been in the First Army long enough to know that most ordinary soldiers didn’t trust Grisha and felt no allegiance to the Darkling.

After a moment, the Darkling said, “My great-great-great-grandfather was the Black Heretic, the Darkling who created the Shadow Fold. It was a mistake, an experiment born of his greed, maybe his evil. I don’t know. But every Darkling since then has tried to undo the damage he did to our country, and I’m no different.” He turned to me then, his expression serious, the firelight playing over the perfect planes of his features. “I’ve spent my life searching for a way to make things right. You’re the first glimmer of hope I’ve had in a long time.”

“Me?”

“The world is changing, Alina. Muskets and rifles are just the beginning. I’ve seen the weapons they’re developing

in Kerch and Fjerda. The age of Grisha power is coming to an end.”

It was a terrifying thought. “But . . . but what about the First Army? They have rifles. They have weapons.”

“Where do you think their rifles come from? Their ammunition? Every time we cross the Fold, we lose lives. A divided Ravka won’t survive the new age. We need our ports. We need our harbors. And only you can give them back to us.”

“How?” I pleaded. “How am I supposed to do that?”

“By helping me destroy the Shadow Fold.”

I shook my head. “You’re crazy. This is all crazy.”

I looked up through the broken beams of the barn’s roof to the night sky. It was full of stars, but I could only see the endless reaches of darkness between them. I imagined myself standing in the dead silence of the Shadow Fold, blind, frightened, with nothing to protect me but my supposed power. I thought of the Black Heretic. He had created the Fold, a Darkling, just like the one who sat watching me so closely in the firelight.

“What about that thing you did?” I asked before I could lose my nerve. “To the Fjerdan?”

He looked back into the fire. “It’s called the Cut. It requires great power and great focus; it’s something few Grisha can do.”

I rubbed my arms, trying to stave off the chill that had taken hold of me.

He glanced at me and then back to the fire. “If I had cut him down with a sword, would that make it any better?”

Would it? I had seen countless horrors in the last few days. But even after the nightmares of the Fold, the image that stayed with me, that reared up in my dreams and chased me into waking, was of the bearded man’s severed body, swaying in the dappled sunlight before it toppled onto me.

“I don’t know,” I said quietly.

Something flashed across his face, something that looked like anger or maybe even pain. Without another word, he rose and walked away from me.

I watched him disappear into the darkness and felt suddenly guilty. *Don’t be a fool*, I chastised myself. *He’s the Darkling. He’s the second most powerful man in Ravka. He’s one hundred and twenty years old! You didn’t hurt his feelings.* But I thought of the look that had flickered over his features, the shame in his voice when he’d talked about the Black Heretic, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that I had failed some kind of test.

TWO DAYS LATER, just after dawn, we passed through a massive gate and the famous double walls of Os Alta.

Mal and I had taken our training not far from here, in the military stronghold at Poliznaya, but we had never been inside the city itself. Os Alta was reserved for the very

wealthy, for the homes of military and government officials, their families, their mistresses, and all the businesses that catered to them.

I felt a twinge of disappointment as we passed shuttered shops, a wide marketplace where a few vendors were already setting up their stalls, and crowded rows of narrow houses. Os Alta was called the dream city. It was the capital of Ravka, home to the Grisha and the King's Grand Palace. But if anything, it just looked like a bigger, dirtier version of the market town at Keramzin.

All that changed when we reached the bridge. It spanned a wide canal where little boats bobbed in the water beneath it. And on the other side, rising from the mist, white and gleaming, lay the other Os Alta. As we crossed the bridge, I saw that it could be raised to turn the canal into a giant moat that would separate the dream city before us from the common mess of the market town that lay behind.

When we reached the other side of the canal, it was as if we had passed into another world. Everywhere I looked, I saw fountains and plazas, verdant parks, and broad boulevards lined with perfect rows of trees. Here and there, I saw lights on in the lower stories of the grand houses, where kitchen fires were being lit and the day's work was starting.

The streets began to slope upward, and as we climbed higher, the houses became larger and more imposing, until finally we arrived at another wall and another set of gates, these wrought in gleaming gold and emblazoned with the

King's double eagle. Along the wall, I could see heavily armed men at their posts, a grim reminder that for all its beauty, Os Alta was still the capital of a country that had long been at war.

The gate swung open.

We rode up a broad path paved in glittering gravel and bordered by rows of elegant trees. To the left and right, stretching into the distance, I saw manicured gardens, rich with green and hazy in the mist of early morning. Above it all, atop a series of marble terraces and golden fountains, loomed the Grand Palace, the Ravkan King's winter home.

When we finally reached the huge double-eagle fountain at its base, the Darkling brought his horse up beside mine.

"So what do you think of it?" he asked.

I glanced at him, then back at the elaborate facade. It was larger than any building I had ever seen, its terraces crowded with statues, its three stories gleaming with row after row of shining windows, each ornamented extensively in what I suspected was real gold.

"It's very . . . grand?" I said carefully.

He looked at me, a little smile playing on his lips. "I think it's the ugliest building I've ever seen," he said, and nudged his horse forward.

We followed a path that curved behind the palace and deeper into the grounds, passing a hedge maze, a rolling lawn with a columned temple at its center, and a vast greenhouse, its windows clouded with condensation. Then we entered a

thick stand of trees, large enough that it felt like a small wood, and passed through a long, dark corridor where the branches made a dense, braided roof above us.

The hair rose on my arms. I had the same feeling that I'd had as we were crossing the canal, that sense of crossing the boundary between two worlds.

When we emerged from the tunnel into weak sunshine, I looked down a gentle slope and saw a building like nothing I'd ever seen.

“Welcome to the Little Palace,” said the Darkling.

It was a strange name, because though it was smaller than the Grand Palace, the “Little” Palace was still huge. It rose from the trees surrounding it like something carved from an enchanted forest, a cluster of dark wood walls and golden domes. As we drew closer, I saw that every inch of it was covered in intricate carvings of birds and flowers, twisting vines, and magical beasts.

A charcoal-clad group of servants waited on the steps. I dismounted, and one of them rushed forward to take my horse, while others pushed open a large set of double doors. As we passed through them, I couldn't resist the urge to reach out and touch the exquisite carvings. They had been inlaid with mother-of-pearl so that they sparkled in the early-morning light. How many hands, how many years had it taken to create such a place?

We passed through an entry chamber and then into a vast hexagonal room with four long tables arranged in a

square at its center. Our footsteps echoed off the stone floor, and a massive gold dome seemed to float above us at an impossible height.

The Darkling took aside one of the servants, an older woman in a charcoal dress, and spoke to her in hushed tones. Then he gave me a small bow and strode off across the hall, followed by his men.

I felt a surge of annoyance. The Darkling had said little to me since that night in the barn, and he'd given me no idea what I might expect once we arrived. But I didn't have the nerve or the energy to run after him, so I meekly followed the woman in gray through another pair of double doors and into one of the smaller towers.

When I saw all the stairs, I almost broke down and wept. *Maybe I'll just ask if I can stay down here in the middle of the hall*, I thought miserably. Instead, I put my hand on the carved banister and dragged myself upward, my stiff body protesting every step. When we reached the top, I felt like celebrating by lying down and taking a nap, but the servant was already moving down the hallway. We passed door after door, until finally we reached a chamber where another uniformed maid stood waiting by an open doorway.

Dimly, I registered a large room, heavy golden curtains, a fire burning in a beautifully tiled grate, but all I really cared about was the huge canopied bed.

“Can I get you anything? Something to eat?” asked the woman. I shook my head. I just wanted sleep.

“Very good,” she said, and nodded to the maid, who curtsied and disappeared down the hall. “Then I’ll let you rest. Make sure to lock your door.”

I blinked.

“As a precaution,” said the woman and left, closing the door gently behind her.

A precaution against what? I wondered. But I was too tired to think about it. I locked the door, peeled off the *kefta* and my boots, and fell into bed.