The *New York Times*–Bestselling

Grisha Trilogy

Leigh Bardugo

Henry Holt Square Fish

THE GRISHA TRILOGY

LEIGH BARDUGO

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Table of Contents

About the Author

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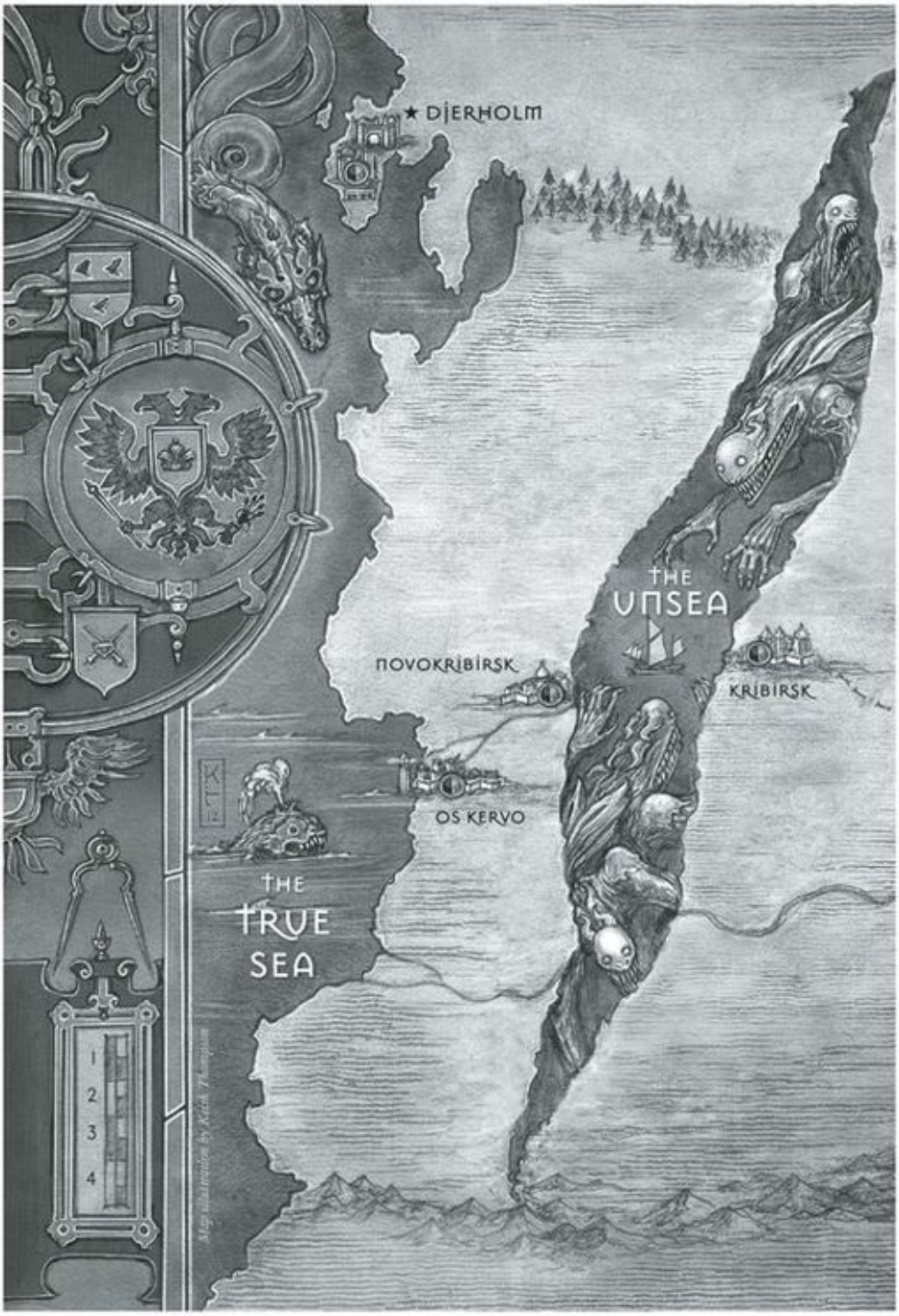
SHADOW AND BONE

LEIGH BARDUGO

For my grandfather:
Tell me some lies.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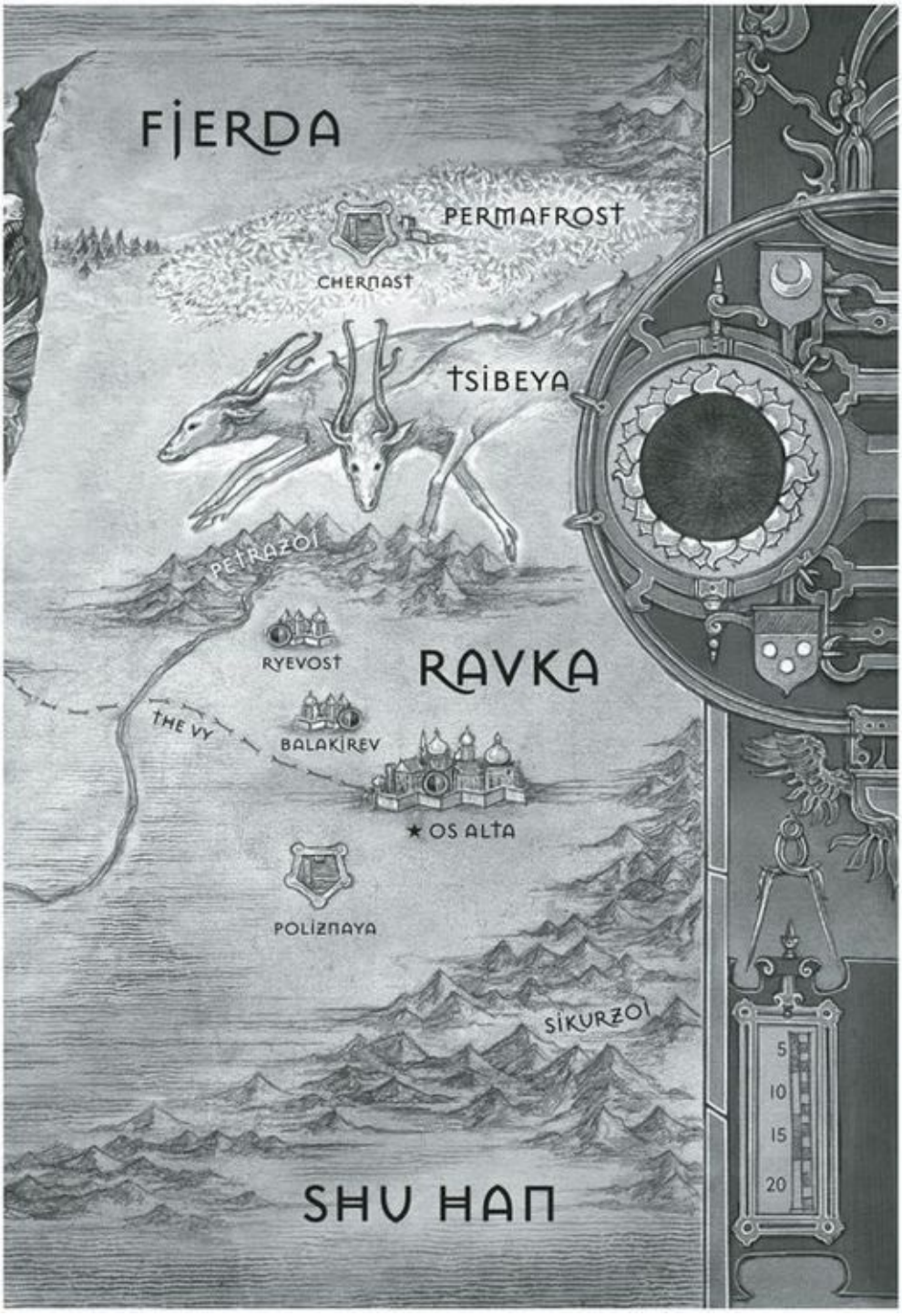
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POLIZNAYA
SIKURZOI
SHU HAN
5
10
15
20

THE
GRISHA
SOLDIERS OF THE SECOND ARMY
MASTERS OF THE SMALL SCIENCE
CORPORALKI
(THE ORDER OF THE LIVING AND THE DEAD)
Heartrenders
Healers
ETHEREALKI
(THE ORDER OF SUMMONERS)
Squallers
Inferni
Tidemakers
MATERIALKI
(THE ORDER OF FABRIKATORS)
Durasts
Alkemi

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 grownups 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 unmistakeable 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 groused. “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 drydocks 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.

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 sandskiffs 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

I WOKE 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 heavyset Grisha. He wore the purple *kefta* 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 Heartrender 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.

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 birchwood 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.

CHAPTER 6

I DREAMED THAT I was back in Keramzin, slipping through the darkened hallways on stockinged feet, trying to find Mal. I could hear him calling to me, but his voice never seemed to get any closer. Finally, I reached the top floor and the door to the old blue bedroom where we liked to sit in the window seat and look out at our meadow. I heard Mal laughing. I threw open the door … and screamed. There was blood everywhere. The volcra was perched on the window seat and, as it turned on me and opened its horrible jaws, I saw that it had gray quartz eyes.

I bolted awake, my heart thudding in my chest, and looked around in terror. For a moment I couldn't remember where I was. Then I groaned and flopped back onto the pillows.

I had just started to doze off again when someone began pounding on the door.

"Go away," I mumbled from beneath the covers. But the pounding only grew louder. I sat up, feeling my whole body shriek in rebellion. My head ached, and when I tried to stand, my legs did not want to cooperate.

"All right!" I shouted. "I'm coming!" The knocking stopped. I stumbled over to the door and reached for the lock, but then I hesitated. "Who is it?"

"I don't have time for this," a female voice snapped from behind the door. "Open. Now!"

I shrugged. Let them kill me or kidnap me or whatever they wanted. As long as I didn't have to ride a horse or climb stairs, I wouldn't complain.

I had barely unlocked the door when it flew open and a tall girl pushed past me, surveying the room and then me with a critical eye. She was easily the most beautiful person I'd ever seen. Her wavy hair was deepest auburn, her irises large and golden; her skin was so smooth and flawless that she looked as if her perfect cheekbones had been carved from marble. She wore a cream-colored *kefta* embroidered in gold and lined in reddish fox fur.

"All Saints," she said, looking me over. "Have you even bathed? And what happened to your face?"

I flushed bright red, my hand flying to the bruise on my cheek. It had been nearly a week since I'd left camp, and longer since I'd bathed or brushed my hair. I was covered in dirt and blood and the smell of horses. "I—"

But the girl was already shouting orders to the servants who had followed her into the room. "Draw a bath. A hot one. I'll need my kit, and get her out of those clothes."

The servants descended upon me, pulling at my buttons.

"Hey!" I shouted, batting their hands away.

The Grisha rolled her eyes. "Hold her down if you have to."

The servants redoubled their efforts.

"Stop!" I shouted, backing away from them. They hesitated, looking from me to the girl.

Honestly, nothing sounded better than a hot bath and a change of clothes, but I wasn't about to let some tyrannical redhead push me around. "*What* is going on? Who are you?"

"I don't have ti—"

"Make time!" I snapped. "I've covered almost two hundred miles on horseback. I haven't had a good night's sleep in a week, and I've nearly been killed twice. So before I do anything else, you're going to have to tell me who you are and why it's so very important that you get my clothes off."

The redhead took a deep breath and said slowly, as if she were speaking to a child, "My name is Genya. In less than an hour, you will be presented to the King and it is my job to make you look presentable."

My anger evaporated. I was going to meet the King? "Oh," I said meekly.

"Yes, 'oh.' So, shall we?"

I nodded mutely, and Genya clapped her hands. The servants flew into action, yanking at my clothes and

dragging me into the bathroom. Last night I'd been too tired to notice the room, but now, even shivering and scared witless at the prospect of having to meet a king, I marveled at the tiny bronze tiles that rippled over every surface and the sunken oval tub of beaten copper that the servants were filling with steaming water. Beside the tub, the wall was covered in a mosaic of shells and shimmering abalone.

"In! In!" said one of the servants, giving me a nudge.

I climbed in. The water was painfully hot, but I endured it rather than try to ease in slowly. Military life had long ago cured me of most of my modesty, but there was something very different about being the only naked person in the room, especially when everyone kept shooting curious glances at me.

I squeaked as one of the servants grabbed my head and began furiously washing my hair. Another leaned over the tub and started scrubbing at my nails.

Once I adjusted to it, the heat of the water felt good on my aching body. I hadn't had a hot bath in well over a year, and I had never even dreamed that there might be such a tub. Clearly, being Grisha had its benefits. I could have spent an hour just paddling around. But once I had been thoroughly dunked and scrubbed, a servant yanked my arm and ordered, "Out! Out!"

Reluctantly, I climbed from the tub, letting the women dry me roughly with thick towels. One of the younger servants stepped forward with a heavy velvet robe and led me into the bedroom. Then she and the others backed out the door, leaving me alone with Genya.

I watched the redhead warily. She had thrown open the curtains and pulled an elaborately carved wooden table and chair over by the windows.

"Sit," she commanded. I bridled at her tone, but I obeyed.

A small trunk lay open by her hand, its contents spread out on the tabletop: squat glass jars full of what looked like berries, leaves, and colored powders. I didn't have a chance to investigate further, because Genya took hold of my chin, peering closely at my face and turning my bruised cheek toward the light from the window. She took a breath and let her fingers travel over my skin. I felt the same prickling sensation I'd experienced when the Healer took care of my wounds from the Fold.

Long minutes passed as I clenched my hands into fists to keep from scratching. Then Genya stepped back and the itching receded. She handed me a small golden hand mirror. The bruise was completely gone. I pressed the skin tentatively, but there was no soreness.

"Thank you," I said, setting the mirror down and starting to stand. But Genya pushed me right back down into the chair.

"Where do you think you're going? We're not done."

"But—"

"If the Darkling just wanted you healed, he would have sent a Healer."

"You're not a Healer?"

"I'm not wearing red, am I?" Genya retorted, an edge of bitterness to her voice. She gestured to herself. "I'm a Tailor."

I was baffled. I realized I'd never seen a Grisha in a white *kefta*. "You're going to make me a dress?"

Genya blew out an exasperated breath. "Not the robes! *This*," she said, waving her long, graceful fingers before her face. "You don't think I was born looking like this, do you?"

I stared at the smooth marble perfection of Genya's features as realization set in and, with it, a wave of indignation. "You want to change my face?"

"Not change it. Just … freshen you up a bit."

I scowled. I knew what I looked like. In fact, I was acutely aware of my shortcomings. But I really didn't need a gorgeous Grisha pointing them out to me. And worse was the fact that the Darkling had sent her to do it.

"Forget it," I said, jumping to my feet. "If the Darkling doesn't like the way I look, that's his problem."

"Do you like the way you look?" Genya asked with what seemed to be genuine curiosity.

"Not particularly," I snapped. "But my life has gotten confusing enough without seeing a stranger's face in the mirror."

"It doesn't work that way," Genya said. "I can't make big changes, just small ones. Even out your skin. Do something with that mousy hair of yours. I've perfected myself, but I've had my whole life to do it."

I wanted to argue, but she actually was perfect. "Get out."

Genya cocked her head to one side, studying me. “Why are you taking this so personally?”

“Wouldn’t you?”

“I have no idea. I’ve always been beautiful.”

“And humble too?”

She shrugged. “So I’m beautiful. That doesn’t mean much among Grisha. The Darkling doesn’t care what you look like, just what you can do.”

“Then why did he send you?”

“Because the King loves beauty and the Darkling knows that. In the King’s court, appearances are everything. If you’re to be the salvation of all of Ravka … well, it would be better if you looked the part.”

I crossed my arms and looked out the window. Outside, the sun was shining off a small lake, a tiny island at its center. I had no idea what time it was or how long I’d slept.

Genya walked over to me. “You’re not ugly, you know.”

“Thanks,” I said drily, still staring out at the wooded grounds.

“You just look a little …”

“Tired? Sickly? Skinny?”

“Well,” Genya said reasonably, “you said yourself, you’ve been traveling hard for days and—”

I sighed. “This is how I always look.” I rested my head on the cool glass, feeling the anger and embarrassment drain out of me. What was I fighting for? If I was honest with myself, the prospect of what Genya was offering was tempting. “Fine,” I said. “Do it.”

“Thank you!” exclaimed Genya, clapping her hands together. I looked at her sharply, but there was no sarcasm in her voice or expression. *She’s relieved,* I realized. The Darkling had set Genya a task, and I wondered what might have happened to her if I’d refused. I let her lead me back to the chair.

“Just don’t get carried away,” I said.

“Don’t worry,” said the redhead. “You’ll still look like yourself, just like you’ve had more than a few hours of sleep. I’m very good.”

“I can see that,” I said. I closed my eyes.

“It’s okay,” she said. “You can watch.” She handed me the gold mirror. “But no more talk. And stay still.”

I held up the mirror and watched as Genya’s cool fingertips descended slowly over my forehead. My skin prickled, and I watched with growing amazement as Genya’s hands traveled over my skin. Every blemish, every scrape, every flaw seemed to disappear beneath her fingers. She placed her thumbs beneath my eyes.

“Oh!” I exclaimed in surprise as the dark circles that had plagued me since childhood disappeared.

“Don’t get too excited,” Genya said. “It’s temporary.” She reached for one of the roses on the table and plucked a pale pink petal. She held it up to my cheek, and the color bled from the petal onto my skin, leaving what looked like a pretty flush. Then she held a fresh petal to my lips and repeated the process. “It only lasts a few days,” she informed me. “Now the hair.”

She plucked a long comb made of bone from her trunk along with a glass jar full of something shiny.

Stunned, I asked, “Is that real gold?”

“Of course,” Genya said, lifting a chunk of my dull brown hair. She shook some of the gold leaf onto the crown of my head and, as she pulled the comb through my hair, the gold seemed to dissolve into shimmering strands. As Genya finished with each section, she wound it around her fingers, letting the hair fall in waves.

Finally she stepped back, wearing a smug smile. “Better, no?”

I examined myself in the mirror. My hair shone. My cheeks held a rosy flush. I still wasn’t pretty, but I couldn’t deny the improvement. I wondered what Mal would think if he saw me, then shoved the thought away. “Better,” I agreed grudgingly.

Genya gave a plaintive sigh. “It’s really the best I can do for now.”

“Thanks,” I said tartly, but then Genya winked at me and smiled.

“Besides,” she said, “you don’t want to attract too much attention from the King.” Her voice was light, but I saw a shadow pass over her features as she strode across the room and opened the door to let the servants rush back in.

They pushed me behind an ebony screen inlaid with mother-of-pearl stars so that it resembled a night

sky. In a few moments, I was dressed in a clean tunic and trousers, soft leather boots, and a gray coat. With disappointment, I realized it was just a clean version of my army uniform. There was even a little cartographer's patch showing a compass rose on the right sleeve. My feelings must have shown on my face.

"Not what you expected?" Genya asked with some amusement.

"I just thought …" But what had I thought? Did I really think I belonged in Grisha robes?

"The King expects to see a humble girl plucked from the ranks of his army, an undiscovered treasure. If you appear in a *kefta*, he'll think the Darkling's been hiding you."

"Why would the Darkling hide me?"

Genya shrugged. "For leverage. For profit. Who knows? But the King is … well, you'll see what the King is."

My stomach turned. I was about to be presented to the King. I tried to steady myself, but as Genya hurried me out the door and down the hall, my legs felt leaden and shaky.

Near the bottom of the stairs, she whispered, "If anyone asks, I just helped you get dressed. I'm not supposed to work on Grisha."

"Why not?"

"Because the ridiculous Queen and her more ridiculous court think it's not fair."

I gaped at her. Insulting the Queen could be considered treason, but Genya seemed unconcerned.

When we entered the huge domed hall, it was crowded with Grisha in robes of crimson, purple, and darkest blue. Most of them looked to be around my age, but a few older Grisha were gathered in a corner. Despite the silver in their hair and their lined faces, they were strikingly attractive. In fact, everyone in the room was unnervingly good-looking.

"The Queen may have a point," I murmured.

"Oh, this isn't my handiwork," said Genya.

I frowned. If Genya was telling the truth, then this was just further evidence that I didn't belong here.

Someone had seen us enter the hall, and a hush fell as every eye in the room fastened onto me.

A tall, broad-chested Grisha in red robes came forward. He had deeply tanned skin and seemed to exude good health. He made a low bow and said, "I am Sergei Beznikov."

"I'm—"

"I know who you are, of course," Sergei interrupted, his white teeth flashing. "Come, let me introduce you. You'll be walking with us." He took me by the elbow and began to steer me toward a group of Corporalki.

"She's a Summoner, Sergei," said a girl in a blue *kefta* with flowing brown curls. "She walks with us." There were murmurs of assent from the other Etherealki behind her.

"Marie," said Sergei with an insincere smile, "you can't possibly be suggesting that she enter the hall as a lower-order Grisha."

Marie's alabaster skin went suddenly blotchy, and several of the Summoners got to their feet. "Need I remind you that the Darkling is himself a Summoner?"

"So you're ranking yourself with the Darkling now?"

Marie sputtered, and in an attempt to make peace, I interjected, "Why don't I just go with Genya?"

There were a few low snickers.

"With the Tailor?" Sergei asked, looking aghast.

I glanced at Genya, who simply smiled and shook her head.

"She belongs with us," protested Marie, and argument broke out all around us.

"She'll walk with me," said a low voice, and the room went silent.

CHAPTER 7

I TURNED AND SAW the Darkling standing in an archway, flanked by Ivan and several other Grisha whom I recognized from the journey. Marie and Sergei backed away hastily. The Darkling surveyed the crowd and said, “We are expected.”

Instantly, the room bustled with activity as the Grisha rose and began to file through the large double doors that led outside. They arranged themselves two abreast in a long line. First the Materialki, then the Etherealki, and finally the Corporalki, so that the highest-ranked Grisha would enter the throne room last.

Unsure of what to do, I stayed where I was, watching the crowd. I looked around for Genya, but she seemed to have disappeared. A moment later, the Darkling was beside me. I glanced up at his pale profile, the sharp jaw, the granite eyes.

“You look well rested,” he said.

I bristled. I wasn’t comfortable with what Genya had done, but standing in a room full of beautiful Grisha, I had to admit that I was grateful for it. I still didn’t look like I belonged, but I would have stuck out much worse without Genya’s help.

“Are there other Tailors?” I asked.

“Genya is unique,” he answered, glancing at me. “Like us.”

I ignored the little thrill that went through me at the word *us* and said, “Why isn’t she walking with the rest of the Grisha?”

“Genya must attend to the Queen.”

“Why?”

“When Genya’s abilities began to show themselves, I could have had her choose between becoming a Fabrikator or a Corporalnik. Instead, I cultivated her particular affinity and made a gift of her to the Queen.”

“A gift? So a Grisha is no better than a serf?”

“We all serve someone,” he said, and I was surprised by the harsh edge in his voice. Then he added, “The King will expect a demonstration.”

I felt as if I’d been dunked in ice water. “But I don’t know how to—”

“I don’t expect you to,” he said calmly, moving forward as the last of the red-robed Corporalki disappeared through the door.

We emerged onto the gravel path and into the last of the afternoon sunshine. I was finding it hard to breathe. I felt as if I were walking to my execution. *Maybe I am*, I thought with a surge of dread.

“This isn’t fair,” I whispered angrily. “I don’t know what the King thinks I can do, but it isn’t fair to throw me out there and expect me to just … make things happen.”

“I hope you don’t expect fairness from me, Alina. It isn’t one of my specialties.”

I stared at him. What was I supposed to make out of that?

The Darkling glanced down at me. “Do you really believe I brought you all this way to make a fool out of you? Out of both of us?”

“No,” I admitted.

“And it’s completely out of your hands now, isn’t it?” he said as we made our way through the dark wooded tunnel of branches. That was true too, if not particularly comforting. I had no choice but to trust that he knew what he was doing. I had a sudden unpleasant thought.

“Are you going to cut me again?” I asked.

“I doubt I’ll have to, but it all depends on you.”

I was not reassured.

I tried to calm myself and to slow the beating of my heart but, before I knew it, we had made our way through the grounds and were climbing the white marble steps to the Grand Palace. As we moved through a

spacious entry hall into a long corridor lined with mirrors and ornamented in gold, I thought how different this place was from the Little Palace. Everywhere I looked, I saw marble and gold, soaring walls of white and palest blue, gleaming chandeliers, liveried footmen, polished parquet floors laid out in elaborate geometric designs. It wasn't without beauty, but there was something exhausting about the extravagance of it all. I'd always assumed that Ravka's hungry peasants and poorly supplied soldiers were the result of the Shadow Fold. But as we walked by a tree of jade embellished with diamond leaves, I wasn't so sure.

The throne room was three stories high, every window sparkling with gold double eagles. A long, pale blue carpet ran the length of the room to where the members of the court milled about a raised throne. Many of the men wore military dress, black trousers and white coats laden with medals and ribbons. The women sparkled in gowns of liquid silk with little puffed sleeves and low necklines. Flanking the carpeted aisle, the Grisha stood arranged in their separate orders.

A hush fell as every face turned to me and the Darkling. We walked slowly toward the golden throne. As we drew closer, the King sat up straighter, tense with excitement. He looked to be in his forties, slender and round-shouldered with big watery eyes and a pale mustache. He wore full military dress, a thin sword at his side, his narrow chest covered with medals. Beside him on the raised dais stood a man with a long, dark beard. He wore priest's robes, but a gold double eagle was emblazoned on his chest.

The Darkling gave my arm a gentle squeeze to warn me that we were stopping.

"Your highness, *moi tsar*," he said in clear tones. "Alina Starkov, the Sun Summoner." A rush of murmurs came from the crowd. I wasn't sure if I should bow or curtsy. Ana Kuya had insisted that all the orphans know how to greet the Duke's few noble guests, but somehow, it didn't feel right to curtsy in army-issue trousers. The King saved me from making a blunder when he waved us forward impatiently. "Come, come! Bring her to me."

The Darkling and I walked to the base of the dais.

The King scrutinized me. He frowned, and his lower lip jutted out slightly. "She's very plain."

I flushed and bit my tongue. The King wasn't much to look at either. He was practically chinless, and close up, I could see the broken blood vessels in his nose.

"Show me," the King commanded.

My stomach clenched. I looked at the Darkling. This was it. He nodded at me and spread his arms wide. A tense silence descended as his hands filled with dark, swirling ribbons of blackness that bled into the air. He brought his hands together with a resounding *crack*. Nervous cries burst from the crowd as darkness blanketed the room.

This time, I was better prepared for the dark that engulfed me, but it was still frightening. Instinctively, I reached forward, searching for something to hold on to. The Darkling caught my arm and his bare hand slid into mine. I felt that same powerful certainty wash through me and then the Darkling's call, pure and compelling, demanding an answer. With a mixture of panic and relief, I felt something rising up inside me. This time, I didn't try to fight it. I let it have its way.

Light flooded the throne room, drenching us in warmth and shattering the darkness like black glass. The court erupted into applause. People were weeping and hugging one another. A woman fainted. The King was clapping the loudest, rising from his throne and applauding furiously, his expression exultant.

The Darkling let go of my hand and the light faded.

"Brilliant!" the King shouted. "A miracle!" He descended the steps of the dais, the bearded priest gliding silently behind him, and took my hand in his own, raising it to his wet lips. "My dear girl," he said. "My dear, dear girl." I thought of what Genya had said about the King's attention and felt my skin crawl, but I didn't dare pull my hand away. Soon, though, he had relinquished me and was clapping the Darkling on the back.

"Miraculous, simply miraculous," he effused. "Come, we must make plans immediately."

As the King and the Darkling stepped away to talk, the priest drifted forward. "A miracle indeed," he said, staring at me with a disturbing intensity. His eyes were so brown they were almost black, and he smelled faintly of mildew and incense. *Like a tomb*, I thought with a shiver. I was grateful when he slithered away to join the King.

I was quickly surrounded by beautifully dressed men and women, all wishing to make my acquaintance and to touch my hand or my sleeve. They crowded on every side of me, jostling and pushing to get closer.

Just as I felt fresh panic setting in, Genya appeared by my side. But my relief was short-lived.

"The Queen wants to meet you," she murmured into my ear. She steered me through the crowd and out a narrow side door into the hall, then into a jewel-like sitting room where the Queen reclined on a divan, a snuffling dog with a pushed-in face cradled on her lap.

The Queen was beautiful, with glossy blond hair in a perfect coiffure, her delicate features cold and lovely. But there was also something a little odd about her face. Her irises seemed a little too blue, her hair too yellow, her skin too smooth. I wondered just how much work Genya had done on her.

She was surrounded by ladies in exquisite gowns of petal pink and soft blue, their low necklines embroidered with gilded thread and tiny riverpearls. And yet, they all paled beside Genya in her simple cream wool *kefta*, her bright red hair burning like a flame.

"*Moya tsaritsa*," Genya said, sinking into a low, graceful curtsy. "The Sun Summoner."

This time, I had to make a choice. I executed a small bow and heard a few low titters from the ladies.

"Charming," said the Queen. "I loathe pretense." It took all my willpower not to snort at this. "You are from a Grisha family?" she asked.

I glanced nervously at Genya, who nodded encouragement.

"No," I said, and then quickly added, "*moya tsaritsa*."

"A peasant then?"

I nodded.

"We are so lucky in our people," the Queen said, and the ladies murmured soft assent. "Your family must be notified of your new status. Genya will send a messenger."

Genya nodded and gave another little curtsy. I thought about just nodding right along with her, but I wasn't sure I wanted to start lying to royalty.

"Actually, your highness, I was raised in Duke Keramsov's household."

The ladies buzzed in surprise, and even Genya looked curious.

"An orphan!" exclaimed the Queen, sounding delighted. "How marvelous!"

I wasn't sure that I would describe my parents being dead as "marvelous," but at a loss for anything else to say, I mumbled, "Thank you, *moya tsaritsa*."

"This all must seem so very strange to you. Take care that life at court does not corrupt you the way it has others," she said, her blue marble eyes sliding to Genya. The insult was unmistakeable, but Genya's expression betrayed nothing, a fact which did not seem to please the Queen. She dismissed us with a flick of her ring-laden fingers. "Go now."

As Genya led me back into the hallway, I thought I heard her mutter, "Old cow." But before I could decide whether or not to ask her about what the Queen had said, the Darkling was there, steering us down an empty corridor.

"How did you fare with the Queen?" he asked.

"I have no idea," I said honestly. "Everything she said was perfectly nice, but the whole time she was looking at me as if I were something her dog spit up."

Genya laughed, and the Darkling's lips quirked in what was nearly a smile.

"Welcome to court," he said.

"I'm not sure I like it."

"No one does," he admitted. "But we all make a good show of it."

"The King seemed pleased," I offered.

"The King is a child."

My mouth fell open in shock and I looked around nervously, afraid someone had overheard. These people seemed to speak treason as easily as breathing. Genya didn't look remotely disturbed by the Darkling's words.

The Darkling must have noticed my discomfort, because he said, "But today, you've made him a very happy child."

"Who was that bearded man with the King?" I asked, eager to change the subject.

"The Apparat?"

"Is he a priest?"

"Of a sort. Some say he's a fanatic. Others say he's a fraud."

"And you?"

"I say he has his uses." The Darkling turned to Genya. "I think we've asked enough of Alina for today," he said. "Take her back to her chambers and have her fitted for her *kefta*. She will start instruction tomorrow."

Genya gave a little bow and laid her hand on my arm to lead me away. I was overcome by excitement and relief. My power (*my* power, it still didn't seem real) had shown up again and kept me from making a fool of myself. I'd made it through my introduction to the King and my audience with the Queen. And I was going to be given a Grisha's *kefta*.

"Genya," the Darkling called after us, "the *kefta* will be black."

Genya drew a startled breath. I looked at her stunned face and then at the Darkling, who was already turning to go.

"Wait!" I called before I could stop myself. The Darkling halted and turned those slate-colored eyes on me. "I … If it would be all right, I'd prefer to have blue robes, Summoners' blue."

"Alina!" exclaimed Genya, clearly horrified.

But the Darkling held up a hand to silence her. "Why?" he asked, his expression unreadable.

"I already feel like I don't belong here. I think it might be easier if I weren't … singled out."

"Are you so anxious to be like everyone else?"

My chin lifted. He clearly didn't approve, but I wasn't going to back down. "I just don't want to be more conspicuous than I already am."

The Darkling looked at me for a long moment. I wasn't sure if he was thinking over what I'd said or trying to intimidate me, but I gritted my teeth and returned his gaze.

Abruptly, he nodded. "As you wish," he said. "Your *kefta* will be blue." And without another word, he turned his back on us and disappeared down the hall.

Genya stared at me, aghast.

"What?" I asked defensively.

"Alina," Genya said slowly, "no other Grisha has ever been permitted to wear a Darkling's colors."

"Do you think he's angry?"

"That's hardly the point! It would have been a mark of your standing, of the Darkling's esteem. It would have placed you high above all others."

"Well, I don't want to be high above all others."

Genya threw up her hands in exasperation and took me by the elbow, leading me back through the palace to the main entrance. Two liveried servants opened the large golden doors for us. With a jolt, I realized that they were wearing white and gold, the same colors as Genya's *kefta*, a servant's colors. No wonder she thought I was crazy for refusing the Darkling's offer. And maybe she was right.

The thought stayed with me through the long walk back across the grounds to the Little Palace. Dusk was falling, and servants were lighting the lamps that lined the gravel path. By the time we climbed the stairs to my room, my stomach was in knots.

I sat down by the window, staring out at the grounds. While I brooded, Genya rang for a servant, whom she sent to find a seamstress and order up a dinner tray. But before she sent the girl away, she turned to me. "Maybe you'd prefer to wait and dine with the Grisha later tonight?" she asked.

I shook my head. I was far too tired and overwhelmed to even think about being around another crowd of people. "But would you stay?" I asked her.

She hesitated.

"You don't have to, of course," I said quickly. "I'm sure you'll want to eat with everyone else."

"Not at all. Dinner for two then," she said imperiously, and the servant raced off. Genya closed the door and walked to the little dressing table, where she started straightening the items on its surface: a comb, a brush, a pen and pot of ink. I didn't recognize any of them, but someone must have had them brought to my room for me.

With her back still to me, Genya said, "Alina, you should understand that, when you start your training tomorrow … well, Corporalki don't eat with Summoners. Summoners don't dine with Fabrikators, and—"

I felt instantly defensive. "Look, if you don't want to stay for dinner, I promise not to cry into my soup."

"No!" she exclaimed. "It's not that at all! I'm just trying to explain the way things work."

“Forget it.”

Genya blew out a frustrated breath. “You don’t understand. It’s a great honor to be asked to dine with you, but the other Grisha might not approve.”

“Why?”

Genya sighed and sat down on one of the carved chairs. “Because I’m the Queen’s pet. Because they don’t consider what I do valuable. A lot of reasons.”

I considered what the other reasons might be and if they had something to do with the King. I thought of the liveried servants standing at every doorway in the Grand Palace, all of them dressed in white and gold. What must it be like for Genya, isolated from her own kind but not a true member of the court?

“It’s funny,” I said after a while. “I always thought that being beautiful would make life so much easier.”

“Oh it does,” Genya said, and laughed. I couldn’t help but laugh, too.

We were interrupted by a knock on the door, and the seamstress soon had us occupied with fittings and measurements. When she had finished and was gathering up her muslin and pins, Genya whispered, “It isn’t too late, you know. You could still—”

But I cut her off. “Blue,” I said firmly, though my stomach clenched again.

The seamstress left, and we turned our attention to dinner. The food was less alien than I’d expected, the kind of food we’d eaten on feast days at Keramzin: sweet pea porridge, quail roasted in honey, and fresh figs. I found I was hungrier than I’d ever been and had to resist picking up my plate to lick it.

Genya maintained a steady stream of chatter during dinner, mostly about Grisha gossip. I didn’t know any of the people she was talking about, but I was grateful not to have to make conversation, so I nodded and smiled when necessary. When the last servants left, taking our dinner dishes with them, I couldn’t suppress a yawn, and Genya rose.

“I’ll come get you for breakfast in the morning. It will take a while for you to learn your way around. The Little Palace can be a bit of a maze.” Then her perfect lips turned up in a mischievous smile. “You should try to rest. Tomorrow you meet Baghra.”

“Baghra?”

Genya grinned wickedly. “Oh yes. She’s an absolute treat.”

Before I could ask what she meant, she gave me a little wave and slipped out the door. I bit my lip. Exactly what was in store for me tomorrow?

As the door closed behind Genya, I felt fatigue creep over me. The thrill of knowing that my power might actually be real, the excitement of meeting the King and Queen, the strange marvels of the Grand Palace and the Little Palace had kept my exhaustion at bay, but now it returned—and, with it, a huge, echoing feeling of loneliness.

I undressed, hung my uniform neatly on a peg behind the star-speckled screen, and placed my shiny new boots beneath it. I rubbed the brushed wool of the coat between my fingers, hoping to find some sense of familiarity, but the fabric felt wrong, too stiff, too new. I suddenly missed my dirty old coat.

I changed into a nightdress of soft white cotton and rinsed my face. As I patted it dry, I caught a glimpse of myself in the glass above the basin. Maybe it was the lamplight, but I thought I looked even better than when Genya had first finished her work on me. After a moment, I realized I was just gawking at myself in the mirror and had to smile. For a girl who hated looking at herself, I was at risk of becoming vain.

I climbed onto the high bed, slid beneath the heavy silks and furs, and blew out the lamp. Distantly, I heard a door closing, voices calling their goodnights, the sounds of the Little Palace going to sleep. I stared into the darkness. I’d never had a room to myself before. In Keramzin, I’d slept in an old portrait hall that had been converted into a dormitory, surrounded by countless other girls. In the army, I’d slept in the barracks or tents with the other Surveyors. My new room felt huge and empty. In the silence, all the events of the day rushed in on me, and tears pricked my eyes.

Maybe I would wake tomorrow and find that it had all been a dream, that Alexei was still alive and Mal was unhurt, that no one had tried to kill me, that I’d never met the King and Queen or seen the Apparat, or felt the Darkling’s hand on the nape of my neck. Maybe I would wake to smell the campfires burning, safe in my own clothes, on my little cot, and I could tell Mal all about this strange and terrifying, but very beautiful, dream.

I rubbed my thumb over the scar in my palm and heard Mal’s voice saying, “We’ll be okay, Alina. We

always are.”

“I hope so, Mal,” I whispered into my pillow and let my tears carry me to sleep.

CHAPTER 8

AFTER A RESTLESS NIGHT, I woke early and couldn't get back to sleep. I'd forgotten to close the curtains when I went to bed, and sunlight was streaming through the windows. I thought about getting up to close them and trying to go back to sleep, but I just didn't have the energy. I wasn't sure if it was worry and fear that had kept me tossing and turning, or the unfamiliar luxury of sleeping in a real bed after so many months spent on wobbly canvas cots or with nothing but a bedroll between me and the hard ground.

I stretched and reached out to run a finger over the intricately carved birds and flowers on the bedpost. High above me, the canopy of the bed opened to reveal a ceiling painted in bold colors, an elaborate pattern of leaves and flowers and birds in flight. As I was staring up at it, counting the leaves of a juniper wreath and beginning to doze off again, a soft knock came at the door. I threw off the heavy covers and slid my feet into the little fur-lined slippers set out by the bed.

When I opened the door, a servant was waiting with a stack of clothing, a pair of boots, and a dark blue *kefta* draped over her arm. I barely had time to thank her before she bobbed a curtsy and disappeared.

I closed the door and set the boots and clothing down on the bed. The new *kefta* I hung carefully over the dressing screen.

For a while, I just looked at it. I'd spent my life in clothes passed down from older orphans, and then in the standard-issue uniform of the First Army. I'd certainly never had anything made for me. And I'd never dreamed that I would wear a Grisha's *kefta*.

I washed my face and combed my hair. I wasn't sure when Genya would be arriving, so I didn't know if I had time for a bath. I was desperate for a glass of tea, but I didn't have the courage to ring for a servant. Finally, there was nothing left for me to do.

I started with the pile of clothes on the bed: close-fitting breeches of a fabric I'd never encountered that seemed to fit and move like a second skin, a long blouse of thin cotton that tied with a dark blue sash, and boots. But to call them boots didn't seem right. I'd owned boots. These were something else entirely, made of the softest black leather and fitted perfectly to my calves. They were strange clothes, similar to what peasant men and farmers wore. But the fabrics were finer and more expensive than any peasant could ever hope to afford.

When I was dressed, I eyed the *kefta*. Was I really going to put that on? Was I really going to be a Grisha? It didn't seem possible.

It's just a coat, I chided myself.

I took a deep breath, pulled the *kefta* off the screen, and slipped it on. It was lighter than it looked, and like the other clothes, it fit perfectly. I fastened the little hidden buttons in the front and stepped back to try to look at myself in the mirror above the basin. The *kefta* was deepest midnight blue and fell nearly to my feet. The sleeves were wide, and though it was a lot like a coat, it was so elegant I felt as if I were wearing a gown. Then I noticed the embroidery at the cuffs. Like all Grisha, the Etherealki indicated their designation within their order by color of embroidery: pale blue for Tidemakers, red for Inferni, and silver for Squallers. My cuffs were embroidered in gold. I ran my finger over the gleaming threads, feeling a sharp twinge of anxiety, and nearly jumped when a knock sounded at the door.

"Very nice," said Genya when I opened the door. "But you would have looked better in black."

I did the graceful thing and stuck my tongue out at her, then hurried to follow as she swept down the hallway and descended the stairs. Genya led me to the same domed room where we had gathered the previous afternoon for the processional. It wasn't nearly as crowded today, but there was still a lively buzz of conversation. In the corners, Grisha clustered around samovars and lounged on divans, warming themselves by elaborately tiled ovens. Others breakfasted at the four long tables arranged in a square at the room's center. Again, a hush seemed to fall as we entered, but this time people at least pretended to carry on

their conversations as we passed.

Two girls in Summoners' robes swooped down on us. I recognized Marie from her argument with Sergei before the processional.

"Alina!" she said. "We weren't properly introduced yesterday. I'm Marie, and this is Nadia." She gestured to the apple-cheeked girl beside her, who smiled toothily at me. Marie looped her arm through mine, deliberately turning her back on Genya. "Come sit with us!"

I frowned and opened my mouth to protest, but Genya simply shook her head and said, "Go on. You belong with the Etherealki. I'll fetch you after breakfast to give you a tour."

"We can show her around—" began Marie.

But Genya cut her off. "To give you a tour *as the Darkling requested*."

Marie flushed. "What are you, her maid?"

"Something like that," Genya said, and walked off to pour herself a glass of tea.

"Far above herself," said Nadia with a little sniff.

"Worse every day," Marie agreed. Then she turned to me and beamed. "You must be starving!"

She led me to one of the long tables, and as we approached, two servants stepped forward to pull out chairs for us.

"We sit here, at the right hand of the Darkling," said Marie, pride in her voice, gesturing down the length of the table where more Grisha in blue *kefta* sat. "The Corporalki sit there," she said with a disdainful glance at the table opposite ours, where a glowering Sergei and a few other red-robed figures were eating breakfast.

It occurred to me that if we were at the right hand of the Darkling, the Corporalki were just as close to him on the left, but I didn't mention that.

The Darkling's table was empty, the only sign of his presence a large ebony chair. When I asked if he would be eating breakfast with us, Nadia shook her head vigorously.

"Oh no! He hardly ever dines with us," she said.

I raised my eyebrows. All this fuss about who sat nearest the Darkling, and he couldn't be bothered to show up?

Plates of rye bread and pickled herring were placed in front of us, and I had to stifle a gag. I hate herring. Luckily, there was plenty of bread and, I saw with astonishment, sliced plums that must have come from a hothouse. A servant brought us hot tea from one of the large samovars.

"Sugar!" I exclaimed as he set a little bowl before me.

Marie and Nadia exchanged a glance and I blushed. Sugar had been rationed in Ravka for the last hundred years, but apparently it wasn't a novelty in the Little Palace.

Another group of Summoners joined us and, after brief introductions, began peppering me with questions.

Where was I from? The North. (Mal and I never lied about where we were from. We just didn't tell the whole truth.)

Was I really a mapmaker? Yes.

Had I really been attacked by Fjerdans? Yes.

How many volcra had I killed? None.

They all seemed disappointed by this last answer, particularly the boys.

"But I heard you killed hundreds of them when the skiff was attacked!" protested a boy named Ivo with the sleek features of a mink.

"Well, I didn't," I said, and then considered. "At least, I don't think I did. I … um … kind of fainted."

"You *fainted*?" Ivo looked appalled.

I was exceedingly grateful when I felt a tap on my shoulder and saw that Genya had come to my rescue.

"Shall we?" she asked, ignoring the others.

I mumbled my goodbyes and quickly escaped, conscious of their stares following us across the room.

"How was breakfast?" Genya asked.

"Awful."

Genya made a disgusted sound. "Herring and rye?"

I'd been thinking more about the interrogation, but I just nodded.

She wrinkled her nose. “Vile.”

I eyed her suspiciously. “What did *you* eat?”

Genya looked over her shoulder to make sure no one was within earshot and whispered, “One of the cooks has a daughter with terrible spots. I took care of them for her, and now she sends me the same pastries they prepare for the Grand Palace every morning. They’re divine.”

I smiled and shook my head. The other Grisha might look down on Genya, but she had her own kind of power and influence.

“But don’t say anything about it,” Genya added. “The Darkling is very keen on the idea that we all eat hearty peasant fare. Saints forbid we forget we’re *real* Ravkans.”

I restrained a snort. The Little Palace was a storybook version of serf life, no more like the real Ravka than the glitter and gilt of the royal court. The Grisha seemed obsessed with emulating serf ways, right down to the clothes we wore beneath our *kefta.* But there was something a little silly about eating “hearty peasant fare” off porcelain plates, beneath a dome inlaid with real gold. And what peasant wouldn’t pick pastry over pickled fish?

“I won’t say a word,” I promised.

“Good! If you’re very nice to me, I might even share,” Genya said with a wink. “Now, these doors lead to the library and the workrooms.” She gestured to a massive set of double doors in front of us. “That way to get back to your room,” she said, pointing to the right. “And that way to the Grand Palace,” she said, pointing to the double doors on the left. Genya started to lead me toward the library.

“But what about that way?” I asked, nodding to the closed double doors behind the Darkling’s table.

“If those doors open, pay attention. They lead to the Darkling’s council room and his quarters.”

When I looked more closely at the heavily carved doors, I could make out the Darkling’s symbol hidden in the tangle of vines and running animals. I tore myself away and hurried after Genya, who was already on her way out of the domed hall.

I followed her across a corridor to another set of enormous double doors. This pair had been carved to look like the cover of an old book, and when Genya pulled them open, I gasped.

The library was two stories high, its walls lined from floor to ceiling with books. A balcony ran around the second story, and its dome was made entirely of glass so that the whole room glowed with morning light. A few reading chairs and small tables were set by the walls. At the room’s center, directly beneath the sparkling glass dome, was a round table ringed by a circular bench.

“You’ll have to come here for history and theory,” Genya said, leading me around the table and across the room. “I finished with all that years ago. So boring.” Then she laughed. “Close your mouth. You look like a trout.”

I snapped my mouth shut, but that didn’t stop me from looking around in awe. The Duke’s library had seemed so grand to me, but compared to this place it was a hovel. All of Keramzin seemed shabby and faded viewed beside the beauty of the Little Palace, but somehow it made me sad to think of it that way. I wondered what Mal’s eyes would see.

My steps slowed. Were the Grisha allowed guests? Could Mal come visit me in Os Alta? He had his duties with his regiment, but if he could get leave … The thought filled me with excitement. The Little Palace didn’t seem quite so intimidating when I thought of walking its corridors with my best friend.

We left the library through another set of double doors and passed into a dark hallway. Genya turned left, but I glanced down the hall to the right and saw two Corporalki emerge from a large set of red-lacquered doors. They gave us unfriendly looks before they disappeared into the shadows.

“Come on,” Genya whispered, grabbing hold of my arm and pulling me in the opposite direction.

“Where do those doors lead?” I asked.

“To the anatomy rooms.”

A chill rippled through me. The Corporalki. Healers … and Heartrenders. They had to practice somewhere, but I hated to think what that practice might entail. I quickened my steps to catch up with Genya. I didn’t want to get caught by myself anywhere near those red doors.

At the end of the hallway, we stopped at a set of doors made of light wood, exquisitely carved with birds and blooming flowers. The flowers had yellow diamonds at their centers, and the birds had what looked like amethyst eyes. The door handles were wrought to look like two perfect hands. Genya took hold of one and

pushed the door open.

The Fabrikators' workshops had been positioned to make the most of the clear eastern light, and the walls were made up almost entirely of windows. The brightly lit rooms reminded me a bit of a Documents Tent, but instead of atlases, stacks of paper, and bottles of ink, the large worktables were laden with bolts of fabric, chunks of glass, thin skeins of gold and steel, and strangely twisted hunks of rock. In one corner, terrariums held exotic flowers, insects, and—I saw with a shudder—snakes.

The Materialki in their dark purple *kefta* sat hunched over their work, but looked up to stare their fill at me as we passed. At one table, two female Fabrikators were working a molten lump of what I thought might become Grisha steel, their table scattered with bits of diamond and jars full of silkworms. At another table, a Fabrikator with a cloth tied over his nose and mouth was measuring out a thick black liquid that stank of tar. Genya led me past all of them to where a Fabrikator hunched over a set of tiny glass discs. He was pale, reed-thin, and in dire need of a haircut.

"Hello, David," said Genya.

David looked up, blinked, gave a curt nod, and bent back to his work.

Genya sighed. "David, this is Alina."

David gave a grunt.

"The Sun Summoner," Genya added.

"These are for you," he said without looking up.

I looked at the disks. "Oh, um … thank you?"

I wasn't sure what else to say, but when I looked at Genya, she just shrugged and rolled her eyes.

"*Goodbye, David*," she said deliberately. David grunted. Genya took my arm and led me outside onto an arched wooden arcade that overlooked a rolling green lawn. "Don't take it personally," she said. "David is a great metalworker. He can fold a blade so sharp it will cut through flesh like water. But if you're not made of metal or glass, he isn't interested."

Genya's voice was light, but it had a funny little edge to it, and when I glanced at her, I saw that there were bright spots of color on her perfect cheekbones. I looked back through the windows to where I could still see David's bony shoulders and messy brown hair. I smiled. If a creature as gorgeous as Genya could fall for a skinny, studious Fabrikator, there might be hope for me yet.

"What?" she said, noticing my smile.

"Nothing, nothing."

Genya squinted suspiciously at me, but I kept my mouth shut. We followed the arcade along the eastern wall of the Little Palace, past more windows that looked into the Fabrikators' workshops. Then we turned a corner and the windows stopped. Genya quickened her pace.

"Why aren't there any windows?" I asked.

Genya glanced nervously at the solid walls. They were the only parts of the Little Palace I'd seen that weren't covered in carvings. "We're on the other side of the Corporalki anatomy rooms."

"Don't they need light to … do their work?"

"Skylights," she said. "In the roof, like the library dome. They prefer it that way. It keeps them and their secrets safe."

"But what do they do in there?" I asked, not entirely sure I wanted to hear the answer.

"Only the Corporalki know. But there are rumors that they've been working with the Fabrikators on new … experiments."

I shivered and was relieved when we turned another corner and the windows began again. Through them I saw bedrooms like my own, and I realized I was seeing the downstairs dormitories. I was grateful that I'd been given a room on the third floor. I could have done without all those stairs to climb, but now that I had my own room for the first time, I was glad that people couldn't just walk by my window.

Genya pointed to the lake I'd seen from my room. "That's where we're going," she said, pointing to the little white structures dotting the shore. "To the Summoners' pavilions."

"All the way out there?"

"It's the safest place for you sort to practice. All we need is some overexcited Inferni to burn the whole palace down around us."

"Ah," I said. "I hadn't thought about that."

“That’s nothing. The Fabrikators have another place all the way outside the city where they work on blast powders. I can arrange for you to have a tour there, too,” she said with a wicked grin.

“I’ll pass.”

We descended a set of steps to a gravel path and made our way to the lake. As we approached it, another building became visible on the far shore. To my surprise, I saw groups of children running and shouting around it. Children in red, blue, and purple. A bell rang, and they left off their playing and streamed inside.

“A school?” I asked.

Genya nodded. “When a Grisha’s talent is discovered, the child is brought here for training. It’s where nearly all of us learned the Small Science.”

Again I thought of those three figures looming over me in the sitting room at Keramzin. Why hadn’t the Grisha Examiners discovered my abilities all those years ago? It was hard to imagine what my life might have been like if they had. I would have been catered to by servants instead of working side by side with them at chores. I never would have become a cartographer or even learned to draw a map. And what might it have meant for Ravka? If I’d learned to use my power, the Shadow Fold might already be a thing of the past. Mal and I would never have had to fight the volcra. In fact, Mal and I would probably have long forgotten each other.

I looked back across the water to the school. “What happens when they finish?”

“They become members of the Second Army. Many are sent to the great houses to serve with noble families, or they’re sent to serve with the First Army on the northern or southern front, or near the Fold. The best are chosen to remain at the Little Palace, to finish their education and join the Darkling’s service.”

“What about their families?” I asked.

“They’re compensated handsomely. A Grisha’s family never wants.”

“That’s not what I meant. Don’t you ever go home to visit?”

Genya shrugged. “I haven’t seen my parents since I was five. This is my home.”

Looking at Genya in her white and gold *kefta*, I wasn’t quite convinced. I’d lived at Keramzin for most of my life, but I’d never felt I belonged there. And even after a year, the same had been true for the King’s Army. The only place I’d ever felt I belonged was with Mal, and even that hadn’t lasted. For all her beauty, maybe Genya and I weren’t so different after all.

When we reached the lakeshore, we strolled past the stone pavilions, but Genya didn’t stop until we reached a path that wound from the shore into the woods.

“Here we are,” she said.

I peered up the path. Hidden in the shadows, I could just make out a small stone hut, obscured by trees. “There?”

“I can’t go with you. Not that I’d want to.”

I looked back up the path and a little shiver ran up my spine.

Genya gave me a pitying look. “Baghra’s not so bad once you get used to her. But you don’t want to be late.”

“Right,” I said hastily, and scurried up the path.

“Good luck!” Genya called after me.

The stone hut was round and, I noted apprehensively, didn’t seem to have any windows. I walked up the few steps to the door and knocked. When no one answered, I knocked again and waited. I wasn’t sure what to do. I looked back up the path, but Genya was long gone. I knocked once more, then screwed up my courage and opened the door.

The heat hit me like a blast, and I instantly began to sweat in my new clothes. As my eyes adjusted to the dimness, I could just make out a narrow bed, a basin, and a stove with a kettle on it. At the center of the room were two chairs and a fire roaring in a large tile oven.

“You’re late,” said a harsh voice.

I looked around but didn’t see anyone in the tiny room. Then one of the shadows moved. I nearly jumped out of my skin.

“Shut the door, girl. You’re letting the heat out.”

I closed the door.

“Good, let’s have a look at you.”

I wanted to turn and run in the other direction, but I told myself to stop being stupid. I forced myself to walk over to the fire. The shadow emerged from behind the oven to peer at me in the firelight.

My first impression was of an impossibly ancient woman, but when I looked closer, I wasn't sure why I'd thought that at all. Baghra's skin was smooth and taut over the sharp angles of her face. Her back was straight, her body wiry like a Suli acrobat, her coal-black hair untouched by gray. And yet the firelight made her features eerily skull-like, all jutting bones and deep hollows. She wore an old *kefta* of indeterminate color, and with one skeletal hand she gripped a flat-headed cane that looked like it had been hewn from silvery, petrified wood.

"So," she said in a low, guttural voice, "you're the Sun Summoner. Come to save us all. Where's the rest of you?"

I shifted uneasily.

"Well, girl, are you mute?"

"No," I managed.

"That's something, I suppose. Why weren't you tested as a child?"

"I was."

"Hmph," she said. Then her expression changed. She looked on me with eyes so unfathomably bleak that a chill rippled through me, despite the heat of the room. "I hope you're stronger than you look, girl," she said grimly.

A bony hand snaked out from the sleeve of her robes and fastened hard around my wrist. "Now," she said, "let's see what you can do."

CHAPTER 9

IT WAS A COMPLETE DISASTER. When Baghra fastened her bony hand around my wrist, I realized instantly that she was an amplifier like the Darkling. I felt the same jolting surety flood through me, and sunlight erupted through the room, shimmering over the stone walls of Baghra's hut. But when she released me and told me to call the power on my own, I was hopeless. She chided me, cajoled me, even hit me once with her stick.

"What am I supposed to do with a girl who can't call her own power?" she growled at me. "Even children can do this."

She slid her hand around my wrist again, and I felt that thing inside me rising up, struggling to break the surface. I reached for it, grasping, sure I could feel it. Then she let go, and the power slipped away from me, sinking like a stone. Finally, she shooed me away with a disgusted wave of her hand.

The day did not improve. I spent the rest of the morning at the library, where I was given a towering stack of books on Grisha theory and Grisha history and informed that this was just a fraction of my reading list. At lunch, I looked for Genya, but she was nowhere to be found. I sat down at the Summoners' table and was quickly swarmed by Etherealki.

I picked at my plate as Marie and Nadia prodded me with questions about my first lesson, where my room was, if I wanted to go with them to the *banya* that night. When they realized they weren't going to get much out of me, they turned to the other Summoners to chat about their classes. While I suffered with Baghra, the other Grisha were studying advanced theory, languages, military strategy. Apparently, this was all to prepare for when they left the Little Palace next summer. Most of them would travel to the Fold or to the northern or southern front to assume command positions in the Second Army. But the greatest honor was to be asked to travel with the Darkling as Ivan did.

I did my best to pay attention, but my mind kept wandering back to my disastrous lesson with Baghra. At some point I realized that Marie must have asked me a question, because she and Nadia were both staring at me.

"Sorry, what?" I said.

They exchanged a glance.

"Do you want to walk with us to the stables?" Marie asked. "For combat training?"

Combat training? I looked down at the little schedule Genya had left with me. Listed after lunch were the words "Combat Training, Botkin, West Stables." So this day was actually going to get worse.

"Sure," I said numbly, and stood up with them. The servants sprang forward to pull our chairs out and clear the dishes. I doubted I'd ever get used to being waited on this way.

"*Ne brinite*," Marie said with a giggle.

"What?" I asked, baffled.

"*To Će biti zabavno*."

Nadia giggled. "She said, 'Don't worry. It will be fun.' It's Suli dialect. Marie and I are studying it in case we get sent west."

"Ah," I said.

"*Shi si yuyan Suli*," said Sergei as he strode past us out of the domed hall. "That's Shu for 'Suli is a dead language.'"

Marie scowled and Nadia bit her lip.

"Sergei is studying Shu," whispered Nadia.

"I got that," I replied.

Marie spent the entire walk to the stables complaining about Sergei and the other Corporalki and debating the merits of Suli over Shu. Suli was best for missions in the northwest. Shu meant you'd be stuck

translating diplomatic papers. Sergei was an idiot who was better off learning to trade in Kerch. She took a brief break to point out the *banya*, an elaborate system of steam baths and cold pools nestled in a birch grove beside the Little Palace, then launched immediately into a rant about selfish Corporalki overrunning the baths every night.

Maybe combat training wouldn't be so bad. Marie and Nadia were definitely making me want to punch something.

As we were crossing the western lawn, I suddenly got the feeling that someone was watching me. I looked up and saw a figure standing off the path, nearly hidden by the shadows from a low stand of trees. There was no mistaking the long brown robes or the dirty black beard, and even from a distance, I could feel the eerie intensity of the Apparat's stare. I hurried to catch up to Marie and Nadia, but I sensed his gaze following me, and when I looked back over my shoulder, he was still there.

The training rooms were next to the stables—large, empty, high-beamed rooms with packed dirt floors and weapons of every variety lining the walls. Our instructor, Botkin Yul-Erdene, wasn't Grisha; he was a former Shu Han mercenary who had fought in wars on every continent for any army that could afford his particular gift for violence. He had straggly gray hair and a gruesome scar across his neck where someone had tried to cut his throat. I spent the next two hours cursing that person for not doing a more thorough job.

Botkin started with endurance drills, racing us across the palace grounds. I did my best to keep up, but I was as weak and clumsy as ever, and I quickly fell behind.

"Is this what they teach in First Army?" he sneered in his heavy Shu accent as I stumbled up a hill.

I was too out of breath to answer.

When we returned to the training rooms, the other Summoners paired off for sparring drills, and Botkin insisted on partnering me. The next hour was a blur of painful jabs and punches.

"Block!" he shouted, knocking me backward. "Faster! Maybe little girl likes to be hit?"

The sole consolation was that we weren't allowed to use our Grisha abilities in the training rooms. So at least I was spared the embarrassment of revealing that I couldn't call my power.

When I was so tired and sore that I thought I might just lie down and let him kick me, Botkin dismissed the class. But before we were out the door he called, "Tomorrow, little girl comes early, trains with Botkin."

It was all I could do not to whimper.

By the time I stumbled back to my room and bathed, I just wanted to slink beneath the covers and hide. But I forced myself to return to the domed hall for dinner.

"Where's Genya?" I asked Marie as I sat down at the Summoners' table.

"She eats at the Grand Palace."

"And sleeps there," added Nadia. "The Queen likes to make sure she's always available."

"So does the King."

"Marie!" Nadia protested, but she was snickering.

I gaped at them. "You mean—"

"It's just a rumor," said Marie. But she and Nadia exchanged a knowing look.

I thought of the King's wet lips, the broken blood vessels in his nose, and beautiful Genya in her servant's colors. I pushed my plate away. The little bit of appetite I'd had seemed to have disappeared.

Dinner seemed to last forever. I nursed a glass of tea and endured another round of endless Summoner chatter. I was getting ready to excuse myself and escape back to my room when the doors behind the Darkling's table opened and the domed hall fell silent.

Ivan emerged and sauntered over to the Summoners' table, seemingly oblivious to the stares of the other Grisha.

With a sinking sensation, I realized he was walking straight toward me.

"Come with me, Starkov," he said when he reached us, then added a mocking "please."

I pushed my chair back and rose on legs that felt suddenly weak. Had Baghra told the Darkling that I was hopeless? Had Botkin told him just how badly I'd failed at my lessons? The Grisha were goggling at me. Nadia's jaw was actually hanging open.

I followed Ivan across the silent hall and through the huge ebony doors. He led me down a hallway and through another door emblazoned with the Darkling's symbol. It was easy to tell that I was in the war room. There were no windows, and the walls were covered with large maps of Ravka. The maps were made in the

old style, with heated ink on animal hide. Under any other circumstances, I could have spent hours studying them, running my fingers over the raised mountains and twisting rivers. Instead, I stood with my hands bunched into clammy fists, my heart thudding in my chest.

The Darkling was seated at the end of a long table, reading through a pile of papers. He looked up when we entered, his quartz eyes glittering in the lamplight.

"Alina," he said. "Please, sit." He gestured to the chair beside him.

I hesitated. He didn't *sound* angry.

Ivan disappeared back through the door, closing it behind him. I swallowed hard and made myself cross the room and take the seat the Darkling offered.

"How was your first day?"

I swallowed again. "Fine," I croaked.

"Really?" he asked, but he was smiling slightly. "Even Baghra? She can be a bit of a trial."

"Just a bit," I managed.

"You're tired?"

I nodded.

"Homesick?"

I shrugged. It felt strange to say I was homesick for the barracks of the First Army. "A little, I guess."

"It will get better."

I bit my lip. I hoped so. I wasn't sure how many days like this one I could handle.

"It will be harder for you," he said. "An Etherealnik rarely works alone. Inferni pair up. Squallers often partner with Tidemakers. But you're the only one of your kind."

"Right," I said wearily. I wasn't really in the mood to hear about how special I was.

He rose. "Come with me," he said.

My heart started pounding again. He led me out of the war room and down another hallway.

He pointed to a narrow door set unobtrusively into the wall. "Keep right and this will lead you back to the dormitories. I thought you might want to avoid the main hall."

I stared at him. "That's it?" I blurted. "You just wanted to ask me about my day?"

He cocked his head to one side. "What were you expecting?"

I was so relieved that a little laugh escaped me. "I have no idea. Torture? Interrogation? A stern talking to?"

He frowned slightly. "I'm not a monster, Alina. Despite what you may have heard."

"I didn't mean that," I said hurriedly. "I just … I didn't know what to expect."

"Other than the worst?"

"It's an old habit." I knew I should stop there, but I couldn't help myself. Maybe I wasn't being fair. But neither was he. "Why shouldn't I be afraid of you?" I asked. "You're the Darkling. I'm not saying you *would* throw me in a ditch or ship me off to Tsibeya, but you certainly could. You can cut people in half. I think it's fair to be a little intimidated."

He studied me for a long moment, and I wished fervently that I'd kept my mouth shut. But then that half smile flickered across his face. "You may have a point."

A little of the fear ebbed out of me.

"Why do you do that?" he asked suddenly.

"Do what?"

He reached out and took hold of my hand. I felt that wonderful sense of surety rush through me. "Rub your thumb across your palm."

"Oh," I laughed nervously. I hadn't even been aware I was doing it. "Just another old habit."

He turned my hand over and examined it in the dim light of the hallway. He dragged his thumb over the pale scar that ran across my palm. A shivery hum shot through me.

"Where did you get this?" he asked.

"I … Keramzin."

"Where you grew up?"

"Yes."

"The tracker is an orphan, too?"

I drew in a sharp breath. Was mind reading another one of his powers? But then I remembered that Mal had given testimony in the Grisha tent.

"Yes," I said.

"Is he any good?"

"What?" I was finding it hard to concentrate. The Darkling's thumb was still moving back and forth, tracing the length of the scar on my palm.

"At tracking. Is he any good at it?"

"The best," I said honestly. "The serfs at Keramzin said he could make rabbits out of rocks."

"I wonder sometimes how much we really understand our own gifts," he mused.

Then he dropped my hand and opened the door. He stepped aside and gave me a little bow.

"Good night, Alina."

"Good night," I managed.

I ducked through the doorway and into a narrow hall. A moment later, I heard the sound of a door closing behind me.

CHAPTER 10

THE NEXT MORNING, my body ached so badly that I could barely drag myself out of bed. But I got up and did it all over again. And again. And again. Each day was worse and more frustrating than the one before, but I didn't stop. I couldn't. I wasn't a mapmaker anymore, and if I couldn't manage to become a Grisha, where would that leave me?

I thought of the Darkling's words that night beneath the broken beams of the barn. *You're the first glimmer of hope I've had in a long time.* He believed I was the Sun Summoner. He believed I could help him destroy the Fold. And if I could, no soldier, no merchant, no tracker would ever have to cross the Unsea again.

But as the days dragged on, that idea began to seem more and more absurd.

I spent long hours in Baghra's hut learning breathing exercises and holding painful poses that were supposed to help with my focus. She gave me books to read, teas to drink, and repeated whacks with her stick, but nothing helped. "Should I cut you, girl?" she would cry in frustration. "Should I have an Inferni burn you? Should I have them throw you back into the Fold to make food for those abominations?"

My daily failures with Baghra were matched only by the torture that Botkin put me through. He ran me all over the palace grounds, through the woods, up and down hills until I thought I would collapse. He put me through sparring drills and falling drills until my body was covered in bruises and my ears ached from his constant grumbling: too slow, too weak, too skinny.

"Botkin cannot build house from such little twigs!" he shouted at me, giving my upper arm a squeeze. "Eat something!"

But I wasn't hungry. The appetite that had appeared after my brush with death on the Fold was gone and food had lost all its savor. I slept poorly, despite my luxurious bed, and felt like I was stumbling through my days. The work Genya had done on me had worn off, and my cheeks were once again sallow, my eyes shadowed, my hair dull and limp.

Baghra believed that my lack of appetite and inability to sleep were connected to my failure to call my power. "How much harder is it to walk with your feet bound? Or to talk with a hand over your mouth?" she lectured. "Why do you waste all of your strength fighting your true nature?"

I wasn't. Or I didn't think I was. I wasn't sure of anything anymore. All my life I'd been frail and weak. Every day had felt like a struggle. If Baghra was right, all that would change when I finally mastered my Grisha talent. Assuming I ever did. Until then, I was stuck.

I knew that the other Grisha were whispering about me. The Etherealki liked to practice by the lakeside together, experimenting with new ways to use wind and water and fire. I couldn't risk them discovering that I couldn't even call my own power, so I made excuses not to join them, and eventually they stopped inviting me.

In the evenings, they sat around the domed hall, sipping tea or *kvas*, planning weekend excursions into Balakirev or one of the other villages near Os Alta. But because the Darkling was still concerned about assassination attempts, I had to remain behind. I was glad for the excuse. The more time I spent with the Summoners, the greater the chance that I would be found out.

I rarely saw the Darkling, and when I did it was from a distance, coming or going, deep in conversation with Ivan or the King's military advisers. I learned from the other Grisha that he wasn't often at the Little Palace, but spent most of his time traveling between the Fold and the northern border, or south to where Shu Han raiding parties were attacking settlements before winter set in. Hundreds of Grisha were stationed throughout Ravka, and he was responsible for all of them.

He never said a word to me, rarely even glanced my way. I was sure it was because he knew that I was showing no improvement, that his Sun Summoner might turn out to be a complete failure after all.

When I wasn't suffering at the hands of Baghra or Botkin, I was sitting in the library, wading through books on Grisha theory. I thought I understood the basics of what Grisha did. (*Of what* we *did*, I amended.) Everything in the world could be broken down into the same small parts. What looked like magic was really the Grisha manipulating matter at its most fundamental levels.

Marie didn't make fire. She summoned combustible elements in the air around us, and she still needed a flint to make the spark that would burn that fuel. Grisha steel wasn't endowed with magic, but by the skill of Fabrikators, who did not need heat or crude tools to manipulate metal.

But if I understood what we did, I was less sure of how we did it. The grounding principle of the Small Science was "like calls to like," but then it got complicated. *Odinakovost* was the "thisness" of a thing that made it the same as everything else. *Etovost* was the "thatness" of a thing that made it different from everything else. *Odinakovost* connected Grisha to the world, but it was *etovost* that gave them an affinity for something like air, or blood, or in my case, light. Around then, my head started swimming.

One thing did stand out to me: the word the philosophers used to describe people born without Grisha gifts, *otkazat'sya*, "the abandoned." It was another word for orphan.

LATE ONE AFTERNOON, I was plodding through a passage describing Grisha assistance with trade routes when I felt someone's presence beside me. I looked up and cringed back in my chair. The Apparat was looming over me, his flat black pupils lit with peculiar intensity.

I glanced around the library. It was empty except for us, and despite the sun pouring through the glass ceiling, I felt a chill creep through me.

He sat down in the chair beside me with a gust of musty robes, and the damp smell of tombs enveloped me. I tried to breathe through my mouth.

"Are you enjoying your studies, Alina Starkov?"

"Very much," I lied.

"I'm so glad," he said. "But I hope you will remember to feed the soul as well as the mind. I am the spiritual adviser to all those within the palace walls. Should you find yourself worried or in distress, I hope you will not hesitate to come to me."

"I will," I said. "Absolutely."

"Good, good." He smiled, revealing a mouth of crowded, yellowing teeth, his gums black like a wolf 's. "I want us to be friends. It is so important that we are friends."

"Of course."

"I would be pleased if you would accept a gift from me," he said, reaching into the folds of his brown robes and removing a small book bound in red leather.

How could someone offering you a present sound so creepy?

Reluctantly, I leaned forward and took the book from his long, blue-veined hand. The title was embossed in gold on the cover: *Istorii Sankt'ya.*

"The Lives of Saints?"

He nodded. "There was a time when all Grisha children were given this book when they came to school at the Little Palace."

"Thank you," I said, perplexed.

"Peasants love their Saints. They hunger for the miraculous. And yet they do not love the Grisha. Why do you think that is?"

"I hadn't thought about it," I said. I opened the book. Someone had written my name inside the cover. I flipped a few pages. *Sankt Petyr of Brevno. Sankt Ilya in Chains. Sankta Lizabeta.* Each chapter began with a full-page illustration, beautifully rendered in brightly colored inks.

"I think it is because the Grisha do not suffer the way the Saints suffer, the way the people suffer."

"Maybe," I said absently.

"But you have suffered, haven't you, Alina Starkov? And I think … yes. I think you will suffer more."

My head jerked up. I thought he might be threatening me, but his eyes were full of a strange sympathy that was even more terrifying.

I glanced back down at the book in my lap. My finger had stopped on an illustration of *Sankta Lizabeta* as she had died, drawn and quartered in a field of roses. Her blood made a river through the petals. I snapped the book closed and sprang to my feet. “I should go.”

The Apparat rose, and for a moment I thought he would try to stop me. “You do not like your gift.”

“No, no. It’s very nice. Thank you. I don’t want to be late,” I babbled.

I bolted past him through the library doors, and I didn’t take an easy breath until I was back in my room. I tossed the book of Saints into the bottom drawer of my dressing table and slammed it shut.

What did the Apparat want from me? Had his words been meant as a threat? Or as some kind of warning?

I took a deep breath, a tide of fatigue and confusion washing over me. I missed the easy rhythm of the Documents Tent, the comforting monotony of my life as a cartographer, when nothing more was expected of me than a few drawings and a tidy worktable. I missed the familiar smell of inks and paper. Mostly, I missed Mal.

I’d written to him every week, care of our regiment, but I hadn’t heard anything back. I knew the post could be unreliable and that his unit might have moved on from the Fold or might even be in West Ravka, but I still hoped that I would hear from him soon. I’d given up on the idea of him visiting me at the Little Palace. As much as I missed him, I couldn’t bear the thought of him knowing that I fit into my new life about as well as I’d fit into my old one.

Every night, as I climbed the stairs to my room after another pointless, painful day, I would imagine the letter that might be waiting for me on my dressing table, and my steps would quicken. But the days passed, and no letter came.

Today was no different. I ran my hand over the empty surface of the table.

“Where are you, Mal?” I whispered. But there was no one there to answer.

CHAPTER 11

WHEN I THOUGHT things couldn't get any worse, they did.

I was sitting at breakfast in the domed hall when the main doors blew open and a group of unfamiliar Grisha entered. I didn't pay them much attention. Grisha in the Darkling's service were always coming and going at the Little Palace, sometimes to recover from injuries received at the northern or southern front, sometimes on leave from other assignments.

Then Nadia gasped.

"Oh no," groaned Marie.

I looked up and my stomach lurched as I recognized the raven-haired girl who had found Mal so fascinating back in Kribirsk.

"Who is she?" I whispered, watching the girl glide among the other Grisha, saying her hellos, her high laugh echoing off the golden dome.

"Zoya," muttered Marie. "She was a year ahead of us at school and she's horrible."

"Thinks she's better than everyone," added Nadia.

I raised my eyebrows. If Zoya's sin was snobbery, then Marie and Nadia had no business making judgments.

Marie sighed. "The worst part is that she's kind of right. She's an incredibly powerful Squaller, a great fighter, and look at her."

I took in the silver embroidery on Zoya's cuffs, the glossy perfection of her black hair, the big blue eyes fringed by impossibly dark lashes. She was almost as beautiful as Genya. I thought of Mal and felt a pang of pure jealousy shoot through me. But then I realized that Zoya had been stationed at the Fold. If she and Mal had … well, she might know if he was there, if he was all right. I pushed my plate away. The prospect of asking Zoya about Mal made me a little nauseated.

As if she could feel my stare, Zoya turned from where she was chatting with some awestruck Corporalki and swept over to the Summoners' table.

"Marie! Nadia! How are you?"

They stood to hug her, their faces plastered with huge, fake smiles.

"You look amazing, Zoya! How are you?" gushed Marie.

"We missed you so much!" squealed Nadia.

"I missed you, too," Zoya said. "It's *so* good to be back at the Little Palace. You can't imagine how busy the Darkling's kept me. But I'm being rude. I don't think I've met your friend."

"Oh!" Marie exclaimed. "I'm so sorry. This is Alina Starkov. The Sun Summoner," she said with a little pride.

I stood up awkwardly.

Zoya swept me into an embrace. "It's *such* an honor to finally meet the Sun Summoner," she said loudly. But as she hugged me she whispered, "You stink of Keramzin."

I stiffened. She released me, a smile playing on her perfect lips.

"I'll see you all later," she said with a little wave. "I'm frantic for a bath." And with that she sailed from the domed hall and through the double doors to the dormitories.

I stood there, stunned, my cheeks blazing. I felt like everyone must be gaping at me, but no one else seemed to have heard what Zoya said.

Her words stayed with me the rest of the day, through another botched lesson with Baghra and an interminable lunch during which Zoya held forth on the journey from Kribirsk, the state of the towns bordering the Fold, and the exquisite *lubok* woodcuts she'd seen in one of the peasant villages. It might have been my imagination, but it seemed like every time she said "peasant" she looked directly at me. As

she spoke, light glinted off the heavy silver bracelet gleaming at her wrist. It was studded with what looked like pieces of bone. *An amplifier,* I realized.

Things went from bad to dreadful when Zoya showed up at our combat lesson. Botkin hugged her, kissed both of her cheeks, and then proceeded to chatter back and forth with her in Shu. Was there anything this girl couldn't do?

She'd brought along her friend with the chestnut curls, whom I remembered from the Grisha tent. They proceeded to giggle and whisper as I stumbled through the drills with which Botkin began every class. When we separated to spar, I wasn't even surprised when Botkin paired me with Zoya.

"Is star pupil," he said, grinning proudly. "Will help little girl."

"Surely the Sun Summoner doesn't need my help," Zoya said with a smug smile.

I watched her warily. I wasn't sure why this girl hated me so much, but I'd had just about enough for one day.

We took our fighting stances, and Botkin gave the signal to start.

I actually managed to block Zoya's first jab, but not the second. It caught me hard on the jaw and my head snapped back. I tried to shake it off.

She danced forward and aimed a punch at my ribs. But some of Botkin's training must have sunk in over the last few weeks. I dodged right and the blow glanced off me.

She flexed her shoulders and circled. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that the other Summoners had left off sparring and were watching us.

I shouldn't have let myself get distracted. I took Zoya's next punch hard to the gut. As I gasped for breath, she followed with an elbow. I managed to avoid it more by luck than skill.

She pressed her advantage and lunged forward. That was her mistake. I was weak and I was slow, but Botkin had taught me to make use of my opponent's strength.

I stepped to the side, and as she came in close, I hooked my leg around her ankle. Zoya went down hard.

The other Summoners broke into applause. But before I had a chance to even register my victory, Zoya sat up, her expression furious, her arm slashing through the air. I felt myself lifted off my feet as I sailed backward through the air and slammed into the training room's wooden wall. I heard something crack, and all the breath went out of my body as I slid to the ground.

"Zoya!" Botkin roared. "You do not use power. Not in these rooms. Never in these rooms!"

Dimly, I was aware of the other Summoners gathering around me, of Botkin calling for a Healer.

"I'm fine," I tried to say, but I couldn't gather enough breath. I lay in the dirt, panting shallowly. Every time I tried to breathe, pain tore through my left side. A group of servants arrived, but when they lifted me onto the stretcher, I fainted.

Marie and Nadia told me the rest when they came to visit me in the infirmary. A Healer had slowed my heart rate until I fell into a deep sleep, then mended my broken rib and the bruises Zoya had left on me.

"Botkin was furious!" Marie exclaimed. "I've never seen him so angry. He threw Zoya out of the training rooms. I thought he might hit her himself."

"Ivo says he saw Ivan take her through the domed hall to the Darkling's council rooms, and when she came out, she was crying."

Good, I thought with satisfaction. But when I thought of myself lying in a heap in the dirt, I felt a burning wave of embarrassment.

"Why did she do it?" I asked as I tried to sit up. I'd had plenty of people ignore me or look down on me. But Zoya actually seemed to hate me.

Marie and Nadia gaped at me as if I'd taken a crack to the skull instead of the ribs.

"Because she's jealous!" said Nadia.

"Of me?" I said incredulously.

Marie rolled her eyes. "She can't bear the idea of anyone being the Darkling's favorite."

I laughed and then winced at the stab of pain in my side. "I'm hardly his favorite."

"Of course you are. Zoya's powerful, but she's just another Squaller. You're the Sun Summoner."

Nadia's cheeks flushed when she said this, and I knew I wasn't imagining the tinge of envy in her voice. Just how deep did that envy go? Marie and Nadia talked like they hated Zoya, but they smiled to her face. *What do they say about me when I'm not around?* I wondered.

“Maybe he’ll demote her!” squealed Marie.

“Maybe he’ll send her to Tsibeya!” crowed Nadia.

A Healer appeared from the shadows to shush them and send them on their way. They promised to visit again the next day.

I must have fallen back asleep because, when I woke a few hours later, the infirmary was dark. The room was eerily quiet, the other beds unoccupied, the only sound the soft ticking of a clock.

I pushed myself up. I still felt a little sore, but it was hard to believe that I’d had a broken rib just a few hours before.

My mouth was dry, and I had the beginning of a headache. I dragged myself out of bed and poured a glass of water from the pitcher at my bedside. Then I pushed open the window and took a deep breath of night air.

“Alina Starkov.”

I jumped and whirled.

“Who’s there?” I gasped.

The Apparat emerged from the long shadows by the door.

“Did I startle you?” he asked.

“A bit,” I admitted. How long had he been standing there? Had he been watching me sleep?

He seemed to glide silently across the room toward me, his ragged robes slithering over the infirmary floor. I took an involuntary step backward.

“I was very sorry to hear of your injury,” he said. “The Darkling should be more watchful of his charges.”

“I’m fine.”

“Are you?” he said, regarding me in the moonlight. “You do not look well, Alina Starkov. It’s essential that you stay well.”

“I’m just a little tired.”

He stepped closer. His peculiar smell wafted over me, that strange mix of incense and mildew, and the scent of turned earth. I thought of the graveyard at Keramzin, the crooked headstones, the peasant women keening over new graves. I was suddenly very aware of the emptiness of the infirmary. Was the Corporalki Healer still nearby? Or had he gone somewhere to find a glass of *kvas* and a warm bed?

“Did you know that in some of the border villages, they are making altars to you?” murmured the Apparat.

“What?”

“Oh yes. The people are hungry for hope, and the icon painters are doing a booming business thanks to you.”

“But I’m not a Saint!”

“It is a blessing, Alina Starkov. A benediction.” He stepped even closer to me. I could see the dark and matted hairs of his beard, the stained jumble of his teeth. “You are becoming dangerous, and you will become more dangerous still.”

“Me?” I whispered. “To whom?”

“There is something more powerful than any army. Something strong enough to topple kings, and even Darklings. Do you know what that thing is?”

I shook my head, inching away from him.

“Faith,” he breathed, his black eyes wild. “Faith.”

He reached for me. I groped toward my bedside table and knocked the glass of water to the floor. It shattered loudly. Hurried footsteps pounded down the hall toward us. The Apparat stepped back, melting into the shadows.

The door burst open and a Healer entered, his red *kefta* flapping behind him. “Are you all right?”

I opened my mouth, unsure of what to say. But the Apparat had already slid soundlessly out the door.

“I … I’m sorry. I broke a glass.”

The Healer called a servant to clean up the mess. He settled me back into bed and suggested that I try to rest. But as soon as he was gone, I sat up and lit the lamp by my bed.

My hands were shaking. I wanted to dismiss the Apparat’s ramblings as nonsense, but I couldn’t. Not if

people were really praying to the Sun Summoner, not if they were expecting me to save them. I remembered the Darkling's dire words beneath the broken roof of the barn. *The age of Grisha power is coming to an end.* I thought of the volcra, of the lives being lost on the Shadow Fold. *A divided Ravka won't survive the new age.* I wasn't just failing the Darkling or Baghra or myself. I was failing all of Ravka.

WHEN GENYA CAME by the next morning, I told her about the Apparat's visit, but she didn't seem concerned by what he'd said or his strange behavior.

"He's creepy," she admitted. "But harmless."

"He is not harmless. You should have seen him. He looked completely mad."

"He's just a priest."

"But why was he even here?"

Genya shrugged. "Maybe the King asked him to pray for you."

"I'm not staying here again tonight. I want to sleep in my room. With a door that locks."

Genya sniffed and looked around the spare infirmary. "Well, that, at least, I can agree with. I wouldn't want to stay here either." Then she peered at me. "You look dreadful," she said with her usual tact. "Why don't you let me fix you up a bit?"

"No."

"Just let me get rid of the dark circles."

"No!" I said stubbornly. "But I do need a favor."

"Should I get my kit?" she asked eagerly.

I scowled at her. "Not that kind of favor. A friend of mine was injured on the Fold. I … I've written to him, but I'm not sure my letters are getting through." I felt my cheeks flush and hurried on. "Could you find out if he's okay and where he's been stationed? I don't know who else to ask, and since you're always at the Grand Palace, I thought you might be able to help."

"Of course, but … well, have you been checking the casualty lists?"

I nodded, a lump in my throat. Genya left to find paper and pen so I could write down Mal's name for her.

I sighed and rubbed my eyes. I didn't know what to make of Mal's silence. I checked the casualty lists every single week, my heart pounding, my stomach in knots, terrified that I would see his name. And each week, I gave thanks to all the Saints that Mal was safe and alive, even if he couldn't be bothered to write.

Was that the truth of it? My heart gave a painful twist. Maybe Mal was glad I was gone, glad to be free of old friendships and obligations. *Or maybe he's lying in a hospital bed somewhere and you're being a petty little brat,* I chided myself.

Genya returned, and I wrote out Mal's name, regiment, and unit number. She folded the paper and slipped it into the sleeve of her *kefta.*

"Thanks," I said hoarsely.

"I'm sure he's fine," she said, and gave my hand a gentle squeeze. "Now lie back so I can fix those dark circles."

"Genya!"

"Lie back or you can forget about your little favor."

My jaw dropped. "You are rotten."

"I am marvelous."

I glared at her, then flopped back against the pillows.

After Genya left, I made arrangements to return to my own quarters. The Healer wasn't happy about it, but I insisted. I was barely even sore anymore, and there was no way I was spending another night in that empty infirmary.

When I got back to my room, I took a bath and tried to read one of my theory books. I couldn't concentrate. I was dreading returning to my classes the next day, dreading another futile lesson with Baghra.

The stares and gossip about me had died down a bit since I arrived at the Little Palace. But I had no doubt

that my fight with Zoya would bring that all back.

As I rose and stretched, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror above my dressing table. I crossed the room and scrutinized my face in the glass.

The dark shadows beneath my eyes were gone, but I knew they would be back in a few days. And it made little difference. I looked the way I always had: tired, scrawny, sick. Nothing like a real Grisha. The power was there, somewhere inside me, but I couldn't reach it, and I didn't know why. Why was I different? Why had it taken so long for my power to reveal itself? And why couldn't I access it on my own?

Reflected in the mirror I could see the thick golden curtains at the windows, the brilliantly painted walls, the firelight glittering off the tiles in the grate. Zoya was awful, but she was also right. I didn't belong in this beautiful world, and if I didn't find a way to use my power, I never would.

CHAPTER 12

THE NEXT MORNING wasn't as bad as I'd expected. Zoya was already in the domed hall when I entered. She sat by herself at the end of the Summoners' table, eating her breakfast in silence. She didn't look up as Marie and Nadia called their greetings to me, and I did my best to ignore her, too.

I savored every step of my walk down to the lake. The sun was bright, the air cold on my cheeks, and I wasn't looking forward to the stuffy, windowless confines of Baghra's hut. But when I climbed the steps to her door, I heard raised voices.

I hesitated and then knocked softly. The voices quieted abruptly, and after a moment, I pushed the door open and peeked inside. The Darkling was standing by Baghra's tile oven, his face furious.

"Sorry," I said, and began to back out the door.

But Baghra just snapped, "In, girl. Don't let the heat out."

When I entered and shut the door, the Darkling gave me a small bow. "How are you, Alina?"

"I'm fine," I managed.

"She's fine!" hooted Baghra. "She's fine! She cannot light a hallway, but she's fine."

I winced and wished I could disappear into my boots.

To my surprise, the Darkling said, "Leave her be."

Baghra's eyes narrowed. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

The Darkling sighed and ran his hands through his dark hair in exasperation. When he looked at me, there was a rueful smile on his lips, and his hair was going every which way. "Baghra has her own way of doing things," he said.

"Don't patronize me, boy!" Her voice cracked out like a whip. To my amazement, I saw the Darkling stand up straighter and then scowl as if he'd caught himself.

"Don't chide me, old woman," he said in a low, dangerous voice.

Angry energy crackled through the room. What had I walked into? I was thinking about slipping out the door and leaving them to finish whatever argument I'd interrupted when Baghra's voice lashed out again.

"The boy thinks to get you an amplifier," she said. "What do you think of that, girl?"

It was so strange to hear the Darkling called "boy" that it took me a moment to understand her meaning. But when I did, hope and relief rushed through me. An amplifier! Why hadn't I thought of it before? Why hadn't *they* thought of it before? Baghra and the Darkling were able to help me call my power because they were living amplifiers, so why not an amplifier of my own like Ivan's bear claws or the seal tooth I'd seen hanging around Marie's neck?

"I think it's brilliant!" I exclaimed more loudly than I'd intended.

Baghra made a disgusted sound.

The Darkling gave her a sharp glance, but then he turned to me. "Alina, have you ever heard of Morozova's herd?"

"Of course she has. She's also heard of unicorns and the Shu Han dragons," Baghra said mockingly.

An angry look passed over the Darkling's features, but then he seemed to master himself. "May I have a word with you, Alina?" he inquired politely.

"Of … of course," I stammered.

Baghra snorted again, but the Darkling ignored her and took me by the elbow to lead me out of the cottage, shutting the door firmly behind us. When we had walked a short distance down the path, he heaved a huge sigh and ran his hands through his hair again. "That woman," he muttered.

It was hard not to laugh.

"What?" he said warily.

"I've just never seen you so … ruffled."

“Baghra has that effect on people.”

“Was she your teacher, too?”

A shadow crossed his face. “Yes,” he said. “So what do you know about Morozova’s herd?”

I bit my lip. “Just, well, you know …”

He sighed. “Just children’s stories?”

I shrugged apologetically.

“It’s all right,” he said. “What do you remember from the stories?”

I thought back, remembering Ana Kuya’s voice in the dormitories late at night. “They were white deer, magical creatures that appeared only at twilight.”

“They’re no more magical than we are. But they are ancient and very powerful.”

“They’re real?” I asked incredulously. I didn’t mention that I certainly hadn’t been feeling very magical *or* powerful lately.

“I think so.”

“But Baghra doesn’t.”

“She usually finds my ideas ridiculous. What else do you remember?”

“Well,” I said with a laugh. “In Ana Kuya’s stories, they could talk, and if a hunter captured them and spared their lives, they granted wishes.”

He laughed then. It was the first time I’d ever heard his laugh, a lovely dark sound that rippled through the air. “Well, that part definitely isn’t true.”

“But the rest is?”

“Kings and Darklings have been searching for Morozova’s herd for centuries. My hunters claim they’ve seen signs of them, though they’ve never seen the creatures themselves.”

“And you believe them?”

His slate-colored gaze was cool and steady. “My men don’t lie to me.”

I felt a chill skitter up my spine. Knowing what the Darkling could do, I wouldn’t be keen on lying to him either. “All right,” I said uneasily.

“If Morozova’s stag can be taken, its antlers can be made into an amplifier.” He reached out and tapped my collarbone—even that brief contact was enough to send a jolt of surety through me.

“A necklace?” I asked, trying to picture it, still feeling the tap of his fingers at the base of my throat.

He nodded. “The most powerful amplifier ever known.”

My jaw dropped. “And you want to give it to me?”

He nodded again.

“Wouldn’t it just be easier for me to get a claw or a fang or, I don’t know, pretty much anything else?”

He shook his head. “If we have any hope of destroying the Fold, we need the stag’s power.”

“But maybe if I had one to practice with—”

“You know it doesn’t work that way.”

“I do?”

He frowned. “Haven’t you been reading your theory?”

I gave him a look and said, “There’s a lot of theory.”

He surprised me by smiling. “I forget that you’re new to this.”

“Well, I don’t,” I muttered.

“Is it that bad?”

To my embarrassment, I felt a lump well up in my throat. I swallowed it down. “Baghra must have told you I can’t summon a single sunbeam on my own.”

“It will happen, Alina. I’m not worried.”

“You’re not?”

“No. And even if I were, once we have the stag, it won’t matter.”

I felt a surge of frustration. If an amplifier could make it possible for me to be a real Grisha, then I didn’t want to wait for some mythical antler. I wanted a real one. Now.

“If no one’s found Morozova’s herd in all this time, what makes you think you’ll find it now?” I asked.

“Because this was meant to be. The stag was meant for you, Alina. I can feel it.” He looked at me. His hair was still a mess, and in the bright morning sunlight, he looked more handsome and more human than

I'd ever seen him. "I guess I'm asking you to trust me," he said.

What was I supposed to say? I didn't really have a choice. If the Darkling wanted me to be patient, I would have to be patient. "Okay," I said finally. "But hurry it up."

He laughed again, and I felt a pleased flush creep up my cheeks. Then his expression became serious. "I've been waiting for you a long time, Alina," he said. "You and I are going to change the world."

I laughed nervously. "I'm not the world-changing type."

"Just wait," he said softly, and when he looked at me with those gray quartz eyes, my heart gave a little thump. I thought he was going to say something more, but abruptly he stepped back, a troubled look on his face. "Good luck with your lessons," he said. He gave me a short bow and turned on his heel to walk up the path to the lakeshore. But he'd only gone a few steps before he turned back to me. "Alina," he said. "About the stag?"

"Yes?"

"Please keep it to yourself. Most people think it's just a children's story, and I'd hate to look a fool."

"I won't say anything," I promised.

He nodded once and, without another word, strode away. I stared after him. I felt a little dazed, and I wasn't sure why.

When I looked up, Baghra was standing on the porch of her cottage, watching me. For no reason at all, I blushed.

"Hmph," she snorted, and then she turned her back on me, too.

AFTER MY CONVERSATION with the Darkling, I took my first opportunity to visit the library. There was no mention of the stag in any of my theory books, but I did find a reference to Ilya Morozova, one of the first and most powerful Grisha.

There was also plenty about amplifiers. The books were very clear on the fact that a Grisha could have only one amplifier in his or her lifetime and that once a Grisha owned an amplifier, it could be possessed by no one else: *"The Grisha claims the amplifier, but the amplifier claims the Grisha, as well. Once it is done, there can be no other. Like calls to like, and the bond is made."*

The reason for this wasn't entirely clear to me, but it seemed to have something to do with a check on Grisha power.

"The horse has speed. The bear has strength. The bird has wings. No creature has all of these gifts, and so the world is held in balance. Amplifiers are part of this balance, not a means of subverting it, and each Grisha would do well to remember this or risk the consequences."

Another philosopher wrote, *"Why can a Grisha possess but one amplifier? I will answer this question instead: What is infinite? The universe and the greed of men."*

Sitting beneath the library's glass dome, I thought of the Black Heretic. The Darkling had said that the Shadow Fold was the result of his ancestor's greed. Was that what the philosophers meant by consequences? For the first time, it occurred to me that the Fold was the one place where the Darkling was helpless, where his powers meant nothing. The Black Heretic's descendants had suffered for his ambition. Still, I couldn't help but think that it was Ravka that had been made to pay in blood.

FALL TURNED TO WINTER, and cold winds stripped the branches in the palace gardens bare. Our table was still laden with fresh fruit and flowers furnished from the Grisha hothouses, where they made their own weather. But even juicy plums and purple grapes did little to improve my appetite.

Somehow I'd thought that my conversation with the Darkling might change something in me. I wanted to believe the things he'd said, and standing by the lakeshore, I almost had. But nothing changed. I still couldn't summon without Baghra's help. I still wasn't truly a Grisha.

All the same, I felt a bit less miserable about it. The Darkling had asked me to trust him, and if he believed that the stag was the answer, then all I could do was hope he was right. I still avoided practicing

with the other Summoners, but I let Marie and Nadia drag me to the *banya* a couple of times and to one of the ballets at the Grand Palace. I even let Genya put a little color in my cheeks.

My new attitude infuriated Baghra.

"You're not even trying anymore!" she shouted. "You're waiting for some magical deer to come save you? For your pretty necklace? You might as well wait for a unicorn to put its head in your lap, you stupid thing."

When she started railing at me, I just shrugged. She was right. I was tired of trying and failing. I wasn't like the other Grisha, and it was time I accepted that. Besides, some rebellious part of me enjoyed driving her into a tizzy.

I didn't know what punishment Zoya had received, but she continued to ignore me. She'd been barred from the training rooms, and I'd heard she would be returning to Kribirsk after the winter fete. Occasionally, I caught her glaring at me or giggling behind her hand with her little group of Summoner friends, but I tried not to let it get to me.

Still, I couldn't shake the sense of my own failure. When the first snow came, I woke to find a new *kefta* waiting for me on my door. It was made of heavy midnight blue wool and had a hood lined in thick golden fur. I put it on, but it was hard not to feel like a fraud.

After picking at my breakfast, I made the familiar walk to Baghra's cottage. The gravel paths, cleared of snow by Inferni, sparkled beneath the weak winter sun. I was almost all the way to the lake when a servant caught up with me.

She handed me a folded piece of paper and bobbed a curtsy before scurrying back up the path. I recognized Genya's handwriting.

> Malyen Oretsev's unit has been stationed at the Chernast outpost in northern Tsibeya for six weeks. He is listed as healthy. You can write to him care of his regiment.
>
> The Kerch ambassadors are showering the Queen with gifts. Oysters and sandpipers packed in dry ice (vile) and almond candies! I'll bring some by tonight.—G

Mal was in Tsibeya. He was safe, alive, far from the fighting, probably hunting winter game.

I should be grateful. I should be glad.

You can write to him care of his regiment. I'd been writing to him care of his regiment for months.

I thought of the last letter I'd sent.

Dear Mal, I'd written. *I haven't heard from you, so I assume you've met and married a volcra and that you're living comfortably on the Shadow Fold, where you have neither light nor paper with which to write. Or, possibly, your new bride ate both your hands.*

I'd filled the letter with descriptions of Botkin, the Queen's snuffling dog, and the Grisha's curious fascination with peasant customs. I'd told him about beautiful Genya and the pavilions by the lake and the marvelous glass dome in the library. I'd told him about mysterious Baghra and the orchids in the hothouse and the birds painted above my bed. But I hadn't told him about Morozova's stag or the fact that I was such a disaster as a Grisha or that I still missed him every single day.

When I was done, I'd hesitated and then hastily scrawled at the bottom, *I don't know if you got my other letters. This place is more beautiful than I can describe, but I would trade it all to spend an afternoon skipping stones with you at Trivka's pond. Please write.*

But he had gotten my letters. What had he done with all of them? Had he even bothered to open them? Had he sighed with embarrassment when the fifth and the sixth and the seventh arrived?

I cringed. Please write, Mal. Please don't forget me, Mal.

Pathetic, I thought, brushing angry tears away.

I stared out at the lake. It was starting to freeze. I thought of the creek that ran through Duke Keramsov's estate. Every winter, Mal and I had waited for that creek to freeze so we could skate on it.

I crumpled Genya's note in my fist. I didn't want to think about Mal anymore. I wished I could blot out

every memory of Keramzin. Mostly I wished I could run back to my room and have a good cry. But I couldn't. I had to spend another pointless, miserable morning with Baghra.

I took my time making my way down the lake path, then stomped up the steps to Baghra's hut and banged open the door.

As usual, she was sitting by the fire, warming her bony body by the flames. I plunked myself down in the chair opposite her and waited.

Baghra let out a short bark of laughter. "So you're angry today, girl? What do you have to be angry about? Are you sick of waiting for your magical white deer?"

I crossed my arms and said nothing.

"Speak up, girl."

On any other day, I would have lied, told her I was fine, said that I was tired. But I guess I'd reached my breaking point, because I snapped. "I'm sick of all of this," I said angrily. "I'm sick of eating rye and herring for breakfast. I'm sick of wearing this stupid *kefta.* I'm sick of being pummeled by Botkin, and I'm sick of you."

I thought she would be furious, but instead she just peered at me. With her head cocked to one side and her eyes glittering black in the firelight, she looked like a very mean sparrow.

"No," she said slowly. "No. It's not that. There's something else. What is it? Is the poor little girl homesick?"

I snorted. "Homesick for what?"

"You tell me, girl. What's so bad about your life here? New clothes, a soft bed, hot food at every meal, the chance to be the Darkling's pet."

"I'm not his pet."

"But you want to be," she jeered. "Don't bother lying to me. You're like all the rest. I saw the way you looked at him."

My cheeks burned, and I thought about hitting Bahgra over the head with her own stick.

"A thousand girls would sell their own mothers to be in your shoes, and yet here you are, miserable and sulking like a child. So tell me, girl. What is your sad little heart pining for?"

She was right, of course. I knew very well that I was homesick for my best friend. But I wasn't about to tell her that.

I stood up, knocking my chair back with a clatter. "This is a waste of time."

"Is it? What else do you have to do with your days? Make maps? Fetch inks for some old cartographer?"

"There's nothing wrong with being a mapmaker."

"Of course not. And there's nothing wrong with being a lizard either. Unless you were born to be a hawk."

"I've had enough of this," I snarled, and turned my back on her. I was close to tears and I refused to cry in front of this spiteful old woman.

"Where are you going?" she called after me, her voice mocking. "What's waiting for you out there?"

"Nothing!" I shouted at her. "No one!"

As soon as I said it, the truth of the words hit me so hard that it left me breathless. I gripped the door handle, feeling suddenly dizzy.

In that moment, the memory of the Grisha Examiners came rushing back to me.

I am in the sitting room at Keramzin. A fire is burning in the grate. The heavyset man in blue has hold of me and he is pulling me away from Mal.

I feel Mal's fingers slip as his hand is torn from mine.

The young man in purple picks Mal up and drags him into the library, slamming the door behind him. I kick and thrash. I can hear Mal shouting my name.

The other man holds me. The woman in red slides her hand around my wrist. I feel a sudden rush of pure certainty wash over me.

I stop struggling. A call rings through me. Something within me rises up to answer.

I can't breathe. It's like I'm kicking up from the bottom of a lake, about to break the surface, my lungs aching for air.

The woman in red watches me closely, her eyes narrowed.

I hear Mal's voice through the library door. Alina, Alina.

I know then. I know that we are different from one another. Terribly, irrevocably different.

Alina. Alina!

I make my choice. I grab hold of the thing inside me and push it back down.

"Mal!" I shout, and begin to struggle once more.

The woman in red tries to keep hold of my wrist, but I wriggle and wail until finally she lets me go.

I leaned against the door to Baghra's hut, trembling. The woman in red had been an amplifier. That was why the Darkling's call had felt familiar. But somehow I'd managed to resist her.

At last, I understood.

Before Mal, Keramzin had been a place of terrors, long nights spent crying in the dark, older children who ignored me, cold and empty rooms. But then Mal arrived and all of that changed. The dark hallways became places to hide and play. The lonely woods became places to explore. Keramzin became our palace, our kingdom, and I wasn't afraid anymore.

But the Grisha Examiners would have taken me from Keramzin. They would have taken me away from Mal, and he had been the only good thing in my world. So I'd made my choice. I'd pushed my power down and held it there each day, with all my energy and will, without ever realizing it. I'd used up every bit of myself to keep that secret.

I remembered standing at the window with Mal, watching the Grisha depart in their troika, how tired I'd felt. The next morning, I'd woken to find dark circles beneath my eyes. They'd been with me ever since.

And now? I asked myself, pressing my forehead against the cool wood of the door, my whole body shaking.

Now Mal had left me behind.

The only person in the world who truly knew me had decided I wasn't worth the effort of a few words. But I was holding on still. Despite all the luxuries of the Little Palace, despite my newfound powers, despite Mal's silence, I held on.

Baghra was right. I'd thought I was making such an effort, but deep down, some part of me just wanted to go home to Mal. Some part of me hoped that this had all been a mistake, that the Darkling would realize his error and send me back to the regiment, that Mal would realize how much he'd missed me, that we'd grow old together in our meadow. Mal had moved on, but I was still standing frightened before those three mysterious figures, holding tight to his hand.

It was time to let go. That day on the Shadow Fold, Mal had saved my life, and I had saved his. Maybe that was meant to be the end of us.

The thought filled me with grief, grief for the dreams we'd shared, for the love I'd felt, for the hopeful girl I would never be again. That grief flooded through me, dissolving a knot that I hadn't even known was there. I closed my eyes, feeling tears slide down my cheeks, and I reached out to the thing within me that I'd kept hidden for so long. *I'm sorry*, I whispered to it.

I'm sorry I left you so long in the dark.

I'm sorry, but I'm ready now.

I called and the light answered. I felt it rushing toward me from every direction, skimming over the lake, skittering over the golden domes of the Little Palace, under the door and through the walls of Baghra's cottage. I felt it everywhere. I opened my hands and the light bloomed right through me, filling the room, illuminating the stone walls, the old tile oven, and every angle of Baghra's strange face. It surrounded me, blazing with heat, more powerful and more pure than ever before because it was all mine. I wanted to laugh, to sing, to shout. At last, there was something that belonged wholly and completely to me.

"Good," said Baghra, squinting in the sunlight. "Now we work."

CHAPTER 13

THAT VERY AFTERNOON, I joined the other Etherealki by the lake and called my power for them for the first time. I sent a sheet of light shimmering out over the water, letting it roll over the waves that Ivo had summoned. I didn't have the others' control yet, but I managed. In fact, it was easy.

Suddenly, lots of things seemed easy. I wasn't tired all the time or winded when I climbed the stairs. I slept deeply and dreamlessly every night and woke refreshed. Food was a revelation: bowls of porridge heaped with sugar and cream, plates of skate fried in butter, fat plums and hothouse peaches, the clear and bitter taste of *kvas*. It was as if that moment in Baghra's cottage was my first full breath and I had awakened into a new life.

Since none of the other Grisha knew that I'd had so much trouble summoning, they were all a little baffled by the change in me. I didn't offer any explanations, and Genya let me in on some of the more hilarious rumors.

"Marie and Ivo were speculating that the Fjerdans had infected you with some disease."

"I thought Grisha didn't get sick."

"Exactly!" she said. "That's why it was so very sinister. But apparently the Darkling cured you by feeding you his own blood and an extract of diamonds."

"That's disgusting," I said, laughing.

"Oh that's nothing. Zoya actually tried to put it around that you were possessed."

I laughed even harder.

My lessons with Baghra were still difficult and I never actually enjoyed them. But I did relish any chance to use my power, and I felt like I was making progress. At first, I'd been frightened every time I got ready to call the light, afraid that it just wouldn't be there and I'd be back to where I started.

"It isn't something separate from you," Baghra snapped. "It isn't an animal that shies away from you or chooses whether or not to come when you call it. Do you ask your heart to beat or your lungs to breathe? Your power serves you because that is its purpose, because *it cannot help but serve you.*"

Sometimes I felt like there was a shadow in Baghra's words, a second meaning she wanted me to understand. But the work I was doing was hard enough without guessing at the secrets of a bitter old woman.

She drove me hard, pushing me to expand my reach and my control. She taught me to focus my power in short bright bursts, piercing beams that burned with heat, and long sustained cascades. She forced me to call the light again, and again, and again, until I barely had to reach for it. She made me trek to her cottage at night to practice when it was nearly impossible for me to find any light to summon. When I finally, proudly produced a weak thread of sunlight, she slammed her cane down on the ground and shouted, "Not good enough!"

"I'm doing my best," I muttered in exasperation.

"Pah!" she spat. "Do you think the world cares if you do your best? Do it again and do it right."

My lessons with Botkin were the real surprise. As a little girl, I had run and played with Mal in the woods and fields, but I'd never been able to keep up with him. I'd always been too sickly and frail, too easy to tire. But as I ate and slept regularly for the first time in my life, all of that changed. Botkin put me through brutal combat drills and seemingly endless runs through the palace grounds, but I found myself enjoying some of the challenges. I liked learning what this new, stronger body could do.

I doubted I'd ever be able to outspar the old mercenary, but the Fabrikators had helped even the field. They'd produced a pair of fingerless leather gloves for me that were lined with little mirrors—the mysterious glass discs David had shown me on that first day in the workshops. With a flick of the wrist, I could slide a mirror between my fingers and, with Botkin's permission, I practiced bouncing flashes of light

off them and into my opponent's eyes. I worked with them until they felt almost natural in my hands, like extensions of my own fingers.

Botkin was still gruff and critical, and took every opportunity to call me useless, but once in a while I thought I glimpsed a hint of approval on his weathered features.

Late in winter, he took me aside after a long lesson in which I'd actually managed to land a blow to his ribs (and been thanked for it with a hard cuff across my jaw).

"Here," he said, handing me a heavy knife in a steel and leather sheath. "Always keep with you."

With a jolt, I saw that it was no ordinary knife. It was Grisha steel. "Thank you," I managed.

"Not 'thank you,'" he said. He tapped the ugly scar at his throat. "Steel is earned."

Winter looked different to me than it ever had before. I spent sunny afternoons skating on the lake or sledding on the palace grounds with the other Summoners. Snowy evenings were spent in the domed hall, gathered around the tile ovens, drinking *kvas* and gorging ourselves on sweets. We celebrated the feast of Sankt Nikolai with huge bowls of dumpling soup and *kutya* made with honey and poppy seeds. Some of the other Grisha left the palace to go on sleigh rides and dogsledding excursions in the snow-blanketed countryside surrounding Os Alta, but for security reasons, I was still confined to the palace grounds.

I didn't mind. I felt more comfortable with the Summoners now, but I doubted I'd ever really enjoy being around Marie and Nadia. I was much happier sitting in my room with Genya, drinking tea and gossiping by the fire. I loved to hear all the court gossip, and even better were the tales of the opulent parties at the Grand Palace. My favorite was the story of the massive pie that a count had presented to the King, and the dwarf who had burst out of it to hand the *tsaritsa* a bouquet of forget-me-nots.

At the end of the season, the King and the Queen would host a final winter fete that all the Grisha would attend. Genya claimed it would be the most lavish party of all. Every noble family and high court officer would be there, along with military heroes, foreign dignitaries, and the *tsarevitch*, the King's eldest son and heir to the throne. I'd once seen the Crown Prince riding around the palace grounds on a white gelding that was roughly the size of a house. He was almost handsome, but he had the King's weak chin and eyes so heavy-lidded that it was hard to tell if he was tired or just supremely bored.

"Probably drunk," said Genya, stirring her tea. "He devotes all his time to hunting, horses, and imbibing. Drives the Queen mad."

"Well, Ravka is at war. He should probably be more concerned with matters of state."

"Oh she doesn't care about that. She just wants him to find a bride instead of gallivanting around the world spending mounds of gold buying up ponies."

"What about the other one?" I asked. I knew the King and Queen had a younger son, but I'd never actually seen him.

"*Sobachka*?"

"You can't call a royal prince 'puppy,'" I laughed.

"That's what everyone calls him." She lowered her voice. "And there are rumors that he isn't strictly royal."

I nearly choked on my tea. "No!"

"Only the Queen knows for sure. He's a bit of a black sheep anyway. He insisted on doing his military service in the infantry, then he apprenticed to a gunsmith."

"And he's never at court?"

"Not in years. I think he's off studying shipbuilding or something equally dull. He'd probably get along well with David," she added sourly.

"What do you two talk about, anyway?" I asked curiously. I still didn't quite understand Genya's fascination with the Fabrikator.

She sighed. "The usual. Life. Love. The melting point of iron ore." She wound a curl of bright red hair around her finger, and her cheeks flushed a pretty pink. "He's actually quite funny when he lets himself be."

"Really?"

Genya shrugged. "*I* think so."

I patted her hand reassuringly. "He'll come around. He's just shy."

"Maybe I should lie down on a table in the workroom and wait to see if he welds something to me."

"I think that's the way most great love stories begin."

She laughed, and I felt a sudden niggle of guilt. Genya talked so easily about David, but I'd never confided in her about Mal.

That's because there's nothing to confide, I reminded myself harshly and added more sugar to my tea.

ONE QUIET AFTERNOON when the other Grisha had ventured out of Os Alta, Genya convinced me to sneak into the Grand Palace, and we spent hours looking through the clothes and shoes in the Queen's dressing room. Genya insisted that I try on a pale pink silk gown studded with riverpearls, and when she laced me up in it and stuck me in front of one of the giant golden mirrors, I had to look twice.

I'd learned to avoid mirrors. They never seemed to show me what I wanted to see. But the girl standing next to Genya in the glass was a stranger. She had rosy cheeks and shiny hair and … a shape. I could have stared at her for hours. I suddenly wished good old Mikhael could see me. *"Sticks" indeed*, I thought smugly.

Genya caught my eye in the mirror and grinned.

"Is this why you dragged me in here?" I asked suspiciously.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

"I just thought you might want to get a good look at yourself, that's all."

I swallowed the embarrassing lump in my throat and gave her an impulsive hug. "Thanks," I whispered. Then I gave her a little shove. "Now get out of the way. It's impossible to feel pretty with you standing next to me."

We spent the rest of the afternoon trying on dresses and goggling at ourselves in the mirror—two activities I never would have expected to enjoy. We lost track of time, and Genya had to help me scramble out of an aquamarine ball gown and back into my *kefta* so that I could hurry down to the lake for my evening lesson with Baghra. I ran all the way but I was still late, and she was furious.

The evening sessions with Baghra were always the hardest, but she was particularly tough on me that night.

"Control!" she snapped as the weak wave of sunlight that I'd summoned flickered on the lakeshore. "Where is your focus?"

At dinner, I thought but didn't say. Genya and I had gotten so caught up in the distractions of the Queen's wardrobe that we'd forgotten to eat, and my stomach was growling.

I centered myself and the light bloomed brighter, reaching out over the frozen lake.

"Better," she said. "Let the light do the work for you. Like calls to like."

I tried to relax and let the light call to itself. To my surprise, it surged across the ice, illuminating the little island in the middle of the lake.

"More!" Baghra demanded. "What's stopping you?"

I dug deeper and the circle of light swelled past the island, bathing the whole lake and the school on the opposite shore in gleaming sunlight. Though there was snow on the ground, the air around us shone bright and heavy with summer heat. My body thrummed with power. It was exhilarating, but I could feel myself tiring, bumping up against the limits of my abilities.

"More!" Baghra shouted.

"I can't!" I protested.

"More!" she said again, and there was an urgency in her voice that sounded an alarm inside of me and caused my focus to falter. The light wavered and slipped from my grasp. I scrambled for it but it rushed away from me, plunging the school, then the island, and then the lakeshore back into darkness.

"It's not enough." His voice made me jump. The Darkling emerged from the shadows onto the lamplit path.

"It might be," said Baghra. "You see how strong she is. I wasn't even helping her. Give her an amplifier and see what she can do."

The Darkling shook his head. "She'll have the stag."

Baghra scowled. "You're a fool."

“I’ve been called worse. Often by you.”

“This is folly. You must reconsider.”

The Darkling’s face went cold. “I *must*? You don’t give me orders anymore, old woman. I know what has to be done.”

“I might surprise you,” I piped up. The Darkling and Baghra turned to stare at me. It was almost like they’d forgotten I was there. “Baghra’s right. I know I can do better. I can work harder.”

“You’ve been on the Shadow Fold, Alina. You know what we’re up against.”

I felt suddenly stubborn. “I know that I’m getting stronger every day. If you give me a chance—”

Again, the Darkling shook his head. “I can’t take that kind of a chance. Not with Ravka’s future at stake.”

“I understand,” I said numbly.

“Do you?”

“Yes,” I said. “Without Morozova’s stag, I’m pretty much useless.”

“Ah, so she’s not as stupid as she looks,” cackled Baghra.

“Leave us,” said the Darkling with surprising ferocity.

“We’ll all suffer for your pride, boy.”

“I won’t ask you again.”

Baghra gave him a disgusted glower, then turned on her heel and marched back up the path to her cottage.

When her door slammed shut, the Darkling regarded me in the lamplight. “You look well,” he said.

“Thanks,” I mumbled, my eyes sliding away. Maybe Genya could teach me to take a compliment.

“If you’re returning to the Little Palace, I’ll walk with you,” he said.

For a while, we strolled in silence along the lakeshore, past the deserted stone pavilions. Across the ice, I could see the lights of the school.

Finally, I had to ask. “Has there been any word? Of the stag?”

He pressed his lips together. “No,” he said. “My men think that the herd may have crossed into Fjerda.”

“Oh,” I said, trying to hide my disappointment.

He stopped abruptly. “I don’t think you’re useless, Alina.”

“I know,” I said to the tops of my boots. “Not useless. Just not exactly useful.”

“No Grisha is powerful enough to face the Fold. Not even me.”

“I get it.”

“But you don’t like it.”

“Should I? If I can’t help you destroy the Fold, then what exactly am I good for? Midnight picnics? Keeping your feet warm in the winter?”

His mouth quirked up in a half smile. “Midnight picnics?”

I couldn’t smile back. “Botkin told me that Grisha steel is earned. It’s not that I’m not grateful for all of this. I am, truly. But I don’t feel like I’ve earned any of it.”

He sighed. “I’m sorry, Alina. I asked you to trust me and I haven’t delivered.”

He looked so weary that I felt instantly contrite. “It’s not that—”

“It’s true.” He took another deep breath and ran a hand over his neck. “Maybe Baghra’s right, as much as I hate to admit it.”

I cocked my head to one side. “You never seem fazed by anything. Why do you let her bother you so much?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I think she’s good for you.”

He started in surprise. “Why?”

“Because she’s the only one around here who isn’t scared of you or constantly trying to impress you.”

“Are you trying to impress me?”

“Of course,” I laughed.

“Do you always say exactly what you’re thinking?”

“Not even half the time.”

Then he laughed too, and I remembered how much I liked the sound. “Then I guess I should count myself lucky,” he said.

“What’s Baghra’s power, anyway?” I asked, the thought occurring to me for the first time. She was an amplifier like the Darkling, but he had his own power, too.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “I think she was a Tidemaker. No one around here is old enough to remember.” He looked down at me. The cold air had put a flush in his cheeks, and the lamplight shone in his gray eyes. “Alina, if I tell you that I still believe we can find the stag, would you think I’m mad?”

“Why would you care what I think?”

He looked genuinely baffled. “I don’t know,” he said. “But I do.”

And then he kissed me.

It happened so suddenly that I barely had time to react. One moment, I was staring into his slate-colored eyes, and the next, his lips were pressed to mine. I felt that familiar sense of surety melt through me as my body sang with sudden heat and my heart jumped into a skittery dance. Then, just as suddenly, he stepped back. He looked as surprised as I felt.

“I didn’t mean … ,” he said.

At that moment, we heard footsteps and Ivan rounded the corner. He bowed to the Darkling and then to me, but I caught a little smirk playing on his lips.

“The Apparat is getting impatient,” he said.

“One of his less appealing traits,” replied the Darkling smoothly. The look of surprise had vanished from his face. He bowed to me, completely composed, and without another glance, he and Ivan left me standing in the snow.

I stood there for a long moment and then made my way back to the Little Palace in a daze. *What just happened?* I touched my fingers to my lips. *Did the Darkling really just kiss me?* I avoided the domed hall and went straight to my room, but once I was there, I didn’t know what to do with myself. I rang for a dinner tray and then sat picking at my food. I was desperate to talk to Genya, but she slept at the Grand Palace every night, and I didn’t have the courage to go try to find her. Finally, I gave up and decided to go down to the domed hall after all.

Marie and Nadia had returned from their sleighing excursion and were sitting by the fire, drinking tea. I was shocked to see Sergei sitting next to Marie, his arm looped through hers. *Maybe there’s something in the air*, I thought in amazement.

I sat sipping tea with them, asking about their day and their trip to the countryside, but I had trouble keeping my mind on the conversation. My thoughts kept wandering back to the feel of the Darkling’s lips on mine and the way he’d looked standing in the lamplight, his breath a white cloud in the cold night air, that stunned expression on his face.

I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep, so when Marie suggested going to the *banya*, I decided to join them. Ana Kuya had always told us that the *banya* was barbaric, an excuse for peasants to drink *kvas* and engage in wanton behavior. But I was beginning to realize that old Ana had been a bit of a snob.

I sat in the steam for as long as I could bear the heat and then plunged, squealing, into the snow with the others, before running back inside to do it all over again. I stayed until long past midnight, laughing and gasping, trying to clear my head.

When I stumbled back to my room, I fell into bed, my skin damp and pink, my hair in wet tangles. I felt flushed and boneless, but my mind was still whirring. I focused and summoned a warm wash of sunlight, making it dance in slivers across the painted ceiling, letting the sure rush of power soothe my nerves. Then the memory of the Darkling’s kiss blew through me and rattled my concentration, scattering my thoughts and making my heart swoop and dive like a bird borne aloft by uncertain currents.

The light shattered, leaving me in darkness.

CHAPTER 14

AS WINTER DREW to a close, talk turned to the King and Queen's fete at the Grand Palace. The Grisha Summoners were expected to put on a demonstration of their powers to entertain the nobles, and much time was spent discussing who would perform and what would make the most impressive showing.

"Just don't call it 'performing,'" Genya warned. "The Darkling can't stand it. He thinks the winter fete is a giant waste of Grisha time."

I thought he might have a point. The Materialki workshops buzzed morning and night with orders from the palace for cloth and gems and fireworks. The Summoners spent hours at the stone pavilions honing their "demonstrations." Given that Ravka was at war and had been for over a hundred years, it all seemed a little frivolous. Still, I hadn't been to many parties, and it was hard not to get caught up in the talk of silks and dances and flowers.

Baghra had no patience with me. If I lost focus for even a moment, she'd smack me with her stick and say, "Dreaming of dancing with your dark prince?"

I ignored her but, too often, she was right. Despite my best efforts, I was thinking of the Darkling. He'd disappeared once again, and Genya told me that he'd left for the north. The other Grisha speculated that he would have to put in an appearance at the winter fete, but no one could be sure. Again and again, I found myself on the verge of telling Genya about the kiss, but I always stopped just as the words were on my lips.

You're being ridiculous, I told myself sternly. *It didn't mean anything. He probably kisses a lot of Grisha girls. And why would the Darkling have any interest in you when there are people like Genya and Zoya around?* But if all those things were true, I didn't want to know. As long as I kept my mouth shut, the kiss was a secret that the Darkling and I shared, and I wanted it to stay that way. All the same, some days it took everything in me not to stand up in the middle of breakfast and shout, "The Darkling kissed me!"

If Baghra was disappointed in me, it was nothing compared to my disappointment in myself. As hard as I pushed, my limitations were becoming obvious. At the end of every lesson, I kept hearing the Darkling say, "It's not enough," and I knew he was right. He wanted to destroy the very fabric of the Fold, to turn back the black tide of the Unsea, and I simply wasn't strong enough to manage that. I'd read enough to understand that this was the way of things. All Grisha had limits to their power, even the Darkling. But he'd said I was going to change the world, and it was hard to accept that I might not be up to the task.

The Darkling had vanished, but the Apparat seemed to be everywhere. He lurked in hallways and by the path to the lake. I thought he might be trying to trap me alone again, but I didn't want to listen to him rant about faith and suffering. I was careful never to let him catch me by myself.

On the day of the winter fete, I was excused from my classes, but I went to see Botkin anyway. I was too anxious about my part in the demonstration and the prospect of seeing the Darkling again to just sit in my room. Being around the other Grisha didn't help. Marie and Nadia talked constantly about their new silk *kefta* and what jewels they intended to wear, and David and the other Fabrikators kept accosting me to talk over the details of the demonstration. So I avoided the domed hall and went out to the training rooms by the stables.

Botkin put me through my paces and made me drill using my mirrors. Without them, I was still pretty helpless against him. But with my gloves on, I could almost hold my own. Or so I thought. When the lesson was over, Botkin admitted that he'd been pulling his punches.

"Should not hit girl in face when she is going to party," he said with a shrug. "Botkin will be fairer tomorrow."

I groaned at the prospect.

I had a quick dinner in the domed hall and then, before anyone could corner me, I hurried up to my room, already thinking of my beautiful sunken tub. The *banya* was fun, but I'd had my share of communal bathing

in the army, and privacy was still a novelty to me.

When I'd had a long, luxurious soak, I sat down by the windows to dry my hair and watch night fall over the lake. Soon, the lamps lining the long drive to the palace would be lit as nobles arrived in their lavish coaches, each more ornate than the last. I felt a little prickle of excitement. A few months ago, I would have dreaded a night like this: a performance, playing dress-up with hundreds of beautiful people in their beautiful clothes. I was still nervous, but I thought it all might actually be … fun.

I looked at the little clock on the mantel and frowned. A servant was supposed to be delivering my new silk *kefta*, but if she didn't arrive soon, I was going to have to wear my old wool one or borrow something from Marie.

Almost as soon as I'd had the thought, a knock sounded at the door. But it was Genya, her tall frame swathed in cream silk heavily embroidered in gold, her red hair piled high on her head to better display the massive diamonds dangling from her ears and the graceful turn of her neck.

"Well?" she said, turning this way and that.

"I loathe you," I said with a smile.

"I do look remarkable," she said, admiring herself in the mirror over the basin.

"You'd look even better with a little humility."

"I doubt that. Why aren't you dressed?" she asked, taking a break from marveling at her own reflection to notice I was still in my robe.

"My *kefta* hasn't arrived."

"Oh, well, the Fabrikators have been a bit overwhelmed with the Queen's requests. I'm sure it will get here. Now, sit down in front of the mirror so I can do your hair."

I practically squealed with excitement, but I managed to restrain myself. I'd been hoping Genya would offer to do my hair, but I hadn't wanted to ask. "I thought you would be helping the Queen," I said as Genya set her clever hands to work.

She rolled her amber eyes. "I can only do so much. Her highness has decided she doesn't feel up to attending the ball tonight. She has a headache. Ha! I'm the one who spent an hour removing her crow's feet."

"So she's not going?"

"Of course she's going! She just wants her ladies to fuss over her so she can feel even more important. This is the biggest event of the season. She wouldn't miss it for the world."

The biggest event of the season. I let out a shaky breath.

"Nervous?" asked Genya.

"A little. I don't know why."

"Maybe because a few hundred nobles are waiting to get their first look at you."

"Thanks. That really helps."

"You're very welcome," she said, giving my hair a hard tug. "You should be used to being gawked at by now."

"And yet I'm not."

"Well, if it gets too bad, give me a signal, and I'll get up on the banquet table, toss my skirt over my head, and do a little dance. That way no one will be looking at you."

I laughed and felt myself relax a bit. After a moment, trying to keep my voice casual, I asked, "Has the Darkling arrived?"

"Oh yes. He arrived yesterday. I saw his coach."

My heart sank a little. He had been in the palace for an entire day and he hadn't come to see me or called for me.

"I imagine he's very busy," said Genya.

"Of course."

After a moment, she said softly, "We all feel it, you know."

"Feel what?"

"The pull. Toward the Darkling. But he's not like us, Alina."

I tensed. Genya kept her gaze studiously focused on the coils of my hair.

"What do you mean?" I asked. Even to my own ears, my voice sounded unnaturally high.

“His kind of power, the way he looks. You’d have to be mad or blind not to notice it.”

I didn’t want to ask, but I couldn’t help myself. “Has he ever … ? I mean, have you and he ever … ?”

“No! Never!” A mischievous smile twitched on her lips. “But I would.”

“Really?”

“Who wouldn’t?” Her eyes met mine in the mirror. “But I’d never let my heart get involved.”

I gave what I hoped was an indifferent shrug. “Of course not.”

Genya raised her flawless brows and tugged hard on my hair.

“Ouch!” I yelped. “Will David be there tonight?”

Genya sighed. “No, he doesn’t like parties. But I did just happen to drop by the workrooms so he could get a peek at what he was missing. He barely looked at me.”

“I doubt that,” I said comfortingly.

Genya twisted a final piece of my hair into place and secured it with a golden hairpin.

“There!” she said triumphantly. She handed me my little mirror and turned me around so that I could see her handiwork. Genya had piled half of my hair into an elaborate knot. The rest cascaded around my shoulders in shining waves. I beamed and gave her a quick hug.

“Thank you!” I said. “You’re spectacular.”

“A lot of good it does me,” she grumbled.

How was it that Genya had fallen so hard for someone so serious and so quiet and so seemingly oblivious to her gorgeousness? Or was that exactly why she had fallen for David?

A knock at the door pulled me from my thoughts. I practically ran to open it. I felt a rush of relief when I saw two servants standing in the doorway, each carrying several boxes. Until that moment, I hadn’t realized how worried I was about my *kefta* arriving. I laid the largest box on the bed and pulled off the lid.

Genya squeaked, and I just stood there gaping at the contents. When I didn’t move, she reached into the box and pulled out yards of rippling black silk. The sleeves and neckline were delicately embroidered in gold and glittered with tiny jet beads.

“Black,” Genya whispered.

His color. What did it mean?

“Look!” she gasped.

The neckline of the gown was laced with a black velvet ribbon, and from it hung a small golden charm: the sun in eclipse, the Darkling’s symbol.

I bit my lip. This time, the Darkling had chosen to set me apart, and there was nothing I could do about it. I felt a little jab of resentment, but it was drowned by excitement. Had he chosen these colors for me before or after the night by the lake? Would he regret seeing me in them tonight?

I couldn’t think about that now. Unless I wanted to go to the ball naked, I didn’t have a lot of options. I stepped behind the screen and slipped into the new *kefta.* The silk felt cool on my skin as I fumbled with the tiny buttons. When I emerged, Genya broke into a huge grin.

“Ooh, I knew you’d look good in black.” She grabbed my arm. “Come on!”

“I don’t even have my shoes on!”

“Just come on!”

She pulled me down the hall, then threw open a door without knocking.

Zoya shrieked. She was standing in the middle of her room in a *kefta* of midnight blue silk, a brush in her hand.

“Excuse us!” announced Genya. “But we have need of this chamber. Darkling’s orders!”

Zoya’s beautiful blue eyes slitted dangerously. “If you think—” she began and then she caught sight of me. Her jaw dropped, and the blood drained from her face.

“Out!” commanded Genya.

Zoya snapped her mouth shut, but to my amazement, she left the room without another word. Genya slammed the door behind her.

“What are you doing?” I asked dubiously.

“I thought it was important that you see yourself in a proper mirror, not that useless sliver of glass on your dressing table,” she said. “But mostly I wanted to see the look on that bitch’s face when she saw you in the Darkling’s color.”

I couldn't restrain my grin. "That was pretty wonderful."

"Wasn't it?" Genya said dreamily.

I turned to the mirror, but Genya grabbed me and sat me down at Zoya's dressing table. She started rooting around in the drawers.

"Genya!"

"Just wait … aha! I knew she was darkening her lashes!" Genya pulled a little pot of black antimony from Zoya's drawer. "Can you summon a little light for me to work with?"

I called a nice warm glow to help Genya see better and tried to be patient as she made me look up, down, left, right.

"Perfect!" she said when she was done. "Oh, Alina, you look like quite the temptress."

"Right," I said, and snatched the mirror from her. But then I had to smile. The sad, sickly girl with hollowed-out cheeks and bony shoulders was gone. In her place was a Grisha with sparkling eyes and shimmering waves of bronze hair. The black silk clung to my new form, shifting and sliding like sewn-together shadows. And Genya had done something marvelous to my eyes so that they looked dark and almost catlike.

"Jewelry!" shouted Genya, and we ran back to my room, passing Zoya seething in the hallway.

"Are you done?" she snapped.

"For the moment," I said airily, and Genya gave a very unladylike snort.

In the other boxes on my bed, we found golden silk slippers, glittering jet and gold earrings, and a thick fur muff. When I was ready, I examined myself in the little mirror above the basin. I felt exotic and mysterious, like I was wearing some other, far more glamorous girl's clothes.

I looked up to see Genya watching me with a troubled expression.

"What's wrong?" I said, suddenly self-conscious again.

"Nothing," she said with a smile. "You look beautiful. Truly. But …" Her smile faltered. She reached out and lifted the little golden charm at my neckline.

"Alina, the Darkling doesn't notice most of us. We're moments he'll forget in his long life. And I'm not sure that's such a bad thing. Just … be careful."

I stared at her, baffled. "Of what?"

"Of powerful men."

"Genya," I asked before I could lose my nerve, "what happened between you and the King?"

She examined the toes of her satin slippers. "The King has his way with lots of servants," she said. Then she shrugged. "At least I got a few jewels out if it."

"You don't mean that."

"No. I don't." She fiddled with one of her earrings. "The worst part is that everyone knows."

I put my arm around her. "They don't matter. You're worth all of them put together."

She gave a weak imitation of her confident smile. "Oh, I know that."

"The Darkling should have done something," I said. "He should have protected you."

"He has, Alina. More than you know. Besides, he's as much a slave to the whims of the King as the rest of us. At least for now."

"For now?"

She gave me a quick squeeze. "Let's not dwell on depressing things tonight. Come on," she said, her gorgeous face breaking into a dazzling grin. "I'm in desperate need of champagne!"

And with that, she glided serenely from the room. I wanted to say more to her. I wanted to ask her what she meant about the Darkling. I wanted to take a hammer to the King's head. But she was right. There would be plenty of time for trouble tomorrow. I took a last peek in the little mirror and hurried out into the hall, leaving my worries and Genya's warnings behind me.

MY BLACK KEFTA caused quite a stir in the domed hall as Marie and Nadia and a group of other Etherealki dressed in blue velvets and silks swarmed around me and Genya. Genya made to slip away as she usually did, but I held fast to her arm. If I was wearing the Darkling's color, then I intended to take full

advantage of it and have my friend by my side.

"You know I can't go into the ballroom with you. The Queen would have a fit," she whispered in my ear.

"Okay, but you can still walk over with me."

Genya beamed.

As we walked down the gravel path and into the wooded tunnel, I noticed that Sergei and several other Heartrenders were keeping pace with us, and I realized with a start that they were guarding us—or probably me. I supposed it made sense with all of the strangers on the palace grounds for the fete, but it was still disconcerting, a reminder that there were a lot of people in the world who wanted me dead.

The grounds surrounding the Grand Palace had been lit up to showcase tableaus of actors and little troupes of acrobats performing for wandering guests. Masked musicians strolled the paths. A man with a monkey on his shoulder ambled past, and two men covered from head to toe in gold leaf rode by on zebras, throwing jeweled flowers to everyone they passed. Costumed choirs sang in the trees. A trio of redheaded dancers splashed around in the double-eagle fountain, wearing little more than seashells and coral and holding up platters full of oysters to guests.

We had just started to climb the marble steps when a servant appeared with a message for Genya. She read the note and sighed.

"The Queen's headache has miraculously disappeared, and she has decided to attend the ball after all." She gave me a hug, promised to find me before the demonstration, and then slipped away.

Spring had barely begun to show itself, but it was impossible to tell that in the Grand Palace. Music floated down the marble hallways. The air felt curiously warm and was perfumed with the scent of thousands of white flowers, grown in Grisha hothouses. They covered tables and trailed down balustrades in thick clusters.

Marie, Nadia, and I drifted through groups of nobles, who pretended to ignore us but whispered as we passed by with our Corporalki guard. I held my head high and even smiled at one of the young noblemen standing by the entrance to the ballroom. I was surprised to see him blush and look down at his shoes. I glanced at Marie and Nadia to see if they had noticed, but they were gabbling about some of the dishes served to the nobles at dinner—roasted lynx, salted peaches, burnt swan with saffron. I was glad that we'd eaten earlier.

The ballroom was larger and grander than even the throne room had been, lit by row after row of sparkling chandeliers, and full of masses of people drinking and dancing to the sounds of a masked orchestra seated along the far wall. The gowns, the jewels, the crystals dripping from the chandeliers, even the floor beneath our feet seemed to sparkle, and I wondered how much of it was Fabrikator craft.

The Grisha themselves mingled and danced, but they were easy to pick out in their bold colors: purple, red, and midnight blue, glowing beneath the chandeliers like exotic flowers that had sprung up in some pale garden.

The next hour passed in a blur. I was introduced to countless noblemen and their wives, high-ranking military officers, courtiers, and even some Grisha from noble households who had come as guests to the ball. I quickly gave up trying to remember names and simply smiled and nodded and bowed. And tried to keep myself from scanning the crowd for the Darkling's black-clad form. I also had my first taste of champagne, which I found I liked much better than *kvas.*

At one point, I discovered myself face-to-face with a tired-looking nobleman leaning on a cane.

"Duke Keramsov!" I exclaimed. He was wearing his old officer's uniform, his many medals pinned to his broad chest.

The old man looked at me with a flicker of interest, clearly startled that I knew his name.

"It's me," I said. "Alina Starkov?"

"Yes … yes. Of course!" he said with a faint smile.

I looked into his eyes. He didn't remember me at all.

And why should he? I was just another orphan, and a very forgettable one at that. Still, I was surprised at how much it hurt.

I made polite conversation for as long as I had to and then took the first opportunity to escape.

I leaned against a pillar and grabbed another glass of champagne from a passing servant. The room felt uncomfortably warm. As I looked around, I suddenly felt very alone. I thought of Mal, and for the first time

in weeks, my heart gave that old familiar twist. I wished he could be here to see this place. I wished he could see me in my silk *kefta* with gold in my hair. Mostly I just wished that he was standing beside me. I pushed the thought away and took a big gulp of champagne. What difference did it make if some drunk old man didn't know me? I was glad he didn't recognize the scrawny, miserable little girl I'd been.

I saw Genya gliding through the crowd toward me. Counts and dukes and wealthy merchants turned to stare at her as she passed, but she ignored them all. *Don't waste your time,* I wanted to tell them. *Her heart belongs to a gangly Fabrikator who doesn't like parties.*

"Time for the show—I mean, the demonstration," she said when she reached me. "Why are you all by yourself?"

"I just needed to take a little break."

"Too much champagne?"

"Maybe."

"Silly girl," she said, looping her arm through mine. "There's no such thing as too much champagne. Though your head will try to tell you otherwise tomorrow."

She steered me through the crowd, gracefully dodging people who wanted to meet me or leer at her, until we'd made our way behind the stage that had been set up along the far wall of the ballroom. We stood by the orchestra and watched as a man dressed in an elaborate silver ensemble took to the stage to introduce the Grisha.

The orchestra struck a dramatic chord, and the guests were soon gasping and applauding as Inferni sent arcs of flame shooting over the crowd and Squallers sent spires of glitter whirling about the room. They were joined by a large group of Tidemakers who, with the Squallers' help, brought a massive wave crashing over the balcony to hover inches above the audience's heads. I saw hands reach up to touch the shining sheet of water. Then the Inferni raised their arms and, with a hiss, the wave exploded into a swirling mass of mist. Hidden by the side of the stage, I had a sudden inspiration and sent light cascading through the mist, creating a rainbow that shimmered briefly in the air.

"Alina."

I jumped. The light faltered and the rainbow disappeared. The Darkling was standing beside me. As usual, he wore a black *kefta*, though this one was made of raw silk and velvet. The candlelight gleamed off his dark hair. I swallowed and glanced around, but Genya had disappeared.

"Hello," I managed.

"Are you ready?"

I nodded, and he led me to the base of the steps leading to the platform. As the crowd applauded and the Grisha left the stage, Ivo punched my arm. "Nice touch, Alina! That rainbow was perfect." I thanked him and then turned my attention to the crowd, feeling suddenly nervous. I saw eager faces, the Queen surrounded by her ladies, looking bored. Beside her, the King swayed on his throne, clearly well in his cups, the Apparat at his side. If the royal princes had bothered to show up, they were nowhere to be seen. With a start, I realized the Apparat was staring directly at me, and I looked quickly away.

We waited as the orchestra began to play an ominous, escalating thrum and the man in silver bounded onto the stage once again to introduce us.

Suddenly, Ivan was beside us saying something in the Darkling's ear. I heard the Darkling reply, "Take them to the war room. I'll be there shortly."

Ivan darted away, ignoring me completely. When the Darkling turned to me, he was smiling, his eyes alive with excitement. Whatever news he'd gotten had been good.

A burst of applause signaled that it was time for us to take the stage. He took my arm and said, "Let's give the people what they want."

I nodded, my throat dry as he led me up the steps and to the center of the stage. I heard eager buzzing from the crowd, looked out at their expectant faces. The Darkling gave me a short nod. With little preamble, he slammed his hands together and thunder boomed through the room as a wave of darkness fell over the party.

He waited, letting the crowd's anticipation grow. The Darkling might not have liked the Grisha performing, but he certainly knew how to put on a show. Only when the room was practically vibrating with tension did he lean into me and whisper, so softly that only I could hear, "Now."

Heart clattering, I extended my arm, palm up. I took a deep breath and called up that feeling of surety, the feeling of light rushing toward me and through me, and focused it in my hand. A bright column of light shot upward from my palm, gleaming in the darkness of the ballroom. The crowd gasped, and I heard someone shout, “It’s true!”

I turned my hand slightly, angling toward what I hoped was the right spot on the balcony that David had described to me earlier.

“Just make sure you aim high enough, and we’ll find you,” he’d said.

I knew I’d gotten it right when the beam from my palm shot out from the balcony, zigging and zagging across the room as the light bounced from one large Fabrikator-made mirror to the next until the dark ballroom was a pattern of crisscrossing streams of gleaming sunlight.

The crowd murmured in excitement.

I closed my palm, and the beam disappeared, then in a flash I let the light bloom around me and the Darkling, wrapping us in a glowing sphere that surrounded us like a flowing, golden halo.

He looked at me and held out his hand, sending black ribbons of darkness climbing through the sphere, twisting and turning. I grew the light wider and brighter, feeling the pleasure of the power move through me, letting it play through my fingertips as he sent inky tendrils of darkness shooting through the light, making them dance.

The crowd applauded and the Darkling murmured softly, “Now, *show them.*”

I grinned and did as I had been taught, throwing my arms wide and feeling my whole self open, then I slammed my hands together and a loud rumble shook the ballroom. Brilliant white light exploded through the crowd with a *whoosh* as the guests released a collective “Ahhhh!” and closed their eyes, flinging up their hands against the brightness.

I held it for a few long seconds and then unclasped my hands, letting the light fade. The crowd burst into wild applause, clapping furiously and stomping their feet.

We took our bows as the orchestra began to play and the applause gave way to excited chatter. The Darkling pulled me to the side of the stage and whispered, “Do you hear them? See them dancing and embracing? They know now that the rumors are true, that everything is about to change.”

My elation ebbed slightly as I felt uncertainty creep in. “But aren’t we giving these people false hope?” I asked.

“No, Alina. I told you that you were my answer. And you are.”

“But after what happened by the lake …” I blushed furiously and hurried to clarify. “I mean, you said I wasn’t strong enough.”

The Darkling’s mouth quirked in the suggestion of a grin but his eyes were serious. “Did you really think I was done with you?”

A little tremor quaked through me. He watched me, his half smile fading. Then, abruptly, he took me by the arm and pulled me from the stage into the crowd. People offered their congratulations, reached their hands out to touch us, but he cast a rippling pool of darkness that snaked through the crowd and vanished as soon as we had passed. It was almost like being invisible. I could hear snatches of conversation as we slipped between groups of people.

“I didn’t believe it …”

“ … a miracle!”

“ … never trusted him but …”

“It’s over! It’s over!”

I heard people laughing and crying. That feeling of disquiet twisted through me again. These people believed that I could save them. What would they think when they learned I was good for nothing but parlor tricks? But these thoughts were only dim flickers. It was hard to think of anything but the fact that, after weeks of ignoring me, the Darkling had hold of my hand and was pulling me through a narrow door and down an empty corridor.

A giddy laugh escaped me as we slipped inside an empty room lit only by the moonlight pouring in through the windows. I barely had time to register that it was the sitting room where I had once been brought to meet the Queen, because as soon as the door closed, he was kissing me and I could think of nothing else.

I'd been kissed before, drunken mistakes, awkward fumblings. This was nothing like that. It was sure and powerful and like my whole body had just come awake. I could feel my pounding heart, the press of silk against my skin, the strength of his arms around me, one hand buried deep in my hair, the other at my back, pulling me closer. The moment his lips met mine, the connection between us opened and I felt his power flood through me. I could feel how much he wanted me—but behind that desire, I could feel something else, something that felt like anger.

I drew back, startled. "You don't want to be doing this."

"This is the only thing I want to be doing," he growled, and I could hear the bitterness and desire all tangled up in his voice.

"And you hate that," I said with a sudden flash of comprehension.

He sighed and leaned against me, brushing my hair back from my neck. "Maybe I do," he murmured, his lips grazing my ear, my throat, my collarbone.

I shivered, letting my head fall back, but I had to ask. "Why?"

"Why?" he repeated, his lips still brushing over my skin, his fingers sliding over the ribbons at my neckline. "Alina, do you know what Ivan told me before we took the stage? Tonight, we received word that my men have spotted Morozova's herd. The key to the Shadow Fold is finally within our grasp, and right now, I should be in the war room, hearing their report. I should be planning our trip north. But I'm not, am I?"

My mind had shut down, given itself over to the pleasure coursing through me and the anticipation of where his next kiss would land.

"Am I?" he repeated and he nipped at my neck. I gasped and shook my head, unable to think. He had me pushed up against the door now, his hips hard against mine. "The problem with wanting," he whispered, his mouth trailing along my jaw until it hovered over my lips, "is that it makes us weak." And then, at last, when I thought I couldn't bear it any longer, he brought his mouth down on mine.

His kiss was harder this time, laced with the anger I could feel lingering inside him. I didn't care. I didn't care that he'd ignored me or that he confused me or about any of Genya's vague warnings. He'd found the stag. He'd been right about me. He'd been right about everything.

His hand slid down to my hip. I felt a little trill of panic as my skirt slid higher and his fingers closed on my bare thigh, but instead of pulling away, I pushed closer to him.

I don't know what might have happened next—at that moment we heard a loud clamor of voices from the hallway. A group of very noisy, very drunk people were careening down the corridor, and someone bumped heavily into the door, rattling the handle. We froze. The Darkling shoved his shoulder against the door so that it wouldn't open, and the group moved on, shouting and laughing.

In the silence that followed, we stared at each other. Then he sighed and dropped his hand, letting the silk of my skirts fall back into place.

"I should go," he murmured. "Ivan and the others are waiting for me."

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

He stepped away from me. I moved aside, and he opened the door a crack, glancing down the hallway to make sure it was empty.

"I won't return to the party," he said. "But you should, at least for a while."

I nodded again. I was suddenly acutely aware of the fact that I was standing in a dark room with a near stranger and that only a few moments before I'd nearly had my skirts around my waist. Ana Kuya's stern face appeared in my mind, lecturing me about the foolish mistakes of peasant girls, and I flushed with embarrassment.

The Darkling slipped through the doorway, but then he turned back to me. "Alina," he said, and I could see that he was fighting with himself, "can I come to you tonight?"

I hesitated. I knew that if I said yes, there would be no turning back. My skin still burned where he'd touched me, but the excitement of the moment was melting away, and a bit of sense was returning. I wasn't sure of what I wanted. I wasn't sure of anything anymore.

I waited too long. We heard more voices coming down the hall. The Darkling pulled the door shut, striding out into the hallway as I stepped back into the darkness. I waited nervously, trying to think of an excuse for why I might be hiding in an empty room.

The voices passed and I let out a long, shuddering breath. I hadn't had a chance to say yes or no to the Darkling. Would he come anyway? Did I want him to? My mind was whirring. I had to set myself to rights and get back to the party. The Darkling could just disappear, but I didn't have that luxury.

I peeked out into the corridor and then hurried back to the ballroom, stopping to check my appearance in one of the gilt mirrors. It wasn't as bad as I'd feared. My cheeks were flushed, my lips a bit bruised looking, but there was nothing I could do about that. I smoothed my hair and straightened my *kefta.* As I was about to enter the ballroom, I heard a door open at the other end of the hallway. The Apparat was hurrying toward me, his brown robes flapping behind him. *Oh please not now.*

"Alina!" he called.

"I have to get back to the ball," I said cheerily and turned away from him.

"I must speak with you! Things are moving far more quickly than—"

I slipped back into the party with what I hoped was a serene expression. Almost instantly, I was surrounded by nobles hoping to meet me and congratulate me on the demonstration. Sergei hurried over to me with my other Heartrender guards, murmuring apologies for losing me in the crowd. Glancing over my shoulder, I was relieved to see the Apparat's ragged form swallowed by a tide of partygoers.

I did my best to make polite conversation and to answer the questions that the guests asked. One woman had tears in her eyes and asked me to bless her. I had no idea what to do, so I patted her hand in what I hoped was a reassuring manner. All I wanted was to be alone to think, to sort through the confused mess of emotions in my head. The champagne wasn't helping.

As one group of guests moved off to be replaced by another, I recognized the long, melancholy face of the Corporalnik who had ridden with me and Ivan in the Darkling's coach and helped to fight off the Fjerdan assassins. I scrambled to remember his name.

He came to my rescue, bowing deeply and saying, "Fedyor Kaminsky."

"Forgive me," I said. "It's been a long night."

"I can only imagine."

I hope not, I thought with a twinge of embarrassment.

"It seems the Darkling was right after all," he said with a smile.

"Pardon?" I squeaked.

"You were so certain that you couldn't possibly be Grisha."

I returned his grin. "I try to make a habit of getting things hopelessly wrong."

Fedyor barely had time to tell me of his new assignment near the southern border before he was swept away by another wave of impatient guests waiting to get their moment with the Sun Summoner. I hadn't even thanked him for protecting my life that day in the glen.

I managed to keep talking and smiling for about an hour, but as soon as I had a free moment, I told my guards that I wanted to leave and made a beeline for the doors.

The instant I was outside, I felt better. The night air was blessedly cold, the stars bright in the sky. I took a deep breath. I felt giddy and exhausted, and my thoughts seemed to keep bouncing from excitement to anxiety and back again. If the Darkling came to my room tonight, what would it mean? The idea of being his sent a little jolt through me. I didn't think he was in love with me and I had no idea what I felt for him, but he wanted me, and maybe that was enough.

I shook my head, trying to make sense of everything. The Darkling's men had found the stag. I should be thinking about that, about my destiny, about the fact that I would have to kill an ancient creature, about the power it would give me and the responsibility of that, but all I could think about was his hands on my hips, his lips on my neck, the lean, hard feel of him in the dark. I took another deep breath of night air. The sensible thing would be to lock my door and go to sleep. But I wasn't sure I wanted to be sensible.

When we arrived at the Little Palace, Sergei and the others left me to return to the ball. The domed hall was silent, the fires in its tile ovens banked, its lamps glowing low and golden. Just as I was about to pass through the doorway to the main staircase, the carved doors behind the Darkling's table opened. Hurriedly, I stepped into the shadows. I didn't want the Darkling to know I'd left the party early, and I wasn't ready to see him yet anyway. But it was just a group of soldiers crossing through the entry hall on their way out of the Little Palace. I wondered if they were the men who had come to report on the location of the stag. As the light from one of the lamps fell on the last soldier of the group, my heart nearly stopped.

“Mal!”

When he turned around, I thought I might dissolve from happiness at the sight of his familiar face. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I registered his grim expression, but it was lost in the sheer joy I felt. I sprinted across the hall and threw my arms around him, nearly knocking him off his feet. He steadied himself and then pulled my arms from around his neck as he glanced at the other soldiers who had stopped to watch us. I knew I’d probably embarrassed him, but I just didn’t care. I was bouncing on the balls of my feet, practically dancing with happiness.

“Go on,” he said to them. “I’ll catch up to you.”

A few eyebrows were raised, but the soldiers disappeared through the main entrance, leaving us alone.

I opened my mouth to speak, but I wasn’t sure where to begin, so I settled for the first thing that came to mind. “What are you doing here?”

“Hell if I know,” Mal said with a weariness that surprised me. “I had a report to make to your master.”

“My … what?” Then it hit me, and I broke into a huge grin. “You’re the one who found Morozova’s herd! I should have known.”

He didn’t return my smile. He didn’t even meet my eyes. He just looked away and said, “I should go.”

I stared at him in disbelief, my elation withering. So I’d been right. Mal was done with me. All the anger and embarrassment I’d felt over the last few months crashed in on me. “Sorry,” I said coldly. “I didn’t realize I was wasting your time.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“No, no. I understand. You can’t be bothered to answer my letters. Why would you want to stand here talking to me while your real friends are waiting?”

He frowned. “I didn’t get any letters.”

“Right,” I said angrily.

He sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. “We have to move constantly to track the herd. My unit is barely in contact with the regiment anymore.”

There was such weariness in his voice. For the first time, I looked at him, really looked at him, and I saw how much he had changed. There were shadows beneath his blue eyes. A jagged scar ran along the line of his unshaven jaw. He was still Mal, but there was something harder about him, something cold and unfamiliar.

“You didn’t get any of my letters?”

He shook his head, still wearing that same distant expression.

I didn’t know what to think. Mal had never lied to me before, and for all my anger, I didn’t think he was lying to me now. I hesitated.

“Mal, I … Can’t you stay a little while longer?” I heard the pleading in my voice. I hated it, but I hated the thought of him leaving even more. “You can’t imagine what it’s been like here.”

He gave a rough bark of laughter. “I don’t need to imagine. I saw your little demonstration in the ballroom. Very impressive.”

“You saw me?”

“That’s right,” he said harshly. “Do you know how worried I’ve been about you? No one knew what had happened to you, what they’d done to you. There was no way to reach you. There were even rumors you were being tortured. When the captain needed men to report back to the Darkling, like an idiot I made the trek down here just on the chance that I would find you.”

“Really?” That was hard for me to believe. I’d gotten so used to the idea of Mal’s indifference.

“Yes,” he hissed. “And here you are, safe and sound, dancing and flirting like some cosseted little princess.”

“Don’t sound so disappointed,” I snapped. “I’m sure the Darkling can arrange for a rack or some hot coals if that would make you feel better.”

Mal scowled and stepped away from me.

Tears of frustration pricked my eyes. Why were we fighting? Desperately, I reached out to lay a hand on his arm. His muscles tensed, but he didn’t pull away. “Mal, I can’t help the way things are here. I didn’t ask for any of this.”

He looked at me and then looked away. I felt some of the tension go out of him. Finally, he said, “I know

you didn't."

Again, I heard that terrible weariness in his voice.

"What happened to you, Mal?" I whispered.

He said nothing, just stared into the darkness of the hall.

I raised my hand and rested it on his stubbly cheek, gently turning his face to mine. "Tell me."

He closed his eyes. "I can't."

I let my fingertips trail over the raised skin of the scar on his jaw. "Genya could fix this. She can—"

Instantly, I knew I'd said the wrong thing. His eyes flew open.

"I don't need fixing," he snapped.

"I didn't mean—"

He snatched my hand from his face, holding it tightly, his blue eyes searching mine. "Are you happy here, Alina?"

The question took me by surprise.

"I … I don't know. Sometimes."

"Are you happy here *with him*?"

I didn't have to ask who Mal meant. I opened my mouth to answer, but I had no idea what to say.

"You're wearing his symbol," he observed, his glance flicking to the little gold charm hanging at my neckline. "His symbol and his color."

"They're just clothes."

Mal's lips twisted in a cynical smile, a smile so different from the one I knew and loved that I almost flinched. "You don't really believe that."

"What difference does it make what I wear?"

"The clothes, the jewels, even the way you look. *He's all over you.*"

The words hit me like a slap. In the dark of the hall, I felt an ugly flush creeping up my cheeks. I snatched my hand from his, crossing my arms over my chest.

"It's not like that," I whispered, but I didn't meet his gaze. It was as if Mal could see right through me, as if he could pluck every fevered thought I'd ever had of the Darkling right out of my head. But on the heels of that shame came anger. So what if he did know? What right did he have to judge me? How many girls had Mal held in the dark?

"I saw how he looked at you," he said.

"I *like* how he looks at me!" I practically shouted.

He shook his head, that bitter smile still playing on his lips. I wanted to smack it right off his face.

"Just admit it," he sneered. "He owns you."

"He owns you, too, Mal," I lashed back. "He owns us all."

That wiped away his smile.

"No he doesn't," Mal said fiercely. "Not me. Not ever."

"Oh really? Don't you have someplace to be, Mal? Don't you have orders to follow?"

Mal stood up straight, his face cold. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I do."

He turned sharply and walked out the door.

For a moment, I stood there, quivering with anger, and then I ran to the doorway. I got all the way down the steps before I stopped myself. The tears that had been threatening to overflow finally did, coursing down my cheeks. I wanted to run after him, to take back what I'd said, to beg him to stay, but I'd spent my life running after Mal. Instead, I stood in silence and let him go.

CHAPTER 15

ONLY WHEN I WAS in my room, the door closed securely behind me, did I let my sobs overtake me. I slid to the floor, my back pressed against the bed, my arms around my knees, trying to hold myself together.

By now, Mal would be leaving the palace, traveling back to Tsibeya to join the other trackers hunting Morozova's herd. The distance widening between us felt like a palpable thing. I felt further from him than I had in all the lonely months that had gone before.

I rubbed my thumb over the scar on my palm. "Come back," I whispered, my body shaking with fresh sobs. "Come back." But he wouldn't. I'd as good as ordered him to leave. I knew I would probably never see him again, and I ached with it.

I don't know how long I sat there in the dark. At some point I became aware of a soft knocking at my door. I sat up straight, trying to stifle my sniffling. What if it was the Darkling? I couldn't bear to see him now, to explain my tears to him, but I had to do something. I dragged myself to my feet and opened the door.

A bony hand snaked around my wrist, seizing me in an iron grip.

"Baghra?" I asked, peering at the woman standing at my door.

"Come," she said, pulling at my arm and glancing over her shoulder.

"Leave me alone, Baghra." I tried to pull away from her, but she was surprisingly strong.

"You come with me now, girl," she bit out. "Now!"

Maybe it was the intensity of her gaze or the shock of seeing fear in her eyes, or maybe I was just used to doing what Baghra said, but I followed her out the door.

She closed it behind us, keeping hold of my wrist.

"What is this? Where are we going?"

"Quiet."

Instead of turning right and heading toward the main staircase, she dragged me in the opposite direction to the other end of the hall. She pressed a panel in the wall, and a hidden door swung open. She gave me a shove. I didn't have the will to fight her, so I stumbled down the narrow spiral staircase. Every time I looked back at her, she gave me another little push. When we reached the bottom of the stairs, Baghra stepped in front of me and led me down a cramped hallway with bare stone floors and plain wooden walls. It looked almost naked compared to the rest of the Little Palace, and I thought we might be in the servants' quarters.

Baghra grabbed hold of my wrist again and tugged me into a dark, empty chamber. She lit a single candle, locked and bolted the door, then crossed the room and reached up on her tiptoes to draw closed the curtain on the tiny basement window. The room was sparsely furnished with a narrow bed, a simple chair, and a washbasin.

"Here," she said, shoving a pile of clothes at me. "Put these on."

"I'm too tired for lessons, Baghra."

"No more lessons. You must leave this place. Tonight."

I blinked. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm trying to keep you from spending the rest of your life as a slave. Now get changed."

"Baghra, what's going on? Why did you bring me down here?"

"We don't have much time. The Darkling is close to finding Morozova's herd. Soon he will have the stag."

"I know," I said, thinking of Mal. My heart ached, but I also couldn't resist feeling a little smug. "I thought you didn't believe in Morozova's stag."

She waved her arm as if brushing away my words. "That's what I told him. I hoped that he might give up

the stag's pursuit if he thought it was nothing but a peasant tale. But once he has it, nothing will be able to stop him."

I threw up my hands in exasperation. "Stop him from doing what?"

"Using the Fold as a weapon."

"I see," I said. "Does he also plan to build a summer home there?"

Baghra seized hold of my arm, "This isn't a joke!"

There was a desperate, unfamiliar edge to her voice, and her grip on my arm was nearly painful. What was wrong with her?

"Baghra, maybe we should go to the infirmary—"

"I'm not sick and I'm not insane," she spat. "You must listen to me."

"Then talk sense," I said. "How could anyone use the Shadow Fold as a weapon?"

She leaned into me, her fingers digging into my flesh. "By expanding it."

"Right," I said slowly, trying to extricate myself from her grasp.

"The land that the Unsea covers was once green and good, fertile and rich. Now it is dead and barren, crawling with abominations. The Darkling will push its boundaries north into Fjerda, south to the Shu Han. Those who do not bow to him will see their kingdoms turned to desolate wasteland and their people devoured by ravening volcra."

I gaped at her in horror, shocked by the images she had conjured. The old woman had clearly lost her mind.

"Baghra," I said gently, "I think you have some kind of fever." *Or you've gone completely senile.* "Finding the stag is a good thing. It means I can help the Darkling destroy the Fold."

"No!" she cried, and it was almost a howl. "He never intended to destroy it. The Fold is his creation."

I sighed. Why had Baghra picked tonight to lose all touch with reality? "The Fold was created hundreds of years ago by the Black Heretic. The Darkling—"

"He *is* the Black Heretic," she said furiously, her face mere inches from mine.

"Of course he is." With some effort, I pried her fingers loose and stepped past her to the door. "I'm going to go find you a Healer and then I'm going to bed."

"Look at me, girl."

I took a deep breath and turned around, my patience at an end. I felt sorry for her, but this was just too much. "B aghra—"

The words died on my lips.

Darkness was pooling in Baghra's palms, the skeins of inky blackness floating into the air.

"You do not know him, Alina." It was the first time she had ever used my name. "But I do."

I stood there watching dark spirals unfurl around her, trying to comprehend what I was seeing. Searching Baghra's strange features, I saw the explanation clearly written there. I saw the ghost of what must have once been a beautiful woman, a beautiful woman who gave birth to a beautiful son.

"You're his mother," I whispered numbly.

She nodded. "I am not mad. I am the only person who knows what he truly is, what he truly intends. And I am telling you that you must run."

The Darkling had claimed he didn't know what Baghra's power was. Had he lied to me?

I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts, trying to make sense of what Baghra was telling me. "It's not possible," I said. "The Black Heretic lived hundreds of years ago."

"He has served countless kings, faked countless deaths, bided his time, waiting for you. Once he takes control of the Fold, no one will be able to stand against him."

A shiver went through me. "No," I said. "He told me the Fold was a mistake. He called the Black Heretic evil."

"The Fold was no mistake." Baghra dropped her hands and the swirling darkness around her melted away. "The only mistake was the volcra. He did not anticipate them, did not think to wonder what power of that magnitude might do to mere men."

My stomach turned. "The volcra were men?"

"Oh yes. Generations ago. Farmers and their wives, their children. I warned him that there would be a price, but he didn't listen. He was blinded by his hunger for power. Just as he is blinded now."

“You’re wrong,” I said, rubbing my arms, trying to shake the bone-deep cold stealing through me. “You’re lying.”

“Only the volcra have kept the Darkling from using the Fold against his enemies. They are his punishment, a living testimony to his arrogance. But you will change all that. The monsters cannot abide sunlight. Once the Darkling has used your power to subdue the volcra, he will be able to enter the Fold safely. He will finally have what he wants. There will be no limit to his power.”

I shook my head. “He wouldn’t do that. He would never do that.” I remembered the night he’d spoken to me by the fire in the broken-down barn, the shame and sorrow in his voice. *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.* “He said he wants to make Ravka whole again. He said that—”

“Stop telling me what he said!” she snarled. “He is *ancient*. He’s had plenty of time to master lying to a lonely, naive girl.” She advanced on me, her black eyes burning. “Think, Alina. If Ravka is made whole, the Second Army will no longer be vital to its survival. The Darkling will be nothing but another servant of the King. Is that his dream of the future?”

I was starting to shake. “Please stop.”

“But with the Fold in his power, he will spread destruction before him. He will lay waste to the world, and he will never have to kneel to another King again.”

“No.”

“All because of you.”

“No!” I shouted at her. “I wouldn’t do that! Even if what you’re saying is true, I would never help him do that.”

“You won’t have a choice. The stag’s power belongs to whoever slays it.”

“But he can’t use an amplifier,” I protested weakly.

“He can use *you*,” Baghra said softly. “Morozova’s stag is no ordinary amplifier. He will hunt it. He will kill it. He will take its antlers, and once he places them around your neck, you will belong to him completely. You will be the most powerful Grisha who has ever lived, and all that newfound power will be his to command. You will be bound to him forever, and you will be powerless to resist.”

It was the pity in her voice that undid me. Pity from the woman who’d never allowed me a moment’s weakness, a moment’s rest.

My legs gave way, and I slid to the floor. I covered my head with my hands, trying to block out Baghra’s voice. But I couldn’t stop the Darkling’s words from echoing through my mind.

We all serve someone.

The King is a child.

You and I are going to change the world.

He had lied to me about Baghra. He had lied about the Black Heretic. Had he lied about the stag, too?

I’m asking you to trust me.

Baghra had begged him to give me another amplifier, but he’d insisted it had to be the stag’s antlers. A necklace—no, a collar—of bone. And when I’d pushed him, he’d kissed me and I’d forgotten all about the stag and amplifiers and everything else. I remembered his perfect face in the lamplight, his stunned expression, his rumpled hair.

Had it all been deliberate? The kiss by the lakeshore, the flash of hurt that had played across his face that night in the barn, every human gesture, every whispered confidence, even what had happened between us tonight?

I cringed at the thought. I could still feel his warm breath on my neck, hear his whisper in my ear. *The problem with wanting is that it makes us weak.*

How right he was. I’d wanted so badly to belong somewhere, anywhere. I’d been so eager to please him, so proud to keep his secrets. But I’d never bothered to question what he might really want, what his true motives might be. I’d been too busy imagining myself by his side, the savior of Ravka, most treasured, most desired, like some kind of queen. I’d made it so easy for him.

You and I are going to change the world. Just wait.

Put on your pretty clothes and wait for the next kiss, the next kind word. Wait for the stag. Wait for the collar. Wait to be made into a murderer and a slave.

He had warned me that the age of Grisha power was coming to an end. I should have known he would never let that happen.

I took a shaky breath and tried to still my trembling. I thought of poor Alexei and all the others who had been left to die in the black reaches of the Fold. I thought of the ashen sands that had once been soft brown earth. I thought of the volcra, the first victims of the Black Heretic's greed.

Did you really think I was done with you?

The Darkling wanted to use me. He wanted to take away the one thing that had ever really belonged to me, the only power I'd ever had.

I got to my feet. I wasn't going to make it easy for him anymore.

"All right," I said, reaching for the pile of clothes Baghra had brought me. "What do I do?"

CHAPTER 16

BAGHRA'S RELIEF was unmistakable, but she wasted no time. "You can slip out with the performers tonight. Head west. When you get to Os Kervo, find the *Verloren*. It's a Kerch trader. Your passage has been paid."

My fingers froze on the buttons of my *kefta*. "You want me to go to West Ravka? To cross the Fold alone?"

"I want you to disappear, girl. You're strong enough to travel the Fold on your own now. It should be easy work. Why do you think I've spent so much time training you?"

Another thing I hadn't bothered to question. The Darkling had told Baghra to leave me be. I'd thought he was defending me, but maybe he'd just wanted to keep me weak.

I shucked off the *kefta* and pulled a rough wool tunic over my head. "You knew what he intended all along. Why tell me now?" I asked her. "Why tonight?"

"We've run out of time. I never truly believed he'd find Morozova's herd. They're elusive creatures, part of the oldest science, the making at the heart of the world. But I underestimated his men."

No, I thought as I yanked on leather breeches and boots. *You underestimated Mal.* Mal, who could hunt and track like no other. Mal who could make rabbits out of rocks. Mal who would find the stag and deliver me, deliver us all into the Darkling's power without ever knowing it.

Baghra passed me a thick brown traveling coat lined in fur, a heavy fur hat, and a broad belt. As I looped it around my waist, I found a money bag attached to it, along with my knife and a pouch that held my leather gloves, the mirrors tucked safely inside.

She led me out a small door and handed me a leather traveling pack that I slung across my shoulders. She pointed across the grounds to where the lights from the Grand Palace flickered in the distance. I could hear music playing. With a start, I realized that the party was still in full swing. It seemed like years had passed since I'd left the ballroom, but it couldn't have been much more than an hour.

"Go to the hedge maze and turn left. Stay off the lighted paths. Some of the entertainers are already leaving. Find one of the departing wagons. They're only searched on their way into the palace, so you should be safe."

"Should be?"

Baghra ignored me. "When you get out of Os Alta, try to avoid the main roads." She handed me a sealed envelope. "You're a serf woodworker on your way to West Ravka to meet your new master. Do you understand?"

"Yes." I nodded, my heart already starting to race in my chest. "Why are you helping me?" I asked suddenly. "Why would you betray your own son?"

For a moment, she stood straight-backed and silent in the shadow of the Little Palace. Then she turned to me, and I took a startled step back, because I saw it, as clearly as if I had been standing at its edge: the abyss. Ceaseless, black, and yawning, the unending emptiness of a life lived too long.

"All those years ago," she said softly. "Before he'd ever dreamed of a Second Army, before he gave up his name and became the Darkling, he was just a brilliant, talented boy. I gave him his ambition. I gave him his pride. When the time came, I should have been the one to stop him." She smiled then, a small smile of such aching sadness that it was hard to look at. "You think I don't love my son," she said. "But I do. It is because I love him that I will not let him put himself beyond redemption."

She glanced back at the Little Palace. "I will post a servant at your door tomorrow morning to claim that you are ill. I'll try to buy you as much time as I can."

I bit my lip. "Tonight. You'll have to post the servant tonight. The Darkling might … might come to my room."

I expected Baghra to laugh at me again, but instead she just shook her head and said softly, “Foolish girl.” Her contempt would have been easier to bear.

Looking out at the grounds, I thought of what lay ahead of me. Was I really going to do this? I had to choke back my panic. “Thank you, Baghra,” I gulped. “For everything.”

“Hmph,” she said. “Go now, girl. Be quick and take care.”

I turned my back on her and ran.

Endless days of training with Botkin meant I knew the grounds well. I was grateful for every sweaty hour as I jogged over lawns and between trees. Baghra sent thin coils of blackness to either side of me, cloaking me in darkness as I drew closer to the back of the Grand Palace. Were Marie and Nadia still dancing inside? Was Genya wondering where I’d gone? I shoved those thoughts from my mind. I was afraid to think too hard about what I was doing, about everything I was leaving behind.

A theatrical troupe was loading up a wagon with props and racks of costumes, their driver already gripping the reins and shouting at them to hurry things along. One of them climbed up beside him, and the others crowded into a little pony cart that departed with a jingle of bells. I darted into the back of the wagon and wiggled my way between pieces of scenery, covering myself with a burlap drop cloth.

As we rumbled down the long gravel drive and through the palace gates, I held my breath. I was sure that, at any moment, someone would raise the alarm and we would be stopped. I would be pulled from the back of the wagon in disgrace. But then the wheels jounced forward and we were rattling over the cobblestone streets of Os Alta.

I tried to remember the route that I had taken with the Darkling when he had brought me through the city those many months ago, but I’d been so tired and overwhelmed that my memory was a useless blur of mansions and misty streets. I couldn’t see much from my hiding place, and I didn’t dare peek out. With my luck, someone would be passing at just that instant and catch sight of me.

My only hope was to put as much distance as possible between myself and the palace before my absence was noticed. I didn’t know how long Baghra would be able to stall, and I willed the wagon’s driver to move faster. When we crossed over the bridge and into the market town, I allowed myself a tiny sigh of relief.

Cold air crept through the cart’s wooden slats, and I was grateful for the thick coat Baghra had provided. I was weary and uncomfortable, but mostly I was just frightened. I was running from the most powerful man in Ravka. The Grisha, the First Army, maybe even Mal and his trackers would be unleashed to find me. What chance did I have of making it to the Fold on my own? And if I did make it to West Ravka and onto the *Verloren*, then what? I would be alone in a strange land where I didn’t speak the language and I knew no one. Tears stung my eyes and I brushed them furiously away. If I started crying, I didn’t think I’d be able to stop.

We traveled through the early hours of the morning, past the stone streets of Os Alta and onto the wide dirt swath of the Vy. Dawn came and went. Occasionally, I dozed, but my fear and discomfort kept me awake for most of the ride. When the sun was high in the sky and I’d begun to sweat in my thick coat, the wagon rolled to a stop.

I risked taking a peek over the side of the cart. We were behind what looked like a tavern or an inn.

I stretched out my legs. Both of my feet had fallen asleep, and I winced as the blood rushed painfully back to my toes. I waited until the driver and the other members of the troupe had gone inside before I slid out from my hiding place.

I figured I would attract more attention if I looked like I was sneaking around, so I stood up straight and walked briskly around the building, joining the bustle of carts and people on the village’s main street.

It took a little eavesdropping, but I soon realized I was in Balakirev. It was a little town almost directly west of Os Alta. I’d gotten lucky; I was headed in the right direction.

During the ride, I’d counted the money Baghra had given me and tried to make a plan. I knew the fastest way to travel would be on horseback, but I also knew that a girl on her own with enough coin to buy a mount would attract attention. What I really needed to do was steal a horse—but I had no idea how to go about that, so I decided to just keep moving.

On the way out of town, I stopped at a market stall to buy a supply of hard cheese, bread, and dried meat.

“Hungry, are you?” asked the toothless old vendor, looking at me a little too closely as I shoved the food into my pack.

“My brother is. He eats like a pig,” I said, and pretended to wave at someone in the crowd. “Coming!” I shouted, and hurried off. All I could hope was that he would remember a girl traveling with her family or, better yet, that he wouldn’t remember me at all.

I spent that night sleeping in the tidy hayloft of a dairy farm just off the Vy. It was a long way from my beautiful bed at the Little Palace, but I was grateful for the shelter and for the sounds of animals around me. The soft lowing and rustle of the cows made me feel less alone as I curled on my side, using my pack and fur hat as a makeshift pillow.

What if Baghra was wrong? I worried as I lay there. What if she’d lied? Or what if she was just mistaken? I could go back to the Little Palace. I could sleep in my own bed and take my lessons with Botkin and chat with Genya. It was such a tempting thought. If I went back, would the Darkling forgive me?

Forgive me? What was wrong with me? He was the one who wanted to put a collar around my neck and make me a slave, and I was fretting over his forgiveness? I rolled onto my other side, furious with myself.

In my heart, I knew that Baghra was right. I remembered my own words to Mal: *He owns us all.* I’d said it angrily, without thinking, because I’d wanted to hurt Mal’s pride. But I’d spoken the truth just as surely as Baghra. I knew the Darkling was ruthless and dangerous, but I’d ignored all that, happy to believe in my supposedly great destiny, thrilled to think that I was the one he wanted.

Why don’t you just admit that you wanted to belong to him? said a voice in my head. *Why don’t you admit that part of you still does?*

I thrust the thought away. I tried to think of what the next day might bring, of what might be the safest route west. I tried to think of anything but the stormcloud color of his eyes.

I LET MYSELF SPEND the next day and night traveling on the Vy, blending in with the traffic that came and went on the way to Os Alta. But I knew that Baghra’s stalling would only buy me so much time, and the main roads were just too risky. From then on, I kept to the woods and fields, using hunters’ trails and farm tracks. It was slow going on foot. My legs ached, and I had blisters on the tops of my toes, but I made myself keep heading west, following the trajectory of the sun in the sky.

At night, I pulled my fur hat low over my ears and huddled shivering in my coat, listening to my belly grumble and making myself picture maps in my head, the maps I had worked on so long ago in the comfort of the Documents Tent. I pictured my own slow progress from Os Alta to Balakirev, skirting the little villages of Chernitsyn, Kerskii, and Polvost, and tried not to give up hope. I had a long way to go to the Fold, but all I could do was keep moving and hope that my luck held.

“You’re still alive,” I whispered to myself in the dark. “You’re still free.”

Occasionally, I encountered farmers or other travelers. I wore my gloves and kept my hand on my knife in case of trouble, but they took little notice of me. I was constantly hungry. I had always been a rotten hunter, so I subsisted on the meager supplies I’d bought back in Balakirev, on water from streams, and the occasional egg or apple stolen from a lonely farm.

I had no idea what the future held or what waited for me at the end of this grueling journey and yet, somehow, I wasn’t miserable. I’d been lonely my whole life, but I’d never been truly alone before, and it wasn’t nearly as scary as I’d imagined.

All the same, when I came upon a tiny whitewashed church one morning, I couldn’t resist slipping inside to hear the priest say Mass. When he finished, he offered prayers for the congregation: for a woman’s son who had been wounded in battle, for an infant who was ill with fever, and for the health of Alina Starkov. I flinched.

“Let the Saints protect the Sun Summoner,” intoned the priest, “she who was sent to deliver us from the evils of the Shadow Fold and make this nation whole again.”

I swallowed hard and ducked quickly out of the church. *They pray for you now,* I thought bleakly. *But if the Darkling has his way, they’ ll come to hate you.* And maybe they should. Wasn’t I abandoning Ravka and all the people who believed in me? Only my power could destroy the Fold, and I was running away.

I shook my head. I couldn’t afford to think about any of that right now. I was a traitor and a fugitive.

Once I was free of the Darkling, I could worry about Ravka's future.

I set a fast pace up the trail and into the woods, chased up the hillside by the ringing of church bells.

As I pictured the map in my head, I realized I would soon reach Ryevost, and that meant making a decision about the best way to reach the Shadow Fold. I could follow the river route or head into the Petrazoi, the stony mountains that loomed to the northwest. The river would be easier going, but it would mean passing through heavily populated areas. The mountains were a more direct route, but would be much tougher to traverse.

I debated with myself until I came to the crossroads at Shura, then chose the mountain route. I would have to stop in Ryevost before I headed into the foothills. It was the largest of the river cities, and I knew I was taking a risk, but I also knew I wouldn't make it through the Petrazoi without more food and some kind of tent or bedroll.

After so many days on my own, the noise and bustle of Ryevost's crowded streets and canals felt strange to me. I kept my head down and my hat pulled low, sure that I would find posters of my face on every lamppost and shop window. But the deeper I got into the city, the more I began to relax. Maybe word of my disappearance hadn't spread as far or as fast as I'd expected.

My mouth watered at the smells of roasting lamb and fresh bread, and I treated myself to an apple as I refreshed my supplies of hard cheese and dried meat.

I was tying my new bedroll to my traveling pack and trying to figure out how I was going to lug all the extra weight up the mountainside when I rounded a corner and nearly ran right into a group of soldiers.

My heart slammed into a gallop at the sight of their long olive coats and the rifles on their backs. I wanted to turn on my heel and sprint in the opposite direction, but I kept my head low and forced myself to keep walking at a normal pace. Once I'd passed them, I risked a glance back. They weren't looking after me suspiciously. In fact, they didn't seem to be doing much of anything. They were talking and joking, one of them catcalling at a girl hanging out the wash.

I stepped into a side street and waited for my heartbeat to return to normal. What was going on? I'd escaped from the Little Palace well over a week ago. The alarm must have been raised by now. I'd been sure the Darkling would send riders to every regiment in every town. Every member of the First and Second Armies should be looking for me by now.

As I headed out of Ryevost, I saw other soldiers. Some were on leave, others on duty, but none of them seemed to be looking for me. I didn't know what to make of it. I wondered if I had Baghra to thank. Maybe she'd managed to convince the Darkling that I'd been kidnapped or even killed by Fjerdans. Or maybe he just thought that I'd already made it farther west. I decided not to press my luck and hurried to find my way out of town.

It took me longer than I'd expected, and I didn't reach the western outskirts of the city until well past nightfall. The streets were dark and empty except for a few disreputable-looking taverns and an old drunk leaning up against a building, singing softly to himself. As I hurried past a noisy inn, the door flew open and a heavyset man toppled out into the street on a burst of light and music.

He grabbed hold of my coat and pulled me close. "Hello, pretty! Have you come to keep me warm?"

I tried to pull away.

"You're strong for such a little thing." I could smell the stink of stale beer on his hot breath.

"Let go of me," I said in a low voice.

"Don't be like that, *lapushka*," he crooned. "We could have fun, you and me."

"I said let go of me!" I pushed against his chest.

"Not for a bit yet," he chuckled, pulling me into the shadows of the alley beside the tavern. "I want to show you something."

I flicked my wrist and felt the comforting weight of the mirror slide between my fingers. My hand shot out and light flared into his eyes in a single quick flash.

He grunted as the light blinded him, throwing his hands up and letting go of me. I did as Botkin had instructed. I stomped down hard on the arch of his foot and then hooked my leg behind his ankle. His legs flew out from under him, and he hit the ground with a thud.

At that moment, the side door to the tavern flew open. A uniformed soldier emerged, a bottle of *kvas* in one hand and a scantily clad woman clutched in the other. With a wave of dread, I saw that he was dressed

in the charcoal uniform of the Darkling's guard. His bleary glance took in the scene: the man on the ground and me standing over him.

"What's all this?" he slurred. The girl on his arm tittered.

"I'm blind!" wailed the man on the ground. "She blinded me!"

The *oprichnik* looked at him and then peered at me. His eyes met mine, and recognition spread across his face. My luck had run out. Even if no one else was looking for me, the Darkling's guards were.

"You … ," he whispered.

I ran.

I bolted down an alleyway and into a maze of narrow streets, my heart pounding in my chest. As soon as I cleared the last few dingy buildings of Ryevost, I hurtled off the road and into the underbrush. Branches stung my cheeks and forehead as I stumbled deeper into the woods.

Behind me rose the sounds of pursuit: men shouting to one another, heavy footfalls through the wood. I wanted to run blindly, but I made myself stop and listen.

They were to the east of me, searching near the road. I couldn't tell how many there were.

I quieted my breathing and realized I could hear rushing water. There must be a stream nearby, a tributary of the river. If I could make it to the water I could hide my tracks, and they would be hard-pressed to find me in the darkness.

I made for the sounds of the stream, stopping periodically to correct my course. I struggled up a hill so steep I was almost crawling, pulling myself up by branches and exposed tree roots.

"There!" The voice called out from below me, and looking over my shoulder, I saw lights moving through the woods toward the base of the hill. I clawed my way higher, the earth slipping beneath my hands, each breath burning in my lungs. When I got to the top, I dragged myself over the edge and looked down. I felt a surge of hope as I spotted moonlight glimmering off the surface of the stream.

I slid down the steep hill, leaning back to try to keep my balance, moving as fast as I dared. I heard shouts, and when I looked behind me, I saw the shapes of my pursuers silhouetted against the night sky. They had reached the top of the hill.

Panic got the best of me, and I started to run down the slope, sending showers of pebbles clattering down the hill to the stream below. The grade was too steep. I lost my footing and fell forward, scraping both hands as I hit the ground hard and, unable to stop my momentum, somersaulted down the hill and plunged into the freezing water.

For a moment, I thought my heart had stopped. The cold was like a hand, gripping my body in a relentless, icy grip as I tumbled through the water. Then my head broke the surface and I gasped, drawing in precious air before the current grabbed me and pulled me under again. I don't know how far the water took me. All I thought about was my next breath and the growing numbness in my limbs.

Finally, when I thought I couldn't fight my way to the surface again, the current drove me into a slow, silent pool. I grabbed hold of a rock and pulled myself into the shallows, dragging myself to my feet, my boots slipping on the smooth river stones as I stumbled under the weight of my sodden coat.

I don't know how I did it, but I pushed my way into the woods and burrowed under a thick copse of bushes before I let myself collapse, shivering in the cold and still coughing river water.

It was easily the worst night of my life. My coat was soaked through. My feet were numb in my boots. I started at any sound, sure that I'd been found. My fur hat, my pack full of food, and my new bedroll had all been lost somewhere upstream, so my disastrous excursion into Ryevost had been for nothing. My money pouch was gone. At least my knife was still safely sheathed at my hip.

Sometime near dawn, I let myself summon a little sunlight to dry my boots and warm my clammy hands. I dozed and dreamed of Baghra holding my own knife to my throat, her laugh a dry rattle in my ear.

I awoke to the pounding of my heart and the sounds of movement in the woods around me. I had fallen asleep slumped against the base of a tree, hidden—I hoped—behind the copse of bushes. From where I sat, I could see no one, but I could hear voices in the distance. I hesitated, frozen in place, unsure of what to do. If I moved, I risked giving away my position, but if I stayed silent, it would only be a matter of time before they found me.

My heart began to race as the sounds grew closer. Through the leaves, I glimpsed a stocky, bearded soldier. He had a rifle in his hands, but I knew there was no chance that they would kill me. I was too

valuable. It gave me an advantage, if I was willing to die.

They're not going to take me. The thought came to me with sure and sudden clarity. *I won't go back.*

I flicked my wrist and a mirror slid into my left hand. With my other hand I pulled out my knife, feeling the weight of Grisha steel in my palm. Silently, I drew myself into a crouch and waited, listening. I was frightened, but I was surprised to find that some part of me felt eager.

I watched the bearded soldier through the leaves, circling closer until he was just feet from me. I could see a bead of sweat trickling down his neck, the morning light gleaming off his rifle barrel, and for a moment, I thought he might be looking right at me. A call sounded from deep in the woods. The soldier shouted back to them. "*Nichyevo!*" Nothing.

And then, to my amazement, he turned and walked away from me.

I listened as the sounds faded, the voices growing more distant, the footfalls more faint. Could I possibly be so lucky? Had they somehow mistaken an animal's trail or another traveler's for mine? Or was it some kind of trick? I waited, my body trembling, until all I could hear was the relative quiet of the wood, the calls of insects and birds, the rustle of the wind in the trees.

At last, I slid the mirror back into my glove and took a deep, shuddering breath. I returned my knife to its sheath and slowly rose out of my crouch. I reached for my still-damp coat lying in a crumpled heap on the ground and froze at the unmistakable sound of a soft step behind me.

I spun on my heel, my heart in my throat, and saw a figure partially hidden by branches, only a few feet from me. I'd been so focused on the bearded soldier that I hadn't realized there was someone behind me. In an instant, the knife was back in my hand, the mirror held high as the figure emerged silently from the trees. I stared, sure I must be hallucinating.

Mal.

I opened my mouth to speak, but he put his finger to his lips in warning, his gaze locked on mine. He waited a moment, listening, then gestured to me to follow and melted back into the woods. I grabbed my coat and hurried after him, doing my best to keep up. It was no easy task. He moved silently, slipping like a shadow through the branches, as if he could see paths invisible to others' eyes.

He led me back to the stream, to a shallow bend where we were able to slog across. I cringed as the icy water poured into my boots again. When we emerged on the other side, he circled back to cover our tracks.

I was bursting with questions, and my mind kept jumping from one thought to the next. How had Mal found me? Had he been tracking me with the other soldiers? What did it mean that he was helping me? I wanted to reach out and touch him to make sure he was real. I wanted to throw my arms around him in gratitude. I wanted to punch him in the eye for the things he'd said to me that night at the Little Palace.

We walked for hours in complete silence. Periodically, he would gesture for me to stop, and I would wait as he disappeared into the underbrush to hide our tracks. Sometime in the afternoon, we began climbing a rocky path. I wasn't sure where the stream had spit me out, but I felt fairly certain that he must be leading me into the Petrazoi.

Each step was agony. My boots were still wet, and fresh blisters formed on my heels and toes. My miserable night in the woods had left me with a pounding headache, and I was dizzy from lack of food, but I wasn't about to complain. I kept quiet as he led me up the mountain and then off the trail, scrabbling over rocks until my legs were shaking with fatigue and my throat burned with thirst. When Mal finally stopped, we were high up the mountain, hidden from view by an enormous outcropping of rock and a few scraggly pines.

"Here," he said, dropping his pack. He slid sure-footed back down the mountain, and I knew he was going to try to cover the traces of my clumsy progress over the rocks.

Gratefully, I sank to the ground and closed my eyes. My feet were throbbing, but I was worried that if I took my boots off, I would never get them back on again. My head drooped, but I couldn't let myself sleep. Not yet. I had a thousand questions, but only one couldn't wait until morning.

Dusk was falling by the time Mal returned, moving silently over the terrain. He sat down across from me and pulled a canteen from his pack. After taking a swig, he swiped his hand over his mouth and passed the water to me. I drank deeply.

"Slow down," he said. "That has to last us through tomorrow."

"Sorry." I handed the canteen back to him.

“We can’t risk a fire tonight,” he said, gazing out into the gathering dark. “Maybe tomorrow.”

I nodded. My coat had dried during our trek up the mountain, though the sleeves were still a little damp. I felt rumpled, dirty, and cold. Mostly, I was just reeling over the miracle that was sitting in front of me. That would have to wait. I was terrified of the answer, but I had to ask.

“Mal.” I waited for him to look at me. “Did you find the herd? Did you capture Morozova’s stag?”

He tapped his hand on his knee. “Why is it so important?”

“It’s a long story. I need to know, does he have the stag?”

“No.”

“They’re close, though?”

He nodded. “But …”

“But what?”

Mal hesitated. In the remnants of the afternoon light, I saw a ghost of the cocky smile I knew so well playing on his lips. “I don’t think they’ll find it without me.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Because you’re just that good?”

“No,” he said, serious again. “Maybe. Don’t get me wrong. They’re good trackers, the best in the First Army, but … you have to have a feel for tracking the herd. They aren’t ordinary animals.”

And you’re no ordinary tracker, I thought but didn’t say. I watched him, thinking of what the Darkling had once said about not understanding our own gifts. Could there be more to Mal’s talent than just luck or practice? He’d certainly never suffered from a lack of confidence, but I didn’t think this was about conceit.

“I hope you’re right,” I murmured.

“Now you answer a question for me,” he said, and there was a harsh edge to his voice. “Why did you run?”

For the first time, I realized that Mal had no idea why I’d fled the Little Palace, why the Darkling was searching for me. The last time I’d seen him, I’d essentially ordered him out of my sight, but still he’d left everything behind and come for me. He deserved an explanation, but I had no idea where to begin. I sighed and rubbed a hand over my face. What had I gotten us into?

“If I told you that I’m trying to save the world, would you believe me?”

He stared at me, his eyes hard. “So this isn’t some kind of lovers’ quarrel where you turn around and go running back to him?”

“No!” I exclaimed in shock. “It’s not … we’re not …” I was at a loss for words and then I just had to laugh. “I wish it were something like that.”

Mal was quiet for a long time. Then, as if he’d reached some kind of decision, he said, “All right.” He stood up, stretched, and slung his rifle over his shoulder. Then he drew a thick wool blanket from his pack and tossed it to me.

“Get some rest,” he said. “I’ll take the first watch.” He turned his back on me, looking out at the moon rising high over the valley we had left behind.

I curled up on the hard ground, pulling the blanket tight around me for warmth. Despite my discomfort, my eyelids felt heavy and I could feel exhaustion dragging me under.

“Mal,” I whispered into the night.

“What?”

“Thanks for finding me.”

I wasn’t sure if I was dreaming, but somewhere in the dark, I thought I heard him whisper, “Always.”

I let sleep take me.

CHAPTER 17

MAL TOOK BOTH watches and let me sleep the night through. In the morning, he handed me a strip of dried meat and said simply, “Talk.”

I wasn’t sure where to begin, so I started with the worst of it. “The Darkling plans to use the Shadow Fold as a weapon.”

Mal didn’t even blink. “How?”

“He’ll expand it, spread it through Ravka and Fjerda and anywhere else he meets resistance. But he can’t do it without me to keep the volcra at bay. How much do you know about Morozova’s stag?”

“Not much. Just that it’s valuable.” He looked out over the valley. “And that it was intended for you. We were supposed to locate the herd and capture or corner the stag, but not harm it.”

I nodded and tried to explain the little bit I knew about the way amplifiers worked, how Ivan had to slay the Sherborn bear, and Marie had to kill the northern seal. “A Grisha has to earn an amplifier,” I finished. “The same thing is true for the stag, but it was never meant for me.”

“Let’s walk,” Mal said abruptly. “You can tell me the rest while we’re moving. I want to get us deeper into the mountains.”

He shoved the blanket into his pack and did his best to hide any signs that we’d ever made camp there. Then he led us up a steep and rocky trail. His bow was tied to his pack, but he kept his rifle at the ready.

My feet protested every step, but I followed and did my best to tell the rest of the story. I told him everything that Baghra had told me, about the origins of the Fold, about the collar that the Darkling intended to fashion so that he could use my power, and finally about the ship waiting in Os Kervo.

When I finished, Mal said, “You shouldn’t have listened to Baghra.”

“How can you say that?” I demanded.

He turned suddenly, and I almost ran right into him. “What do you think will happen if you make it to the Fold? If you make it onto that ship? Do you think his power stops at the shore of the True Sea?”

“No, but—”

“It’s just a question of time before he finds you and slaps that collar around your neck.”

He turned on his heel and marched up the trail, leaving me standing, dazed, behind him. I made my legs move and hurried to catch up.

Maybe Baghra’s plan was a weak one, but what choice had either of us had? I remembered her fierce grip, the fear in her feverish eyes. She’d never expected the Darkling would really locate Morozova’s herd. The night of the winter fete, she’d been genuinely panicked, but she’d tried to help me. If she’d been as ruthless as her son, she might have dispensed with risk and slit my throat instead. *And maybe we all would have been better off*, I thought dismally.

We walked in silence for a long time, moving up the mountain in slow switchbacks. In some spots, the trail was so narrow that I could do little more than cling to the mountainside, take tiny, shuffling steps, and hope the Saints were kind. Around noon, we descended the first slope and started up the second, which was, to my misery, even steeper and taller than the first.

I stared at the trail in front of me, putting one foot in front of the other, trying to shake my sense of hopelessness. The more I thought about it, the more I worried that Mal might be right. I couldn’t lose the feeling that I’d doomed both of us. The Darkling needed me alive, but what might he do to Mal? I’d been so focused on my own fear and my own future that I hadn’t given much thought to what Mal had done or what he’d chosen to give up. He could never go back to the army, to his friends, to being a decorated tracker. Worse, he was guilty of desertion, maybe of treason, and the penalty for that was death.

By dusk, we’d climbed high enough that the few scraggling trees had all but disappeared and winter frost still lay on the ground in places. We ate a meager dinner of hard cheese and stringy dried beef. Mal still

didn't think it was safe to build a fire, so we huddled beneath the blanket in silence, shivering against the howling wind, our shoulders barely touching.

I had almost dozed off when Mal suddenly said, "I'm taking us north tomorrow."

My eyes flew open. "North?"

"To Tsibeya."

"You want to go after the stag?" I said in disbelief.

"I know I can find it."

"If the Darkling hasn't found it already!"

"No," he said, and I felt him shake his head. "He's still out there. I can feel it."

His words reminded me eerily of what the Darkling had said on the path to Baghra's cottage. *The stag was meant for you, Alina. I can feel it.*

"And what if the Darkling finds us first?" I asked.

"You can't spend the rest of your life running, Alina. You said the stag could make you powerful. Powerful enough to fight him?"

"Maybe."

"Then we have to do it."

"If he catches us, he'll kill you."

"I know."

"All Saints, Mal. Why did you come after me? What were you thinking?"

He sighed and scrubbed a hand over his short hair. "I didn't think. We were halfway back to Tsibeya when we got orders to turn back around and hunt *you.* So that's what I did. The hard part was leading the others away from you, especially after you basically announced yourself in Ryevost."

"And now you're a deserter."

"Yes."

"Because of me."

"Yes."

My throat ached with unshed tears, but I managed to keep my voice from shaking. "I didn't mean for any of this to happen."

"I'm not afraid to die, Alina," he said in that cold, steady voice that seemed so alien to me. "But I'd like to give us a fighting chance. We have to go after the stag."

I thought about what he said for a long while. At last, I whispered, "Okay."

All I got back was a snore. Mal was already asleep.

HE KEPT A BRUTAL PACE over the next few days but my pride, and maybe my fear, wouldn't let me ask him to slow down. We saw an occasional goat skittering down the slopes above us and spent one night camped by a brilliant blue mountain lake, but those were rare breaks in the monotony of leaden rock and sullen sky.

Mal's grim silences didn't help. I wanted to know how he'd ended up tracking the stag for the Darkling and what his life had been like for the last five months, but my questions were met with terse one-word replies, and sometimes he just ignored me completely. When I was feeling particularly tired or hungry, I'd glare resentfully at his back and think about giving him a good whack over the head to get his attention. Most of the time, I just worried. I worried that Mal regretted his decision to come after me. I worried about the impossibility of finding the stag in the vastness of Tsibeya. But more than anything, I worried about what the Darkling might do to Mal if we were captured.

When we finally began the northwest descent out of the Petrazoi, I was thrilled to leave the barren mountains and their cold winds behind. My heart lifted as we descended below the tree line and into a welcoming wood. After days of scrabbling over hard ground, it was a pleasure to walk on soft beds of pine needles, to hear the rustle of animals in the underbrush and breathe air dense with the smell of sap.

We camped by a burbling creek, and when Mal began gathering twigs for a fire, I nearly broke out in song. I summoned a tiny, concentrated shaft of light to start the flames, but Mal didn't seem particularly

impressed. He disappeared into the woods and brought back a rabbit that we cleaned and roasted for dinner. With a bemused expression, he watched as I gobbled down my portion and then sighed, still hungry.

"You'd be a lot easier to feed if you hadn't developed an appetite," he groused, finishing his food and stretching out on his back, his head pillowed on his arm.

I ignored him. I was warm for the first time since I'd left the Little Palace, and nothing could spoil that bliss. Not even Mal's snores.

WE NEEDED TO RESTOCK our supplies before we headed farther north into Tsibeya, but it took us another day and a half to find a hunting trail that led us to one of the villages that lay on the northwest side of the Petrazoi. The closer we got to civilization, the more nervous Mal got. He would disappear for long stretches, scouting ahead, keeping us moving parallel to the town's main road. Early in the afternoon, he appeared wearing an ugly brown coat and a brown squirrel hat.

"Where did you find those?" I asked.

"I grabbed them from an unlocked house," he said guiltily. "But I left a few coins. It's eerie, though—the houses are all empty. I didn't see anyone on the road either."

"Maybe it's Sunday," I said. I had lost track of the days since I'd left the Little Palace. "They could all be at church."

"Maybe," he conceded. But he looked troubled as he buried his old army coat and hat beside a tree.

We were a half mile out from the village when we heard the drums. They got louder as we crept closer to the road, and soon we heard bells and fiddles, clapping and cheering. Mal climbed a tree to get a better view, and when he came down, some of the worry had gone from his face.

"There are people everywhere. There must be hundreds walking the road, and I can see the *dom* cart."

"It's butter week!" I exclaimed.

In the week before the spring fast, every nobleman was expected to ride out among his people in a *dom* cart, a cart laden with sweets and cheeses and baked breads. The parade would pass from the village church all the way back to the noble's estate, where the public rooms would be thrown open to peasants and serfs, who were fed on tea and *blini*. The local girls wore red *sarafan* and flowers in their hair to celebrate the coming of spring.

Butter week had been the best time at the orphanage, when classes were cut short so that we could clean the house and help with the baking. Duke Keramsov had always timed his return from Os Alta to coincide with it. We would all ride out in the *dom* cart, and he would stop at every farm to drink *kvas* and pass out cakes and candies. Sitting beside the Duke, waving to the cheering villagers, we'd felt almost like nobility ourselves.

"Can we go look, Mal?" I asked eagerly.

He frowned, and I knew his caution was wrestling with some of our happiest memories from Keramzin. Then a little smile appeared on his lips. "All right. There are certainly enough people for us to blend in."

We joined the crowds parading down the road, slipping in with the fiddlers and drummers, the little girls clutching branches tied with bright ribbons. As we passed through the village's main street, shopkeepers stood in their doorways ringing bells and clapping their hands with the musicians. Mal stopped to buy furs and stock up on supplies, but when I saw him shove a wedge of hard cheese into his pack, I stuck out my tongue. If I never saw another piece of hard cheese again, it would be too soon.

Before Mal could tell me not to, I darted into the crowd, snaking between people trailing behind the *dom* cart where a red-cheeked man sat with a bottle of *kvas* in one chubby hand as he swayed from side to side, singing and tossing bread to the peasants crowding around the cart. I reached out and snatched a warm golden roll.

"For you, pretty girl!" the man shouted, practically toppling over.

The sweet roll smelled divine, and I thanked him, prancing my way back to Mal and feeling quite pleased with myself.

He grabbed my arm and pulled me down a muddy walkway between two houses. "What do you think you're doing?"

“Nobody saw me. He just thought I was another peasant girl.”

“We can’t take risks like that.”

“So you don’t want a bite?”

He hesitated. “I didn’t say that.”

“I was going to give you a bite, but since you don’t want one, I’ll just have to eat the whole thing myself.”

Mal grabbed for the roll, but I danced out of reach, dodging left and right, away from his hands. I could see his surprise, and I loved it. I wasn’t the same clumsy girl he remembered.

“You are a brat,” he growled and took another swipe.

“Ah, but I’m a brat with a sweet roll.”

I don’t know which of us heard it first, but we both stood up straight, suddenly aware that we had company. Two men had snuck up right behind us in the empty alleyway. Before Mal could even turn around, one of the men was holding a dirty-looking knife to his throat, and the other had clapped his filthy hand over my mouth.

“Quiet now,” rasped the man with the knife. “Or I’ll open both your throats.” He had greasy hair and a comically long face.

I eyed the blade at Mal’s neck and nodded slightly. The other man’s hand slid away from my mouth, but he kept a firm grip on my arm.

“Coin,” said Longface.

“You’re robbing us?” I burst out.

“That’s right,” hissed the man holding me, giving me a shake.

I couldn’t help it. I was so relieved and surprised that we weren’t being captured that a little giggle bubbled out of me.

The thieves and Mal both looked at me like I was crazy.

“A bit simple, is she?” asked the man holding me.

“Yeah,” Mal said, glaring at me with eyes that clearly said *shut up.* “A bit.”

“Money,” said Longface. “Now.”

Mal reached carefully into his coat and pulled out his money bag, handing it over to Longface, who grunted and frowned at its light weight.

“That it? What’s in the pack?”

“Not much, some furs and food,” Mal replied.

“Show me.”

Slowly, Mal unshouldered his pack and opened the top, giving the thieves a view of the contents. His rifle, wrapped in a wool blanket, was clearly visible at the top.

“Ah,” said Longface. “Now, that’s a nice rifle. Isn’t it, Lev?”

The man holding me kept one thick hand tight around my wrist and fished out the rifle with the other. “Real nice,” he grunted. “And the pack looks like military issue.” My heart sank.

“So?” asked Longface.

“So Rikov says a soldier from the outpost at Chernast has gone missing. Word is he went south and never came back. Could be we caught ourselves a deserter.”

Longface studied Mal speculatively, and I knew he was already thinking of the reward that awaited him. He had no idea.

“What do you say, boy? You wouldn’t be on the run, would you?”

“The pack belongs to my brother,” Mal said easily.

“Maybe. And maybe we’ll let the captain at Chernast take a look at it and take a look at you.”

Mal shrugged. “Good. I’d be happy to let him know you tried to rob us.”

Lev didn’t seem to like that idea. “Let’s just take the money and go.”

“Naw,” said Longface, still squinting at Mal. “He’s gone deserter or he took that off some other grunt. Either way, the captain’ll pay good money to hear about it.”

“What about her?” Lev gave me another shake.

“She can’t be up to anything good if she’s traveling with this lot. Could be she’s done a runner, too. And if not, she’ll be good for a bit of fun. Won’t you, sweet?”

“Don’t touch her,” spat Mal, stepping forward.

With one swift movement, Longface brought the handle of his knife down hard on Mal’s head. Mal stumbled, one knee buckling, blood pouring from his temple.

“No!” I shouted. The man holding me clamped his hand back around my mouth, releasing my arm. That was all I needed. I flicked my wrist and the mirror slid between my fingers.

Longface loomed over Mal, the knife in his hand. “Could be the captain’ll pay whether he’s alive or dead.”

He lunged. I twisted the mirror, and bright light shot into Longface’s eyes. He hesitated, throwing his hand up to block the glare. Mal seized his chance. He leapt to his feet and grabbed hold of Longface, throwing him hard against the wall.

Lev loosened his grip on me to raise Mal’s rifle, but I whirled on him, bringing the mirror up, blinding him.

“What the—” he grunted, squinting. Before he could recover, I slammed a knee into his groin. As he bent double, I put my hands on the back of his head and brought my knee up hard. There was a disgusting *crunch*, and I stepped backward as he fell to the ground clutching his nose, blood spurting between his fingers.

“I did it!” I exclaimed. Oh, if only Botkin could see me now.

“Come on!” Mal said, distracting me from my jubilation. I turned and saw Longface lying unconscious in the dirt.

Mal snatched up his pack and ran toward the opposite end of the alley, away from the noise of the parade. Lev was moaning, but he still had a grip on the rifle. I gave him a good hard kick in the gut and sprinted after Mal.

We darted past empty shops and houses and back across the muddy main road, then plunged into the woods and the safety of the trees. Mal set a furious pace, leading us through a little creek and then over a ridge, on and on for what felt like miles. Personally, I didn’t think the thieves were in any condition to come chasing after us, but I was also too out of breath to argue the point. Finally, Mal slowed and stopped, bending double, hands on knees, his breath coming in gasps.

I collapsed to the ground, my heart thudding against my ribs, and flopped onto my back. I lay there with the blood rushing in my ears, drinking in the afternoon light that slanted through the tops of the trees and trying to catch my breath. When I felt like I could talk, I pushed myself up on my elbows and said, “Are you okay?”

Gingerly, Mal touched the wound on his head. It had stopped bleeding, but he winced. “Fine.”

“Do you think they’ll say anything?”

“Of course. They’ll see if they can get some coin for the information.”

“Saints,” I swore.

“There’s nothing we can do about it now.” Then, to my surprise, he cracked a smile. “Where did you learn to fight like that?”

“Grisha training,” I whispered dramatically. “Ancient secrets of the groin kick.”

“Whatever works.”

I laughed. “That’s what Botkin always says. ‘Not showy, just to make pain,’” I said, imitating the mercenary’s heavy accent.

“Smart guy.”

“The Darkling doesn’t think Grisha should rely on their powers for defense.” I was instantly sorry I’d said it. Mal’s smile disappeared.

“Another smart guy,” he said coldly, staring out into the wood. After a minute, he said, “He’ll know that you didn’t head straight to the Fold. He’ll know we’re hunting the stag.” He sat down heavily beside me, his face grim. We’d had very few advantages in this fight, and now we’d lost one of them.

“I shouldn’t have taken us into town,” he said bleakly.

I gave him a light punch on the arm. “We couldn’t know someone was going to try to rob us. I mean, whose luck is actually that bad?”

“It was a stupid risk. I should know better.” He picked up a twig from the forest floor and threw it away angrily.

“I still have the roll,” I offered lamely, pulling the squashed, lint-covered lump from my pocket. It had been baked into the shape of a bird to celebrate the spring flocks, but now it looked more like a rolled-up sock.

Mal dropped his head, covering it with his hands, his elbows resting on his knees. His shoulders began to shake, and for a horrible moment, I thought he might be crying, but then I realized he was laughing silently. His whole body rocked, his breath coming in hitches, tears starting to leak from his eyes. “That better be one hell of a roll,” he gasped.

I stared at him for a second, afraid he might have gone completely mad, and then I started laughing, too. I covered my mouth to stop the sound, which only made me laugh harder. It was as if all the tension and the fear of the last few days had just gotten to be too much.

Mal put a finger to his lips in an exaggerated “Shhhh!” and I collapsed in a fresh wave of giggles.

“I think you broke that guy’s nose,” he snorted.

“That’s not nice. I’m not nice.”

“No, you’re not,” he agreed, and then we were laughing again.

“Do you remember when that farmer’s son broke your nose at Keramzin?” I gasped between fits. “And you didn’t tell anyone, and you bled all over Ana Kuya’s favorite tablecloth?”

“You are making that up.”

“I am not!”

“Yes you are! You break noses, and you lie.”

We laughed until we couldn’t breathe, until our sides ached and our heads spun with it. I couldn’t remember the last time I had laughed like that.

We did actually eat the roll. It was dusted with sugar and tasted just like the sweet rolls we’d eaten as children. When we finished, Mal said, “That *was* a really good roll,” and we burst into another fit of laughter.

Eventually, he sighed and stood, offering a hand to help me up.

We walked until dusk and then made camp by the ruins of a cottage. Given our close call, he didn’t think we should risk a fire that night, so we ate from the supplies we’d picked up in the village. As we chewed on dried beef and that miserable hard cheese, he asked about Botkin and the other teachers at the Little Palace. I didn’t realize how much I’d been longing to share my stories with him until I started talking. He didn’t laugh as easily as he once had. But when he did, some of that grim coolness lifted from him and he seemed a bit more like the Mal I used to know. It gave me hope that he might not be lost forever.

When it was time to turn in, Mal walked the perimeter of the camp, making sure we were safe, while I repacked the food. There was plenty of room in the pack now that we’d lost Mal’s rifle and wool blanket. I was just grateful that he still had his bow.

I bunched the squirrel-fur hat up under my head and left the pack for Mal to use as a pillow. Then I pulled my coat close around me and huddled beneath the new furs. I was nodding off when I heard Mal return and settle himself beside me, his back pressed comfortably against mine.

As I drifted into sleep, I felt like I could still taste the sugar from that sweet roll on my tongue, feel the pleasure of laughter gusting through me. We’d been robbed. We’d almost been killed. We were being hunted by the most powerful man in Ravka. But we were friends again, and sleep came more easily than it had in a long time.

At some point during the night, I woke to Mal’s snoring. I jabbed him in the back with my elbow. He rolled onto his side, muttered something in his sleep, and threw his arm over me. A minute later he started snoring again, but this time I didn’t wake him.

CHAPTER 18

WE STILL SAW shoots of new grasses and even a few wildflowers, but there were fewer signs of spring as we headed north to Tsibeya and into the wild reaches where Mal believed we would find the stag. The dense pines gave way to sparse birchwood forests and then to long stretches of grazing land.

Though Mal regretted our trip into the village, he soon had to admit that it had been a necessity. The nights grew colder as we traveled north, and cookfires weren't an option as we drew closer to the outpost at Chernast. We also didn't want to waste time hunting or trapping food every day, so we relied on our supplies and nervously watched them dwindle.

Something between us seemed to have thawed, and instead of the stony silence of the Petrazoi, we talked as we walked. He seemed curious to hear about life in the Little Palace, the strange ways of the court, and even Grisha theory.

He wasn't at all shocked to hear of the contempt with which most Grisha regarded the King. Apparently, the trackers had been grumbling more and more loudly amongst themselves about the King's incompetence.

"The Fjerdans have a breech-loading rifle that can fire twenty-eight rounds per minute. Our soldiers should have them, too. If the King could be bothered to take an interest in the First Army, we wouldn't be so dependent on the Grisha. But it'll never happen," he told me. Then he muttered, "We all know who's running the country."

I said nothing. I tried to avoid talking about the Darkling as much as possible.

When I asked about the time Mal had spent tracking the stag, he always seemed to find a way to bring the conversation back to me. I didn't press him. I knew that Mal's unit had crossed the border into Fjerda. I suspected that they'd had to fight their way out and that was where Mal had acquired the scar on his jaw, but he refused to say more.

As we were walking through a band of dessicated willows, the frost crunching beneath our boots, Mal pointed out a sparrowhawk nest, and I found myself wishing that we could just keep walking forever. As much as I longed for a hot meal and a warm bed, I was afraid of what the end of our journey might bring. What if we found the stag, and I claimed the antlers? How might an amplifier that powerful change me? Would it be enough to free us from the Darkling? If only we could stay this way, walking side by side, sleeping huddled beneath the stars. Maybe these empty plains and quiet groves could shelter us as they had sheltered Morozova's herd and keep us safe from the men who sought us.

They were foolish thoughts. Tsibeya was an inhospitable place, a wild and empty world of bitter winters and grueling summers. And we weren't strange and ancient creatures who roamed the earth at twilight. We were just Mal and Alina, and we could not stay ahead of our pursuers forever. A dark thought that had flitted through my head for days now finally settled. I sighed, knowing that I had put off talking to Mal about this problem for too long. It was irresponsible, and given how much we'd both risked, I couldn't let it continue.

That night, Mal was almost asleep, his breathing deep and even, before I worked up the courage to speak.

"Mal," I began. Instantly, he came awake, tension flooding through his body, as he sat up and reached for his knife. "No," I said, laying a hand on his arm. "Everything's all right. But I need to talk to you."

"Now?" he grumbled, flopping down and throwing his arm back around me.

I sighed. I wanted to just lie there in the dark, listening to the rustle of the wind in the grass, warm in this feeling of safety, however illusory. But I knew I couldn't. "I need you to do something for me."

He snorted. "You mean other than deserting the army, scaling mountains, and freezing my ass off on the cold ground every night?"

"Yes."

"Hmmph," he grumbled noncommittally, his breath already returning to the deep, even rhythm of sleep.

“Mal,” I said clearly, “if we don’t make it … if they catch up to us before we find the stag, you can’t let him take me.”

He went perfectly still. I could actually feel his heart beating. He was quiet for so long that I began to think he’d fallen back asleep.

Then he said, “You can’t ask that of me.”

“I have to.”

He sat up, pushing away from me, rubbing a hand over his face. I sat up too, drawing the furs tighter around my shoulders, watching him in the moonlight.

“No.”

“You can’t just say no, Mal.”

“You asked, I answered. No.”

He stood up and walked a few steps away.

“If he puts that collar on me, you know what it will mean, how many people will die because of me. I can’t let that happen. I can’t be responsible for that.”

“No.”

“You had to know this was a possibility when we headed north, Mal.”

He turned and strode back, dropping into a crouch in front of me so that he could look into my eyes.

“I won’t kill you, Alina.”

“You may have to.”

“No,” he repeated, shaking his head, looking away from me. “No, no, no.”

I took his face in my cold hands, turning his head until he had to meet my gaze.

“Yes.”

“I can’t, Alina. *I can’t.*”

“Mal, that night at the Little Palace, you said the Darkling owned me.”

He winced slightly. “I was angry. I didn’t mean—”

“If he gets that collar, he really will own me. Completely. And he’ll turn me into a monster. Please, Mal. I need to know you won’t let that happen to me.”

“How can you ask me to do this?”

“Who else could I ask?”

He looked at me, his face full of desperation and anger and something else I couldn’t read. Finally, he nodded once.

“Promise me, Mal.” His mouth set in a grim line, and a muscle twitched in his jaw. I hated doing this to him, but I had to be sure. “Promise me.”

“I promise,” he said hoarsely.

I breathed a long sigh, feeling relief flood through me. I leaned forward, resting my forehead against his, closing my eyes. “Thank you.”

We stayed like that for a long moment, then he leaned back. When I opened my eyes, he was looking at me. His face was inches from mine, near enough that I could feel his warm breath. I dropped my hands from his stubbled cheeks, suddenly aware of just how close we were. He stared at me for a moment and then stood abruptly and walked into the dark.

I stayed awake for a long time, cold and miserable, gazing into the night. I knew he was out there, moving silently through the new grass, carrying the weight of the burden I had placed on him. I was sorry for it, but I was glad that it was done. I waited for him to return, but finally I fell asleep, alone beneath the stars.

WE SPENT THE NEXT few days in the areas surrounding Chernast, scouring miles of terrain for signs of Morozova’s herd, drawing as close to the outpost as we dared. With every passing day, Mal’s mood darkened. He tossed in his sleep and barely ate. Sometimes I woke to him thrashing about under the furs mumbling, “Where are you? Where are you?”

He saw signs of other people—broken branches, displaced rocks, patterns that were invisible to me until

he pointed them out—but no signs of the stag.

Then one morning, he shook me awake before dawn.

"Get up," he said. "They're close, I can feel it." He was already pulling the furs off me and shoving them back into his pack.

"Hey!" I complained, barely awake, trying to yank back the covers to no avail. "What about breakfast?"

He tossed me a piece of hardtack. "Eat and walk. I want to try the western trails today. I have a feeling."

"But yesterday you thought we should head east."

"That was yesterday," he said, already shouldering his pack and striding into the tall grass. "Get moving. We need to find that stag so I don't have to chop your head off."

"I never said you had to chop my head off," I grumbled, rubbing the sleep from my eyes and stumbling after him.

"Run you through with a sword, then? Firing squad?"

"I was thinking something quieter, like maybe a nice poison."

"All you said was that I had to kill you. You didn't say how."

I stuck my tongue out at his back, but I was glad to see him so energized, and I supposed it was a good thing that he could joke about it all. At least, I hoped he was joking.

The western trails took us through groves of squat larches and past meadows clustered with fireweed and red lichen. Mal moved with purpose, his step light as always.

The air felt cool and damp, and a few times I caught him glancing nervously up at the overcast sky, but he drove onward. Late in the afternoon, we reached a low hill that sloped gently down into a broad plateau covered in pale grass. Mal paced along the top of the slope, ranging west and then east. He walked down the hill and up the hill, and down it again, until I thought I would scream. At last, he led us to the leeward side of a large cluster of boulders, slid his pack off his shoulders, and said, "Here."

I shook a fur out on the cold ground and sat down to wait, watching Mal pace uneasily back and forth. Finally, he sat down beside me, eyes trained on the plateau, one hand resting lightly on his bow. I knew that he was imagining them there, picturing the herd emerging from the horizon, white bodies glowing in the gathering dusk, breath pluming in the cold. Maybe he was willing them to appear. This seemed like the right place for the stag—fresh with new grass and spotted with tiny blue lakes that shone like coins in the setting sun.

The sun melted away and we watched the plateau turn blue in the twilight. We waited, listening to the sound of our own breath and the wind moaning over the vastness of Tsibeya. But as the light faded, the plateau stayed empty.

The moon rose, obscured by clouds. Mal didn't move. He sat still as stone, staring out into the reaches of the plateau, his blue eyes distant. I pulled the other fur from the pack and wrapped it around his shoulders and mine. Here, in the lee of the rock, we were protected from the worst of the wind, but it wasn't much for shelter.

Then he sighed deeply and squinted up at the night sky. "It's going to snow. I should have taken us into the woods, but I thought …" He shook his head. "I was so sure."

"It's okay," I said, leaning my head against his shoulder. "Maybe tomorrow."

"Our supplies won't last forever, and every day we're out here is another chance for us to get caught."

"Tomorrow," I said again.

"For all we know, he's found the herd already. He's killed the stag and now they're just hunting us."

"I don't believe that."

Mal said nothing. I pulled the fur up higher and I let the tiniest bit of light blossom from my hand.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm cold."

"It isn't safe," he said, yanking the fur up to hide the light that shone warm and golden on his face.

"We haven't seen another living soul for over a week. And staying hidden won't do us much good if we freeze to death."

He frowned but then he reached out, letting his fingers play in the light, and said, "That's really something."

"Thanks," I said, smiling.

“Mikhael is dead.”

The light sputtered in my hand. “What?”

“He’s dead. He was killed in Fjerda. Dubrov, too.”

I sat frozen in shock. I’d never liked Mikhael or Dubrov, but none of that mattered now. “I didn’t realize …” I hesitated. “How did it happen?”

For a moment, I didn’t know if he would answer or even if I should have asked. He stared at the light that still glimmered from my hand, his thoughts far away.

“We were way up north near the permafrost, way past the outpost at Chernast,” he said quietly. “We had hunted the stag almost all the way into Fjerda. The captain came up with this idea that a few of us should cross the border disguised as Fjerdans and keep tracking the herd. It was stupid, ridiculous really. Even if we managed to get through the border country undiscovered, what were we supposed to do if we caught up with the herd? We had orders not to kill the stag, so we’d have to capture it and then somehow get it back over the border into Ravka. It was insane.”

I nodded. It did sound crazy.

“So that night, Mikhael and Dubrov and I laughed about it, talked about how it was a suicide mission and how the captain was a complete idiot, and we toasted the poor bastards who got stuck with the job. And the next morning I volunteered.”

“Why?” I said, startled.

Mal was silent again. At last, he said, “You saved my life on the Shadow Fold, Alina.”

“And you saved mine,” I countered, unsure of what any of that had to do with a suicide mission into Fjerda. But Mal didn’t seem to hear me.

“You saved my life and then in the Grisha tent, when they led you away, I didn’t do anything. I stood there and let him take you.”

“What were you supposed to do, Mal?”

“Something. Anything.”

“Mal—”

He ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “I know it doesn’t make sense. But it’s how I felt. I couldn’t eat. I couldn’t sleep. I kept seeing you walk away, seeing you disappear.”

I thought of all the nights I had lain awake in the Little Palace, remembering my last glimpse of Mal’s face vanishing into the crowd as the Darkling’s guards led me away, wondering if I would ever see him again. I had missed him so terribly, but I had never really believed that Mal might be missing me just as much.

“I knew we were hunting the stag for the Darkling,” Mal continued. “I thought … I had this idea that if I found the herd, I could help you. I could help to make things right.” He glanced at me and the knowledge of how very wrong he had been passed between us. “Mikhael didn’t know any of that. But he was my friend, so like an ass, he volunteered, too. And then, of course, Dubrov had to sign on. I told them not to, but Mikhael just laughed and said he wasn’t going to let me get all the glory.”

“What happened?”

“Nine of us crossed the border, six soldiers and three trackers. Two of us came back.”

His words hung in the air, cold and final. Seven men dead in pursuit of the stag. And how many others that I didn’t know about? But even as I thought it, a disturbing idea entered my mind: How many lives could the stag’s power save? Mal and I were refugees, born to the wars that had raged at Ravka’s borders for so long. What if the Darkling and the terrible power of the Shadow Fold could stop all that? Could silence Ravka’s enemies and make us safe forever?

Not just Ravka’s enemies, I reminded myself. *Anyone who stands against the Darkling, anyone who dares oppose him.* The Darkling would make the world a wasteland before he ceded one bit of power.

Mal rubbed a hand over his tired face. “It was all for nothing anyway. The herd crossed back into Ravka when the weather turned. We could have just waited for the stag to come to us.”

I looked at Mal, at his distant eyes and the hard set of his scarred jaw. He looked nothing like the boy I’d known. He’d been trying to help me when he went after the stag. That meant that I was partially responsible for the change in him, and it broke my heart to think of it.

“I’m sorry, Mal. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault, Alina. I made my own choices. But those choices got my friends killed.”

I wanted to throw my arms around him and hug him close. But I couldn’t, not with this new Mal. Maybe not with the old one either, I admitted to myself. We weren’t children anymore. The ease of our closeness was a thing of the past. I reached out and laid a hand on his arm.

“If it’s not my fault, then it’s not yours either, Mal. Mikhael and Dubrov made their own choices, too. Mikhael wanted to be a good friend to you. And for all you know, he had his own reasons for wanting to track the stag. He wasn’t a child, and he wouldn’t want to be remembered as one.”

Mal didn’t look at me, but after a moment he laid his hand over mine. We were still sitting that way when the first flakes of snow began to fall.

CHAPTER 19

MY LIGHT KEPT US warm through the night in the lee of the rock. Sometimes I dozed off and Mal had to nudge me awake so that I could pull sun across the dark and starlit stretches of Tsibeya to warm us beneath the furs.

When we emerged the next morning, the sun shone brightly over a world blanketed in white. This far north, snow was common well into spring, but it was hard not to feel that the weather was just another part of our bad luck. Mal took one look at the pristine expanse of the meadow and gave a disgusted shake of his head. I didn't have to ask what he was thinking. If the herd had been close by, any sign they had left would have been covered by the snow. But we would leave plenty of tracks for anyone else to follow.

Without a word, we shook out the furs and stowed them away. Mal tied his bow to his pack, and we began the trek across the plateau. It was slow going. Mal did what he could to disguise our tracks, but it was clear that we were in serious trouble.

I knew Mal blamed himself for not being able to find the stag, but I didn't know how to fix that. Tsibeya felt somehow bigger than it had the previous day. Or maybe I just felt smaller.

Eventually, the meadow gave way to groves of thin silver birches and dense clusters of pines, their branches laden with snow. Mal's pace slowed. He looked exhausted, dark shadows lingering beneath his blue eyes. On an impulse, I slid my gloved hand into his. I thought he might pull away, but instead, he squeezed my fingers. We walked on that way, hand in hand through the late afternoon, the pine boughs clustered in a canopy high above us as we moved deeper into the dark heart of the woods.

Around sunset, we emerged from the trees into a little glade where the snow lay in heavy, perfect drifts that glittered in the fading light. We slipped into the stillness, our footfalls muffled by the snow. It was late. I knew we should be making camp, finding shelter. Instead, we stood there in silence, hands clasped, watching the day disappear.

"Alina?" he said quietly. "I'm sorry. For what I said that night, at the Little Palace."

I glanced at him, surprised. Somehow, that all felt like such a long time ago. "I'm sorry, too," I said.

"And I'm sorry for everything else."

I squeezed his hand. "I knew we didn't have much chance of finding the stag."

"No," he said, looking away from me. "No, not for that. I … When I came after you, I thought I was doing it because you saved my life, because I owed you something."

My heart gave a little twist. The idea that Mal had come after me to pay off some kind of imagined debt was more painful than I'd expected. "And now?"

"Now I don't know what to think. I just know everything is different."

My heart gave another miserable twist. "I know," I whispered.

"Do you? That night at the palace when I saw you on that stage with him, you looked so happy. Like you belonged with him. I can't get that picture out of my head."

"I was happy," I admitted. "In that moment, I was happy. I'm not like you, Mal. I never really fit in the way that you did. I never really belonged anywhere."

"You belonged with me," he said quietly.

"No, Mal. Not really. Not for a long time."

He looked at me then, and his eyes were deep blue in the twilight. "Did you miss me, Alina? Did you miss me when you were gone?"

"Every day," I said honestly.

"I missed you every hour. And you know what the worst part was? It caught me completely by surprise. I'd catch myself walking around to find you, not for any reason, just out of habit, because I'd seen something that I wanted to tell you about or because I wanted to hear your voice. And then I'd realize that

you weren't there anymore, and every time, *every single time*, it was like having the wind knocked out of me. I've risked my life for you. I've walked half the length of Ravka for you, and I'd do it again and again and again just to be with you, just to starve with you and freeze with you and hear you complain about hard cheese every day. So don't tell me we don't belong together," he said fiercely. He was very close now, and my heart was suddenly hammering in my chest. "I'm sorry it took me so long to see you, Alina. But I see you now."

He lowered his head, and I felt his lips on mine. The world seemed to go silent and all I knew was the feel of his hand in mine as he drew me closer, and the warm press of his mouth.

I thought that I'd given up on Mal. I thought the love I'd had for him belonged to the past, to the foolish, lonely girl I never wanted to be again. I'd tried to bury that girl and the love she'd felt, just as I'd tried to bury my power. But I wouldn't make that mistake again. Whatever burned between us was just as bright, just as undeniable. The moment our lips met, I knew with pure and piercing certainty that I would have waited for him forever.

He pulled back from me, and my eyes fluttered open. He raised a gloved hand to cup my face, his gaze searching mine. Then, from the corner of my eye, I caught a flickering movement.

"Mal," I breathed softly, gazing over his shoulder, "look."

Several white bodies emerged from the trees, their graceful necks bent to nibble at the grasses on the edge of the snowy glade. In the middle of Morozova's herd stood a massive white stag. He looked at us with great dark eyes, his silvery antlers gleaming in the half light.

In one swift movement, Mal drew his bow from the side of his pack. "I'll bring it down, Alina. You have to make the kill," he said.

"Wait," I whispered, laying a hand on his arm.

The stag walked slowly forward and stopped just a few yards from us. I could see his sides rising and falling, the flare of his nostrils, the fog of his breath in the chill air.

He watched us with eyes dark and liquid. I walked toward him.

"Alina!" Mal whispered.

The stag didn't move as I approached him, not even when I reached out my hand and laid it on his warm muzzle. His ears twitched slightly, his hide glowing milky white in the deepening gloom. I thought of everything Mal and I had given up, the risks we'd taken. I thought about the weeks we had spent tracking the herd, the cold nights, the miserable days of endless walking, and I was glad of it all. Glad to be here and alive on this chilly night. Glad that Mal was beside me. I looked into the stag's dark eyes and knew the feel of the earth beneath his steady hooves, the smell of pine in his nostrils, the powerful beat of his heart. I knew I could not be the one to end his life.

"Alina," Mal murmured urgently, "we don't have much time. You know what you have to do."

I shook my head. I could not break the stag's dark gaze. "No, Mal. We'll find another way."

The sound was like a soft whistle on the air followed by a dull thunk as the arrow found its target. The stag bellowed and reared up, an arrow blooming from his chest, and then crumpled to his forelegs. I staggered backward as the rest of the herd took flight, scattering into the forest. Mal was beside me in an instant, his bow at the ready, as the clearing filled with charcoal-clad *oprichniki* and Grisha cloaked in blue and red.

"You should have listened to him, Alina." The voice came clear and cold out of the shadows, and the Darkling stepped into the glade, a grim smile playing on his lips, his black *kefta* flowing behind him like an ebony stain.

The stag had fallen on his side and lay in the snow, breathing heavily, his black eyes wide and panicked.

I felt Mal move before I saw him. He turned his bow on the stag and let fly, but a blue-robed Squaller stepped forward, his hand arcing through the air. The arrow swerved left, falling harmlessly into the snow.

Mal reached for another arrow and at the same moment the Darkling threw his hand out, sending a black ribbon of darkness rippling toward us. I raised my hands and light shot from my fingers, shattering the darkness easily.

But it had only been a diversion. The Darkling turned on the stag, lifting his arm in a gesture I knew only too well. "No!" I screamed and, without thinking, I threw myself in front of the stag. I closed my eyes, ready to feel myself torn in half by the Cut, but the Darkling must have turned his body at the last moment.

The tree behind me split open with a loud crack, tendrils of darkness spilling from the wound. He'd spared me, but he'd also spared the stag.

All humor was gone from the Darkling's face as he slammed his hands together and a huge wall of rippling darkness surged forward, engulfing us and the stag. I didn't have to think. Light bloomed in a pulsing, glowing sphere, surrounding me and Mal, keeping the darkness at bay and blinding our attackers. For a moment, we were at a stalemate. They couldn't see us and we couldn't see them. The darkness swirled around the bubble of light, pushing to get in.

"Impressive," said the Darkling, his voice coming to us as if from a great distance. "Baghra taught you far too well. But you're not strong enough for this, Alina."

I knew he was trying to distract me and I ignored him.

"You! Tracker! Are you so ready to die for her?" the Darkling called. Mal's expression didn't change. He stood, bow at the ready, arrow nocked, turning in a slow circle, searching out the Darkling's voice. "That was a very touching scene we witnessed," he sneered. "Did you tell him, Alina? Does the boy know how willing you were to give yourself to me? Did you tell him what I showed you in the dark?"

A wave of shame rushed through me and the glowing light faltered. The Darkling laughed.

I glanced at Mal. His jaw was set. He radiated the same icy anger I had seen the night of the winter fete. I felt my hold on the light slip and I scrambled for it. I tried to refocus my power. The sphere stuttered with fresh brilliance, but I could already feel my reach brushing up against the boundaries of what I could do. Darkness began to leak into the edges of the bubble like ink.

I knew what had to be done. The Darkling was right; I wasn't strong enough. And we wouldn't have another chance.

"Do it, Mal," I whispered. "You know what has to happen."

Mal looked at me, panic flaring in his eyes. He shook his head. Darkness surged against the bubble. I stumbled slightly.

"Quick, Mal! Before it's too late."

In one lightning movement, Mal dropped his bow and reached for his knife.

"Do it, Mal! Do it now!"

Mal's hand was shaking. I could feel my strength ebbing. "I can't," he whispered miserably. "I can't." He let go of the knife, letting it fall soundlessly into the snow. Darkness crashed in on us.

Mal disappeared. The clearing disappeared. I was thrown into suffocating blackness. I heard Mal cry out and reached toward his voice, but suddenly, strong arms had hold of me from both sides. I kicked and struggled furiously.

The darkness lifted, and that quickly, I saw it was over.

Two of the Darkling's guards had hold of me, while Mal struggled between two others.

"Be still or I'll kill you where you stand," Ivan snarled at him.

"Leave him alone!" I shouted.

"Shhhhhh." The Darkling walked toward me, one finger held to his lips, which were curled into a mocking smile. "Quiet now, or I will let Ivan kill him. Slowly."

Tears spilled onto my cheeks, freezing in the cold night air.

"Torches," he said. I heard flint striking and two torches burst into flame, lighting the clearing, the soldiers, and the stag, which lay panting on the ground. The Darkling pulled a heavy knife from his belt, and the firelight glinted off Grisha steel. "We've wasted enough time here."

He strode forward and without hesitating slit the stag's throat.

Blood gushed into the snow, pooling around the stag's body. I watched as the life left his dark eyes, and a sob broke from my chest.

"Take the antlers," the Darkling said to one of the *oprichniki*. "Cut a piece from each."

The *oprichnik* stepped forward and bent over the stag's body, a serrated blade in his hand.

I turned away, my stomach heaving as a sawing sound filled the stillness of the clearing. We stood in silence, our breath curling in the icy air, as the sound went on and on. Even when it stopped, I could still feel it vibrating through my clenched jaw.

The *oprichnik* crossed the glade and handed the two pieces of antler to the Darkling. They were almost evenly matched, both ending in double prongs of roughly the same size. The Darkling clasped the pieces in

his hands, letting his thumb roll over the rough, silvery bone. Then he gestured, and I was surprised to see David emerge from the shadows in his purple *kefta*.

Of course. The Darkling would want his best Fabrikator to fashion this collar. David wouldn't meet my gaze. I wondered if Genya knew where he was and what he was doing. Maybe she would be proud. Maybe she thought of me as a traitor now, too.

"David," I said softly, "don't do this."

David glanced at me and then hurriedly looked away.

"David understands the future," said the Darkling, the edge of a threat in his voice. "And he knows better than to fight it."

David came to stand behind my right shoulder. The Darkling studied me in the torchlight. For a moment, all was silence. Twilight had gone, and the moon had risen, bright and full. The glade seemed suspended in stillness.

"Open your coat," said the Darkling.

I didn't move.

The Darkling glanced at Ivan and nodded. Mal screamed, his hands clutching his chest as he crumpled to the ground.

"No!" I cried. I tried to run to Mal's side, but the guards on either side of me held tight to my arms. "Please," I begged the Darkling. "Make him stop!"

Again, the Darkling nodded, and Mal's cries ceased. He lay in the snow, breathing hard, his gaze fixed on Ivan's arrogant sneer, his eyes full of hatred.

The Darkling watched me, waiting, his face impassive. He looked nearly bored. I shrugged off the *oprichniki*. With shaking hands, I wiped the tears from my eyes and unbuttoned my coat, letting it slide over my shoulders.

Distantly, I was aware of the cold seeping through my wool tunic, of the watching eyes of the soldiers and the Grisha. My world had narrowed to the curving pieces of bone in the Darkling's hands, and I felt a sweeping sense of terror.

"Lift your hair," he murmured. I lifted the hair away from my neck with both hands.

The Darkling stepped forward and pushed the fabric of my tunic out of the way. When his fingertips brushed against my skin, I flinched. I saw a flash of anger pass over his face.

He placed the curving pieces of antler around my throat, one on each side, letting them rest on my collarbones with infinite care. He nodded at David, and I felt the Fabrikator take hold of the antlers. In my mind's eye, I saw David standing behind me, wearing the same focused expression I'd seen that first day in the workrooms of the Little Palace. I saw the pieces of bone shift and melt together. No clasp, no hinge. This collar would be mine to wear forever.

"It's done," whispered David. He dropped the collar, and I felt the weight of it settle on my neck. I bunched my hands into fists, waiting.

Nothing happened. I felt a sudden reckless shock of hope. What if the Darkling had been wrong? What if the collar did nothing at all?

Then the Darkling closed his fingers over my shoulder and a silent command reverberated inside me: *Light.* It felt like an invisible hand reaching into my chest.

Golden light burst through me, flooding the clearing. I saw the Darkling squinting in the brightness, his features alight with triumph and exultation.

No, I thought, trying to release the light, to send it away. But as soon as the idea of resistance had formed, that invisible hand batted it away like it was nothing.

Another command echoed through me: *More*. A fresh surge of power roared through my body, wilder and stronger than anything I had ever felt. There was no end to it. The control I'd learned, the understanding I'd gained collapsed before it—houses I'd built, fragile and imperfect, smashed to kindling in the oncoming flood that was the power of the stag. Light exploded from me in wave after shimmering wave, obliterating the night sky in a torrent of brilliance. I felt none of the exhilaration or joy that I had come to expect from using my power. It wasn't mine anymore, and I was drowning, helpless, caught in that horrible, invisible grip.

The Darkling held me there, testing my new limits—for how long, I couldn't tell. I only knew when I felt

the invisible hand release its grip.

Darkness fell on the clearing once again. I drew a ragged breath, trying to get my bearings, to piece myself back together. The flickering torchlight illuminated the awed expressions of the guards and Grisha, and Mal, still crumpled on the ground, his face miserable, his eyes full of regret.

When I looked back at the Darkling, he was watching me closely, his eyes narrowed. He looked from me to Mal, then turned to his men. “Put him in chains.”

I opened my mouth to object, but a glance from Mal made me shut it.

“We’ll camp tonight and leave for the Fold at first light,” said the Darkling. “Send word to the Apparat to be ready.” He turned to me. “If you try to harm yourself, the tracker will suffer for it.”

“What about the stag?” asked Ivan.

“Burn it.”

One of the Etherealki lifted his arm to a torch, and the flame shot forward in a sweeping arc, surrounding the stag’s lifeless body. As we were led from the clearing, there was no sound but our own footfalls and the crackling of the flames behind us. No rustle came from the trees, no insect buzz or nightbird call. The woods were silent in their grief.

CHAPTER 20

WE WALKED IN SILENCE for over an hour. I stared numbly down at my feet, watching my boots move through the snow, thinking about the stag and the price of my weakness. Eventually, I saw firelight flickering through the trees, and we emerged into a clearing where a small camp had been made around a roaring fire. I noted several small tents and a group of horses tethered amid the trees. Two *oprichniki* sat beside the fire, eating their evening meal.

Mal's guards took him to one of the tents, pushing him inside and following after. I tried to catch his eye, but he disappeared too quickly.

Ivan dragged me across the camp to another tent and gave me a shove. Inside, I saw several bedrolls laid out. He pushed me forward and gestured to the pole at the center of the tent. "Sit," he ordered. I sat with my back to the pole, and he tethered me to it, tying my hands behind my back and binding my ankles.

"Comfortable?"

"You know what he plans to do, Ivan."

"He plans to bring us peace."

"At what price?" I asked desperately. "You know this is madness."

"Did you know I had two brothers?" Ivan asked abruptly. The familiar smirk was gone from his handsome face. "Of course not. They weren't born Grisha. They were soldiers, and they both died fighting the King's wars. So did my father. So did my uncle."

"I'm sorry."

"Yes, everyone is sorry. The King is sorry. The Queen is sorry. I'm sorry. But only the Darkling will do something about it."

"It doesn't have to be this way, Ivan. My power could be used to destroy the Fold."

Ivan shook his head. "The Darkling knows what has to be done."

"He'll never stop! You know that. Not once he's had a taste of that kind of power. I'm the one wearing the collar now. But eventually, it will be all of you. And there won't be anyone or anything strong enough to stand in his way."

A muscle twitched in Ivan's jaw. "Keep talking treason and I'll gag you," he said, and without another word, he strode out of the tent.

A while later, a Summoner and a Heartrender ducked inside. I didn't recognize either of them. Avoiding my gaze, they silently hunched into their furs and blew out the lamp.

I sat awake in the dark, watching the flickering light of the campfire play over the canvas walls of the tent. I could feel the weight of the collar against my neck, and my bound hands itched to claw at it. I thought of Mal, just a few feet away in another tent.

I'd brought us to this. If I'd taken the stag's life, his power would have been mine. I'd known what mercy might cost us. My freedom. Mal's life. The lives of countless others. And still I'd been too weak to do what needed to be done.

That night, I dreamed of the stag. I saw the Darkling cut his throat again and again. I saw the life fading from his dark eyes. But when I looked down, it was my blood that spilled red into the snow.

With a gasp, I woke to the sounds of the camp coming to life around me. The tent flap opened and a Heartrender appeared. She cut me loose from the tent pole and dragged me to my feet. My body creaked and popped in protest, stiff from a night spent sitting in a cramped position.

The Heartrender led me over to where the horses were already saddled and the Darkling stood talking quietly to Ivan and the other Grisha. I looked around for Mal and felt a sudden jab of panic when I couldn't find him, but then I saw an *oprichnik* pull him from the other tent.

"What do we do with him?" the guard asked Ivan.

“Let the traitor walk,” Ivan replied. “And when he gets too tired, let the horses drag him.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but before I could say a word, the Darkling spoke.

“No,” he said, gracefully mounting his horse. “I want him alive when we reach the Shadow Fold.”

The guard shrugged and helped Mal mount his horse, then tied his shackled hands to the saddle horn. I felt a rush of relief followed by a sharp prickle of fear. Did the Darkling intend for Mal to stand trial? Or did he have something far worse in mind for him? *He’s still alive,* I told myself, *and that means there’s still a chance to save him.*

“Ride with her,” the Darkling said to Ivan. “Make sure she doesn’t do anything stupid.” He didn’t spare me another glance as he kicked his horse into a trot.

We rode for hours through the forest, past the plateau where Mal and I had waited for the herd. I could just see the boulders where we’d spent the night, and I wondered if the light that had kept us alive through the snowstorm had been the very thing that led the Darkling to us.

I knew he was taking us back to Kribirsk, but I hated to think what might be waiting for me there. Who would the Darkling choose to move against first? Would he launch a fleet of sandskiffs north to Fjerda? Or did he intend to march south to drive the Fold into the Shu Han? Whose deaths would be on my hands?

It took another night and day of travel before we reached the wide roads that would lead us south to the Vy. We were met at the crossroads by a huge contingent of armed men, most of them in *oprichniki* gray. They brought fresh horses and the Darkling’s coach. Ivan dumped me on the velvet cushions with little ceremony and climbed inside after me. Then, with a snap of the reins, we were moving again.

Ivan insisted we keep the curtains drawn, but I snuck a peek outside and saw that we were flanked by heavily armed riders. It was hard not to be reminded of the first trip I’d made with Ivan in this same vehicle.

The soldiers made camp at night, but I was kept in isolation, confined to the Darkling’s coach. Ivan brought me my meals, clearly disgusted at having to play nursemaid. He refused to speak to me as we rode and threatened to slow my pulse enough to send me into unconsciousness if I persisted in asking about Mal. But I asked every day anyway and kept my eyes trained on the little crack of window visible between curtain and coach, hoping to catch a glimpse of him.

I slept poorly. Every night, I dreamed of the snowy glade, and the stag’s dark eyes, staring at me in the stillness. It was a nightly reminder of my failure and the sorrow my mercy had reaped. The stag had died anyway, and now Mal and I were doomed. Every morning, I woke with a fresh sense of guilt and shame, but also with the frustrating feeling that I was forgetting something, some message that had been clear and obvious in the dream but that hovered just outside of understanding when I woke.

I didn’t see the Darkling again until we reached the outskirts of Kribirsk, when the door to the coach suddenly opened and he slid into the seat opposite me. Ivan vanished without a word.

“Where’s Mal?” I asked as soon as the door had closed.

I saw the fingers of his gloved hand clench, but when he spoke, his voice was as cold and smooth as ever. “We’re entering Kribirsk,” he said. “When we are greeted by the other Grisha, you will not say a word about your little excursion.”

My jaw dropped. “They don’t know?”

“All they know is that you’ve been in seclusion, preparing for your crossing of the Shadow Fold with prayer and rest.”

A dry bark of laughter escaped me. “I certainly look well rested.”

“I’ll say you’ve been fasting.”

“That’s why none of the soldiers in Ryevost were looking for me,” I said with dawning understanding. “You never told the King.”

“If word of your disappearance had gotten out, you would have been hunted down and killed by Fjerdan assassins within days.”

“And you would have had to account for losing the kingdom’s only Sun Summoner.”

The Darkling studied me for a long moment. “Just what kind of life do you think you could have with him, Alina? He’s *otkazat’sya.* He can never hope to understand your power, and if he did, he’d only come to fear you. There is no ordinary life for people like you and me.”

“I’m nothing like you,” I said flatly.

His lips curled in a tight, bitter smile. “Of course not,” he said courteously. Then he knocked on the roof

of the coach and it rolled to a stop. “When we arrive, you’ll say your hellos, then plead exhaustion and retire to your tent. And if you do anything reckless, I will torture the tracker until he begs me to take his life.”

And he was gone.

I rode the rest of the way into Kribirsk alone, trying to stop trembling. *Mal is alive*, I told myself. *That’s all that matters.* But another thought crept in. *Maybe the Darkling is letting you believe he’s still alive just to keep you in line.* I wrapped my arms around myself, praying that it wasn’t true.

I pulled back the curtains as we rode through Kribirsk and felt a pang of sadness as I remembered walking this same road so many months ago. I’d nearly been crushed by the very coach I was riding in. Mal had saved me, and Zoya had looked at him from the window of the Summoners’ coach. I’d wished to be like her, a beautiful girl in a blue *kefta.*

When we finally pulled up to the immense black silk tent, a crowd of Grisha swarmed around the coach. Marie and Ivo and Sergei rushed forward to greet me. I was surprised at how good it felt to see them again.

As they caught sight of me, their excitement vanished, replaced by worry and concern. They’d expected a triumphant Sun Summoner, wearing the greatest amplifier ever known, radiant with power and the favor of the Darkling. Instead, they saw a pale, tired girl, broken by misery.

“Are you all right?” Marie whispered when she hugged me.

“Yes,” I promised. “Just worn out from the journey.”

I did my best to smile convincingly and reassure them. I tried to feign enthusiasm as they marveled at Morozova’s collar and reached out to touch it.

The Darkling was never far from view, a warning in his eyes, and I kept moving through the crowd, grinning until my cheeks hurt.

As we passed through the Grisha pavilion, I caught sight of Zoya sulking on a pile of cushions. She stared greedily at the collar as I passed. *You’re welcome to it*, I thought bitterly, and hurried my steps.

Ivan led me to a private tent close to the Darkling’s quarters. Fresh clothes were waiting on my camp cot along with a tub of hot water and my blue *kefta.* It had only been a few weeks, but it felt strange to wear Summoners’ colors again.

The Darkling’s guards were stationed all around the perimeter of my tent. Only I knew they were there to monitor as well as protect me. The tent was luxuriously appointed with piles of furs, a painted table and chairs, and a Fabrikator mirror, clear as water and inlaid with gold. I would have traded it all in an instant to shiver beside Mal on a threadbare blanket.

I had no visitors, and I spent my days pacing back and forth with nothing to do but worry and imagine the worst. I didn’t know why the Darkling was waiting to enter the Shadow Fold or what he might be planning, and my guards certainly weren’t interested in discussing it.

On the fourth night, when the flap of my tent opened, I nearly fell off my cot. There was Genya, holding my dinner tray and looking impossibly gorgeous. I sat up, unsure of what to say.

She entered and set down the tray, hovering near the table. “I shouldn’t be here,” she said.

“Probably not,” I admitted. “I’m not sure that I’m supposed to have visitors.”

“No, I mean I shouldn’t be *here*. It’s incredibly dirty.”

I laughed, suddenly very glad to see her. She smiled slightly and settled herself gracefully on the edge of the painted chair.

“They’re saying you’ve been in seclusion, preparing for your ordeal,” she said.

I examined Genya’s face, trying to glean how much she knew. “I didn’t have a chance to say goodbye before I … went away,” I said carefully.

“If you had, I would have stopped you.”

So she knew I’d run. “How’s Baghra?”

“No one’s seen her since you left. She seems to have gone into seclusion, too.”

I shuddered. I hoped that Baghra had escaped, but I knew it was unlikely. What price had the Darkling exacted for her betrayal?

I bit my lip, hesitating, and then decided to take what might be my only chance. “Genya, if I could get word to the King. I’m sure he doesn’t know what the Darkling is planning. He—”

“Alina,” Genya interrupted, “the King has taken ill. The Apparat is ruling in his stead.”

My heart sank. I remembered what the Darkling had said the day that I'd met the Apparat: *He has his uses.*

And yet, the priest hadn't just spoken of toppling Kings, but Darklings as well. Had he been trying to warn me? If only I'd been less fearful. If only I'd been more willing to listen. More regrets to add to my long list. I didn't know if the Apparat was truly loyal to the Darkling or if he might be playing a deeper game. And now there was no way to find out.

The hope that the King might have the desire or will to oppose the Darkling had been a slim one, but it had given me something to hold on to over the last few days. Now that hope was undone, too. "What about the Queen?" I asked with faint optimism.

A fierce little smile passed over Genya's lips. "The Queen is confined to her quarters. For her own safety, of course. Contagion, you know."

That was when I realized what Genya was wearing. I'd been so surprised to see her, so caught up in my own thoughts, that I hadn't really taken it in. Genya was wearing red. Corporalki red. Her cuffs were embroidered with blue, a combination I had never seen before.

A chill slid up my spine. What role had Genya played in the King's sudden illness? What had she traded to wear full Grisha colors?

"I see," I said quietly.

"I did try to warn you," she said with some sadness.

"And you know what the Darkling plans to do?"

"There are rumors," she said uncomfortably.

"They're all true."

"Then it has to be done."

I stared at her. After a moment, she looked down at her lap. Her fingers pleated and unpleated the folds of her *kefta.* "David feels terrible," she whispered. "He thinks he's destroyed all of Ravka."

"It's not his fault," I said with an empty laugh. "We all did our part to bring about the end of the world."

Genya looked up sharply. "You don't really believe that." Distress was written on her face. Was there a warning there as well?

I thought of Mal and the Darkling's threats. "No," I said hollowly. "Of course not."

I knew she didn't believe me, but her brow cleared, and she smiled her soft, beautiful smile at me. She looked like a painted icon of a Saint, her hair a burnished copper halo. She rose, and as I walked with her to the flap of the tent, the stag's dark eyes loomed up in my mind, the eyes I saw every night in my dreams.

"For what it's worth," I said, "tell David I forgive him." *And I forgive you, too,* I added silently. I meant it. I knew what it was to want to belong.

"I will," she said quietly. She turned and disappeared into the night, but not before I saw that her lovely eyes were full of tears.

CHAPTER 21

I PICKED AT MY DINNER and then lay down on my cot again, turning over the things that Genya had said. Genya had spent nearly her entire life cloistered away in Os Alta, existing uneasily between the world of the Grisha and the intrigues of the court. The Darkling had put her in that position for his own gain, and now he had raised her out of it. She would never again have to bend to the whim of the King and Queen or wear a servant's colors. But David had regrets. And if he did, maybe others did, too. Maybe there would be more when the Darkling unleashed the Shadow Fold's power. Though by then, it might be too late.

My thoughts were interrupted by Ivan's arrival at the entrance to my tent.

"Up," he commanded. "He wants to see you."

My stomach twisted nervously, but I got up and followed him. As soon as we stepped out of the tent, we were flanked by guards who escorted us the short distance to the Darkling's quarters.

When they saw Ivan, the *oprichniki* at the entryway stepped aside. Ivan nodded toward the tent.

"Go on," he said with a smirk. I desperately wanted to smack that knowing look right off his face. Instead, I lifted my chin and strode past him.

The heavy silks slid closed behind me, and I took a few steps forward, then paused to get my bearings. The tent was large and lit by dimly glowing lamps. The floor was covered in rugs and furs, and at its center burned a fire that crackled in a large silver dish. High above it, a flap in the roof of the tent allowed the smoke to escape and showed a patch of the night sky.

The Darkling sat in a large chair, his long legs sprawled out before him, staring into the fire, a glass in his hand and a bottle of *kvas* on the table beside him.

Without looking at me, he gestured to the chair across from him. I walked over to the fire, but I did not sit. He glanced at me with faint exasperation and then looked back into the flames.

"Sit down, Alina."

I perched on the edge of the chair, watching him warily.

"Speak," he said. I was starting to feel like a dog.

"I have nothing to say."

"I imagine you have a great deal to say."

"If I tell you to stop, you won't stop. If I tell you you're mad, you won't believe me. Why should I bother?"

"Maybe because you want the boy to live."

All of the breath went out of me and I had to stifle a sob. Mal was alive. The Darkling might be lying, but I didn't think so. He loved power, and Mal's life gave him power over me.

"Tell me what to say to save him," I whispered, leaning forward. "Tell me, and I'll say it."

"He's a traitor and a deserter."

"He's the best tracker you have or ever will have."

"Possibly," said the Darkling with an indifferent shrug. But I knew him better now, and I saw the flicker of greed in his eyes as he tilted his head back to empty his glass of *kvas.* I knew what it cost him to think of destroying something he might acquire and use. I pressed this small advantage.

"You could exile him, send him north to the permafrost until you need him."

"You'd have him spend the rest of his life in a work camp or a prison?"

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "Yes."

"You think you'll find a way to him, don't you?" he asked, his voice bemused. "You think that somehow, if he's alive, you'll find a way." He shook his head and gave a short laugh. "I've given you power beyond all dreaming, and you can't wait to run off and keep house for your tracker."

I knew I should stay silent, play the diplomat, but I couldn't help myself. "You haven't given me

anything. You've made me a slave."

"That's never what I intended, Alina." He ran a hand over his jaw, his expression fatigued, frustrated, human. But how much of it was real and how much was pretense? "I couldn't take chances," he said. "Not with the power of the stag, not with Ravka's future hanging in the balance."

"Don't pretend this is about Ravka's welfare. You lied to me. You've been lying to me since the moment I met you."

His long fingers tightened around the glass. "Did you deserve my trust?" he asked, and for once, his voice was less than steady and cold. "Baghra whispers a few accusations in your ear, and off you go. Did you ever stop to think of what it would mean for me, for all of Ravka, if you just disappeared?"

"You didn't give me much choice."

"Of course you had a choice. And you chose to turn your back on your country, on everything that you are."

"That isn't fair."

"Fairness!" he laughed. "Still she talks of fairness. What does fairness have to do with any of this? The people curse my name and pray for you, but you're the one who was ready to abandon them. I'm the one who will give them power over their enemies. I'm the one who will free them from the tyranny of the King."

"And give them your tyranny in return."

"Someone has to lead, Alina. Someone has to end this. Believe me, I wish there were another way."

He sounded so sincere, so reasonable, less a creature of relentless ambition than a man who believed he was doing the right thing for his people. Despite all he'd done and all he intended, I did almost believe him. Almost.

I gave a single shake of my head.

He slumped back in his chair. "Fine," he said with a weary shrug. "Make me your villain." He set his empty glass down and stood. "Come here."

Fear shot through me, but I made myself rise and close the distance between us. He studied me in the firelight. He reached out and touched Morozova's collar, letting his long fingers spread over the rough bone, then slide up my neck to cradle my face with one hand. I felt a jolt of revulsion, but I also felt the sure, intoxicating force of him. I hated that it still had an effect on me.

"You betrayed me," he said softly.

I wanted to laugh. *I* had betrayed *him*? He had used me, seduced me, and now enslaved me, and I was the betrayer? But I thought of Mal and swallowed my anger and my pride. "Yes," I said. "I'm sorry for that."

He laughed. "You're not sorry for any of it. The only thought you have is for the boy and his miserable life."

I said nothing.

"Tell me," he said, his grip tightening painfully, his fingertips pressing into my flesh. In the firelight, his gaze looked unfathomably bleak. "Tell me how much you love him. Beg for his life."

"Please," I whispered, fighting the tears that welled in my eyes. "Please spare him."

"Why?"

"Because the collar can't give you what you want," I said recklessly. I had only one thing with which to bargain and it was so little, but I pressed on. "I have no choice but to serve you, but if Mal comes to harm, I will never forgive you. I will fight you any way that I can. I will spend every waking minute looking for a way to end my life, and eventually, I'll succeed. But show him mercy, let him live, and I will serve you gladly. I will spend the rest of my days proving my gratitude." I nearly choked out the last word.

He cocked his head to one side, a small, skeptical smile playing about his lips. Then the smile disappeared, replaced by something I didn't recognize, something that looked almost like longing.

"Mercy." He said the word as if he were tasting something unfamiliar. "I could be merciful." He raised his other hand to cup my face and kissed me softly, gently, and though everything in me rebelled, I let him. I hated him. I feared him. But still I felt the strange tug of his power, and I couldn't stop the hungry response of my own treacherous heart.

He pulled away and looked at me. Then, his eyes still locked on mine, he called for Ivan.

"Take her to the cells," the Darkling said when Ivan appeared in the doorway of the tent. "Let her see her

tracker."

A sliver of hope entered my heart.

"Yes, Alina," he said, stroking my cheek. "I can be merciful." He leaned forward, pulling me close, his lips brushing my ear. "Tomorrow, we enter the Shadow Fold," he whispered, his voice like a caress. "And when we do, I will feed your friend to the volcra, and you will watch him die."

"No!" I cried, recoiling in horror. I tried to pull away from him, but his grip was like steel, his fingers digging into my skull. "You said—"

"You may say your goodbyes tonight. That is all the mercy traitors deserve."

Something broke loose inside me. I lunged at him, clawing at him, screaming my hate. Ivan was on me in moments, holding me tight as I thrashed and strained in his arms.

"Murderer!" I shouted. "Monster!"

"All of those things."

"I hate you," I spat.

He shrugged. "You'll tire of hate soon enough. You'll tire of everything." He smiled then, and behind his eyes I saw the same bleak and yawning chasm I had seen in Baghra's ancient gaze. "You will wear that collar for the rest of your very, very long life, Alina. Fight me as long as you're able. You will find I have far more practice with eternity."

He waved his hand dismissively, and Ivan pulled me from the tent and down the path, still struggling. A sob tore loose from my throat. The tears I had fought to hold back during my conversation with the Darkling gave way and streamed unchecked down my cheeks.

"Stop that," Ivan whispered furiously. "Someone will see you."

"I don't care."

The Darkling was going to kill Mal anyway. What difference did it make who saw my misery now? The reality of Mal's death and the Darkling's cruelty were staring me in the face, and I saw the stark and horrible shape of things to come.

Ivan yanked me into my tent and gave me a rough shake. "Do you want to see the tracker or not? I'm not going to march a weeping girl through camp."

I pressed my hands against my eyes and stifled my sobs.

"Better," he said. "Put this on." He tossed me a long brown cloak. I slipped it over my *kefta*, and he yanked the large hood up. "Keep your head down and stay quiet, or I swear I'll drag you right back here and you can say your goodbyes on the Fold. Understand?"

I nodded.

We followed an unlit path that skirted the perimeter of the camp. My guards kept their distance, walking far ahead and far behind us, and I quickly realized that Ivan did not want anyone to recognize me or to know I was visiting the jail.

As we walked between the barracks and tents, I could sense a strange tension crackling through the camp. The soldiers we passed seemed jumpy, and a few glared at Ivan with blatant hostility. I wondered how the First Army felt about the Apparat's sudden rise to power.

The jail was located on the far side of camp. It was an older building, clearly from a time predating the barracks that surrounded it. Bored guards flanked the entrance.

"New prisoner?" one of them asked Ivan.

"A visitor."

"Since when do you escort visitors to the cells?"

"Since tonight," Ivan said, a dangerous edge to his voice.

The guards exchanged a nervous glance and stepped aside. "No need to get antsy, bloodletter."

Ivan led me down a hallway lined with mostly empty cells. I saw a few ragged men, a drunk snoring soundly on the floor of his cell. At the end of the hall, Ivan unlocked a gate, and we descended a set of rickety stairs to a dark, windowless room lit by a single guttering lamp. In the gloom, I could make out the heavy iron bars of the room's only cell and, sitting slumped by its far wall, its only prisoner.

"Mal?" I whispered.

In seconds, he was on his feet and we were clinging to each other through the iron bars, our hands clasped tightly together. I couldn't stop the sobs that shook me.

“Shhhh. It’s okay. Alina, it’s okay.”

“You have the night,” said Ivan, and disappeared back up the stairs. When we heard the outer gate clang shut, Mal turned to me.

His eyes roved over my face. “I can’t believe he let you come.”

Fresh tears spilled over my cheeks. “Mal, he let me come because …”

“When?” he asked hoarsely.

“Tomorrow. On the Shadow Fold.”

He swallowed, and I could see him struggle with the knowledge, but all he said was, “All right.”

I let out a sound that was half laugh, half sob. “Only you could contemplate imminent death and just say ‘all right.’”

He smiled at me and pushed the hair back from my tear-stained face. “How about ‘oh no’?”

“Mal, if I’d been stronger …”

“If I’d been stronger, I would have driven a knife through your heart.”

“I wish you had,” I muttered.

“Well, I don’t.”

I looked down at our clasped hands. “Mal, what the Darkling said in the glade about … about him and me. I didn’t … I never …”

“It doesn’t matter.”

I looked up at him. “It doesn’t?”

“No,” he said a little too fiercely.

“I don’t think I believe you.”

“So maybe I don’t believe it yet either, not completely, but it’s the truth.” He clutched my hands more tightly, holding them close to his heart. “I don’t care if you danced naked on the roof of the Little Palace with him. I love you, Alina, even the part of you that loved him.”

I wanted to deny it, to erase it, but I couldn’t. Another sob shook me. “I hate that I ever thought … that I ever—”

“Do you blame me for every mistake I made? For every girl I tumbled? For every dumb thing I’ve said? Because if we start running tallies on stupid, you know who’s going to come out ahead.”

“No, I don’t blame you.” I managed a small smile. “Much.”

He grinned and my heart flip-flopped the way it always had. “We found our way back to each other, Alina. That’s all that matters.”

He kissed me through the bars, the cold iron pressing against my cheek as his lips met mine.

We stayed together that last night. We talked about the orphanage, the angry rasp of Ana Kuya’s voice, the taste of stolen cherry cordial, the smell of the new-mown grass in our meadow, how we’d suffered in the heat of summer and sought out the cool comfort of the music room’s marble floors, the journey we’d made together on the way to do our military service, the Suli violins we’d heard our first night away from the only home either of us could remember.

I told him the story of the day I’d been mending pottery with one of the maids in the kitchen at Keramzin, waiting for him to return from one of the hunting trips that had taken him from home more and more frequently. I’d been fifteen, standing at the counter, vainly trying to glue together the jagged pieces of a blue cup. When I saw him crossing the fields, I ran to the doorway and waved. He caught sight of me and broke into a jog.

I had crossed the yard to him slowly, watching him draw closer, baffled by the way my heart was skittering around in my chest. Then he’d picked me up and spun me in a circle, and I’d clung to him, breathing in his sweet, familiar smell, shocked by how much I’d missed him. Dimly, I’d been aware that I still had a shard of the blue cup in my hand, that it was digging into my palm, but I didn’t want to let go.

When he finally set me down and ambled off to the kitchen to find his lunch, I had stood there, my palm dripping blood, my head still spinning, knowing that everything had changed.

Ana Kuya had scolded me for getting blood on the clean kitchen floor. She’d bandaged my hand and told me it would heal. But I knew it would just go on hurting.

In the creaking silence of the cell, Mal kissed the scar on my palm, the wound made so long ago by the edge of that broken cup, a fragile thing I’d thought beyond repair.

We fell asleep on the floor, cheeks pressed together through the bars, hands clasped tight. I didn't want to sleep. I wanted to savor every last moment with him. But I must have dozed off because I dreamed again of the stag. This time, Mal was beside me in the glade, and it was his blood in the snow.

The next thing I knew, I was waking to the sound of the gate being opened above us and Ivan's footsteps on the stairs.

Mal had made me promise not to cry. He'd said it would only make it harder on him. So I swallowed my tears. I kissed him one last time and let Ivan lead me away.

CHAPTER 22

DAWN WAS CREEPING over Kribirsk as Ivan brought me back to my tent. I sat down on my cot and stared unseeingly at the room. My limbs felt strangely heavy, my mind a blank. I was still sitting there when Genya arrived.

She helped me wash my face and change into the black *kefta* I'd worn to the winter fete. I looked down at the silk and thought of tearing it to shreds, but somehow I couldn't manage to move. My hands stayed limp at my sides.

Genya steered me into the painted chair. I sat still as she arranged my hair, piling it onto my head in loops and coils that she secured with golden pins, the better to show off Morozova's collar.

When she had finished, she pressed her cheek against mine and led me to Ivan, placing my hand on his arm like a bride. Not a word had passed between us.

Ivan led me to the Grisha tent, where I took my place by the Darkling's side. I knew that my friends were watching me, whispering, wondering what was wrong. They probably thought I was nervous about entering the Fold. They were wrong. I wasn't nervous or frightened. I wasn't anything anymore.

The Grisha followed us in an ordered processional all the way to the drydocks. There, only a select few were permitted to board the sandskiff. It was larger than any I'd seen and equipped with three enormous sails emblazoned with the Darkling's symbol. I scanned the crowd of soldiers and Grisha on the skiff. I knew Mal must be on board somewhere, but I couldn't see him.

The Darkling and I were escorted to the front of the skiff, where I was introduced to a group of elaborately dressed men with blond beards and piercing blue eyes. With a start, I realized they were Fjerdan ambassadors. Beside them, in crimson silks, stood a delegation from the Shu Han, and next to them, a group of Kerch tradesmen in shortcoats with curiously belled sleeves. An envoy of the King stood with them in full military dress, his pale blue sash bearing a golden double eagle, a stern expression on his weathered countenance.

I studied them curiously. This must be why the Darkling had delayed our trip into the Fold. He'd needed time to assemble the proper audience, witnesses who would attest to his newfound power. But just how far did he intend to go? A feeling of foreboding stirred inside me, disturbing the lovely numbness that had held me in its grip all morning.

The skiff shuddered and began to slide over the grass and into the eerie black mist of the Fold. Three Summoners raised their arms and the great sails snapped forward, swelling with wind.

The first time I'd entered the Fold, I'd feared the darkness and my own death. Now, darkness was nothing to me, and I knew that soon death would seem like a gift. I'd always known I would have to return to the Unsea, but as I looked back, I realized that some part of me had anticipated it. I had welcomed the chance to prove myself and—I cringed when I thought of it—to please the Darkling. I had dreamed of this moment, standing by his side. I had wanted to believe in the destiny he'd laid out for me, that the orphan no one wanted would change the world and be adored for it.

The Darkling stared ahead, radiating confidence and ease. The sun flickered and began to disappear from view. A moment later, we were in darkness.

For a long while, we drifted in the black, the Grisha Squallers driving the skiffs forward over the sand.

Then, the Darkling's voice rang out. "Burn."

Huge clouds of flame burst from the Inferni on either side of the skiff, briefly illuminating the night sky. The ambassadors and even the guards around me stirred nervously. The Darkling was announcing our location, calling the volcra directly to us.

It didn't take long for them to answer, and a tremor ran up my spine as I heard the distant beat of leathery wings. I felt fear spread through the passengers on the skiff and heard the Fjerdans begin to pray in their

lilting tongue. In the flare of Grisha fire, I saw the dim shapes of dark bodies flying toward us. The volcras' shrieks split the air.

The guards reached for their rifles. Someone began to weep. But still the Darkling waited as the volcra drew closer.

Baghra had claimed that the volcra had once been men and women, victims of the unnatural power unleashed by the Darkling's greed. It might have been my mind playing tricks, but I thought I heard something not just horrible, but human in their cries.

When they were almost upon us, the Darkling gripped my arm and simply said, "Now."

That invisible hand took hold of the power inside me, and I felt it stretch, reaching through the darkness of the Fold, seeking the light. It came to me with a speed and fury that nearly knocked me from my feet, breaking over me in a shower of brilliance and warmth.

The Fold was alight, as bright as noon, as if its impenetrable darkness had never been. I saw a long reach of blanched sand, hulks of what looked like shipwrecks dotting the dead landscape, and above it all, a teeming flock of volcra. They screamed in terror, their writhing gray bodies gruesome in the bright sunlight. *This is the truth of him,* I thought as I squinted in the dazzling light. *Like calls to like.* This was his soul made flesh, the truth of him laid bare in the blazing sun, shorn of mystery and shadow. This was the truth behind the handsome face and the miraculous powers, the truth that was the dead and empty space between the stars, a wasteland peopled by frightened monsters.

Make a path. I wasn't sure if he spoke or simply thought the command that reverberated through me. Helpless, I let the Fold close in around us as I focused the light, making a channel through which the skiff could pass, bordered on both sides by walls of rippling darkness. The volcra fled into the dark, and I could hear them crying in rage and confusion as if from behind an impenetrable curtain.

We sped over the colorless sands, the sunlight spreading in glimmering waves before us. Far ahead, I saw a flash of green, and I realized I was seeing the other side of the Shadow Fold. We were looking into West Ravka, and as we drew closer, I saw their meadow, their drydocks, the village of Novokribirsk nestled behind it. The towers of Os Kervo gleamed in the distance. Was it my imagination, or could I smell the salt tang of the True Sea on the air?

People were streaming from the village and crowding onto the drydocks, pointing at the light that had split the Fold open before them. I saw children playing in the grass. I could hear the dockworkers calling to each other.

At a signal from the Darkling, the skiff slowed, and he lifted his arms. I felt a spike of horror as I understood what was about to happen.

"They're your own people!" I cried desperately.

He ignored me and brought his hands together with a sound like a clap of thunder.

It all seemed to happen slowly. Darkness rippled out from his hands. When it met the darkness of the Fold, a rumbling sound rose up out of the dead sands. The black walls of the path I'd created pulsed and swelled. *It's like it's breathing*, I thought in terror.

The rumble grew to a roar. The Fold shook and trembled around us and then burst forward in a terrible cascading tide.

A frightened wail went up from the crowd on the docks as darkness rushed toward them. They ran, and I saw their fear, heard their screams as the black fabric of the Fold crashed over the drydocks and the village like a breaking wave. Darkness enveloped them, and the volcra set upon their new prey. A woman carrying a little boy stumbled, trying to outrun the grasping dark, but it swallowed her, too.

I reached inside of myself desperately, trying to expand the light, to drive the volcra off, to offer some kind of protection. But I could do nothing. My power slid away from me, pulled from me by that invisible, taunting hand. I wished for a knife to drive into the Darkling's heart, into my own heart, anything that would make this stop.

The Darkling turned to look at the ambassadors and the King's envoy. Their faces were identical masks of horror and shock. Whatever he saw there must have satisfied him, because he separated his hands and the darkness stopped pushing forward. The rumbling faded.

I could hear the anguished cries of those lost in the dark, the shrieks of the volcra, the sounds of rifle fire. The drydocks were gone. The village of Novokribirsk was gone. We were staring into the new reaches of

the Fold.

The message was clear: Today it had been West Ravka. Tomorrow, the Darkling could just as easily push the Fold north to Fjerda or south to the Shu Han. It would devour whole countries and drive the Darkling's enemies into the sea. How many deaths had I just helped to bring about? How many more would I be responsible for?

Close the path, commanded the Darkling. I had no choice but to obey. I pulled the light back until it rested around the skiff like a glowing dome.

"What have you done?" whispered the envoy, his voice shaking.

The Darkling turned on him. "Do you need to see more?"

"You were meant to undo this abomination, not enlarge it! You've slaughtered Ravkans! The King will never stand—"

"The King will do as he's told, or I'll march the Shadow Fold to the walls of Os Alta itself."

The envoy sputtered, his mouth opening and closing soundlessly. The Darkling turned to the ambassadors. "I think you understand me now. There are no Ravkans, no Fjerdans, no Kerch, no Shu Han. There are no more borders, and there will be no more wars. From now on, there is only the land inside the Fold and outside of it, and there will be peace."

"Peace on your terms," said one of the Shu Han angrily.

"It will not stand," blustered a Fjerdan.

The Darkling looked them over and said very calmly, "Peace on my terms. Or your precious mountains and your saintsforsaken tundra will simply cease to exist."

With crushing certainty, I understood that he meant every word. The ambassadors might hope it was an empty threat, believe that there were limits to his hunger, but they would learn soon enough. The Darkling would not hesitate. He would not grieve. His darkness would consume the world, and he would never waver.

The Darkling turned his back on their stunned and angry expressions and addressed the Grisha and soldiers on the skiff. "Tell the story of what you've seen today. Tell everyone that the days of fear and uncertainty are over. The days of endless fighting are over. Tell them that you saw a new age begin."

A cheer went up from the crowd. I saw a few soldiers muttering to each other. Even some of the Grisha looked unnerved. But most of their faces were eager, triumphant, shining.

They're hungry for this, I realized. Even after they've seen what he can do, even after watching their own people die. The Darkling wasn't just offering them an end to war, but an end to weakness. After all these long years of terror and suffering, he would give them something that had seemed permanently beyond their grasp: victory. And despite their fear, they loved him for it.

The Darkling signaled to Ivan, who stood behind him, waiting for orders. "Bring me the prisoner."

I looked up sharply, a fresh bolt of fear shooting through me as Mal was led through the crowd to the railing, his hands bound.

"We return to Ravka," said the Darkling. "But the traitor stays."

Before I even knew what was happening, Ivan shoved Mal over the edge of the skiff. The volcra screeched and beat their wings. I ran to the railing. Mal was on his side in the sand, still within the protective circle of my light. He spat sand from his mouth and pushed himself up with his bound hands.

"Mal!" I cried.

Without thinking, I turned on Ivan and punched him hard in the jaw. He stumbled back against the railing, stunned, and then lunged at me. *Good*, I thought as he grabbed me. *Throw me over, too.*

"Hold," said the Darkling, his voice like ice. Ivan scowled, his face red with embarrassment and anger. He relaxed his grip but didn't let go.

I could see the confusion of the people on the skiff. They didn't know what this show was about, why the Darkling was troubling with a deserter or why his most valued Grisha had just punched his second-in-command.

Pull it back. The command rang through me and I looked at the Darkling in horror.

"No!" I said. But I couldn't stop it; the dome of light began to contract. Mal looked at me as the circle shrank closer to the skiff, and if Ivan hadn't had hold of me, the look of regret and love in his blue eyes would have sent me to my knees. I fought with everything inside me, every bit of strength I had, everything

Baghra had taught me, and it was nothing in the face of the Darkling's power over me. The light inched closer to the skiff.

I gripped the railing and cried out in rage, in misery, the tears streaming down my cheeks. Mal was standing at the edge of the gleaming circle now. I could see the shapes of the volcra in the swirling dark, feel the beat of their wings. He could have run, could have wept, could have clung to the sides of the skiff until the darkness took him, but he did none of those things. He stood unflinching before the gathering dark.

Only I had the power to save him—and I was powerless to save him. In the next breath, the darkness swallowed him. I heard him scream. The memory of the stag reared up before me, so vivid that for a moment the snowy glade swam in my vision, the image of it transposed over the barren landscape of the Fold. I smelled the pines, felt the chill air on my cheeks. I remembered the stag's dark, liquid eyes, the plume of his breath in the cold night, the moment when I knew that I would not take his life. And finally, I understood why the stag had come to me every night in my dreams.

I'd thought the stag was haunting me, a reminder of my failure and the price my weakness would exact. But I was wrong.

The stag had been showing me my strength—not just the price of mercy but the power it bestowed. And mercy was something the Darkling would never understand.

I had spared the stag's life. The power of that life belonged to me as surely as it belonged to the man who had taken it.

I gasped as understanding flooded through me, and I felt that invisible grip falter. My power slid back into my hands. Once more, I stood in Baghra's hut, calling the light for the first time, feeling it rush toward me, taking possession of what was rightfully mine. This was what I had been born for. I would never let anyone separate me from it again.

Light exploded from me, pure and unwavering, flooding over the dark place where Mal had stood only moments before. The volcra that had hold of him shrieked and released its grip. Mal fell to his knees, blood streaming from his wounds as my light enveloped him and drove the volcra back into the darkness.

The Darkling looked momentarily confused. He narrowed his eyes, and I felt his will descend on me again, felt that invisible hand grasping. I shrugged it off. It was nothing. He was nothing.

"What is this?" he hissed. He raised his hands and skeins of darkness spooled toward me, but with a flick of my hand, they burned away like mist.

The Darkling advanced on me, his handsome features contorted with fury. My mind was working frantically. I knew he would have liked to kill me where I stood, but he couldn't, not with the volcra circling outside the light that only I could provide.

"Seize her!" he shouted to the guards surrounding us. Ivan reached out.

I felt the weight of the collar around my neck, the steady rhythm of the stag's ancient heart beating in time with mine. My power rose up in me, solid and without hesitation, a sword in my hand.

I lifted my arm and slashed. With an ear-splitting crack, one of the skiff 's masts split in two. People bleated in panic and scattered as the broken mast fell to the deck, the thick wood gleaming with burning light. Shock registered on the Darkling's face.

"The Cut!" Ivan gasped, taking a step backward.

"Stay back," I warned.

"You aren't a murderer, Alina," said the Darkling.

"I think the Ravkans I just helped you slaughter would disagree."

Panic was spreading through the skiff. The *oprichniki* looked wary, but they were fanning out to surround me just the same.

"You saw what he did to those people!" I cried to the guards and Grisha around me. "Is that the future you want? A world of darkness? A world remade in his image?" I saw their confusion, their anger and fear. "It's not too late to stop him! Help me," I begged. "Please, help me."

But no one moved. Soldier and Grisha alike stood frozen on the deck. They were all too afraid, afraid of him and afraid of a world without his protection.

The *oprichniki* inched closer. I had to make a choice. Mal and I wouldn't have another chance.

So be it, I thought.

I glanced over my shoulder, hoping Mal understood, and then I dove for the side of the skiff.

“Don’t let her reach the railing!” the Darkling shouted.

The guards surged toward me. And I let the light go out.

We were plunged into darkness. People wailed and, above us, I heard the volcra screeching. My outstretched hands struck the railing. I ducked under it and hurled myself onto the sand, rolling to my feet and running blindly toward Mal as I threw the light ahead of me in an arc.

Behind me, I heard the sounds of slaughter on the skiff as the volcra attacked and clouds of Grisha flame exploded in the darkness. But I couldn’t stop to think of the people I’d left behind.

My arc of light flashed over Mal, crouched in the sand. The volcra looming over him screeched and whirled away into the dark. I sprinted toward him and pulled him to his feet.

A bullet pinged against the sand beside us and I plunged us into darkness again.

“Hold your fire!” I heard the Darkling shouting over the chaos on the skiff. “We need her alive!”

I threw out another arc of light, scattering the volcra that were hovering around us.

“You can’t run from me, Alina!” the Darkling shouted.

I couldn’t let him come after us. I couldn’t take the chance that he might survive. But I hated what I had to do. The others on the skiff had failed to come to my aid, but did they deserve to be abandoned to the volcra?

“You can’t leave us all here to die, Alina!” the Darkling shouted. “If you take this step, you know where it will lead.”

I felt a hysterical laugh burble up inside me. I knew. I knew it would make me more like him.

“You begged me for clemency once,” he called over the dead reaches of the Fold, over the hungry shrieks of the horrors he had made. “Is this your idea of mercy?”

Another bullet hit the sand, only inches from us. *Yes*, I thought as the power rose up inside me, *the mercy you taught me*.

I raised my hand and brought it down in a blazing arc, slashing through the air. An earth-shaking *crack* echoed through the Fold as the sandskiff split in half. Raw screams filled the air and the volcra shrieked in their frenzy.

I grabbed Mal’s arm and threw a dome of light around us. We ran, stumbling into the darkness, and soon the sounds of battle faded as we left the monsters behind.

WE EMERGED FROM THE FOLD somewhere south of Novokribirsk and took our first steps in West Ravka. The afternoon sun was bright, the meadow grass green and sweet, but we didn’t stop to savor any of it. We were tired, hungry, and wounded, but our enemies wouldn’t rest, and neither could we.

We walked until we found cover in an orchard and hid there until dark, afraid of being spotted and remembered. The air was thick with the smell of apple blossoms, but the fruit was far too small and green to eat.

There was a bucket full of fetid rainwater sitting beneath our tree, and we used it to wash the worst stains from Mal’s bloodied shirt. He tried not to wince as he pulled the torn fabric over his head, but there was no disguising the deep wounds the volcra’s claws had left across the smooth skin of his shoulder and back.

When night came, we began our trek to the coast. Briefly, I’d worried that we might be lost. But even in a strange country, Mal found the way.

Shortly before dawn, we crested a hill and saw the broad sweep of Alkhem Bay and the glittering lights of Os Kervo below us. We knew we should get off the road. It would soon be bustling with tradesmen and travelers who were sure to notice a cut-up tracker and a girl in a black *kefta*. But we couldn’t resist our first glimpse of the True Sea.

The sun rose at our backs, pink light gleaming off the city’s slender towers then splintering gold on the waters of the bay. I saw the sprawl of the port, the great ships bobbing in the harbor, and beyond that blue, and blue, and blue again. The sea seemed to go on forever, stretching into an impossibly distant horizon. I had seen plenty of maps. I knew there was land out there somewhere, beyond long weeks of travel and miles of ocean. But I still had the dizzying sense that we were standing at the edge of the world. A breeze came in off the water, carrying the smell of salt and damp, the faint cries of gulls.

“There’s just so much of it,” I said at last.

Mal nodded. Then he turned to me and smiled. “A good place to hide.”

He reached out and slid his hand into my hair. He pulled one of the gold pins from the tangled waves. I felt a curl slide free and slither down my neck.

“For clothes,” he said as he dropped the pin into his pocket.

A day ago, Genya had placed those golden pins in my hair. I would never see her again, never see any of them. My heart twisted. I didn’t know if Genya had ever really been my friend, but I would miss her just the same.

Mal left me waiting a little way off the road, hidden in a stand of trees. We’d agreed it would be safer for him to enter Os Kervo by himself, but it was hard to watch him go. He’d told me to rest, but once he was gone, I couldn’t seem to find sleep. I could still feel power thrumming through my body, the echo of what I’d done on the Fold. My hand strayed to the collar at my neck. I’d never felt anything like it, and some part of me wanted to feel it again.

And what about the people you left there? said a voice in my head that I desperately wanted to ignore. Ambassadors, soldiers, Grisha. I had as good as doomed them all, and I couldn’t even be sure that the Darkling was dead. Had he been torn apart by volcra? Had the lost men and women of the Tula Valley finally had their revenge on the Black Heretic? Or was he, at this very moment, hurtling toward me over the dead reaches of the Unsea, ready to bring down his own kind of reckoning?

I shuddered and paced, flinching at every sound.

By late afternoon, I was convinced that Mal had been identified and captured. When I heard footsteps and saw his familiar form emerge through the trees, I nearly sobbed with relief.

“Any trouble?” I asked shakily, trying to hide my nerves.

“None,” he said. “I’ve never seen a city so crowded with people. No one even gave me a second glance.”

He wore a new shirt and an ill-fitting coat, and his arms were laden with clothes for me: a sacklike dress in a red so faded it looked almost orange and a nubbly mustard-colored coat. He handed them to me and then tactfully turned his back so that I could change.

I fumbled with the tiny black buttons of the *kefta*. There seemed to be a thousand of them. When the silk finally slid over my shoulders and pooled at my feet, I felt a great burden lift from me. The cool spring air pricked my bare skin and, for the first time, I dared to hope that we might really be free. I quashed that thought. Until I knew the Darkling was dead, I would never draw an easy breath.

I pulled on the rough wool dress and the yellow coat.

“Did you deliberately buy the ugliest clothes you could find?”

Mal turned to look at me and couldn’t restrain a smile. “I bought the *first* clothes I could find,” he said. Then his grin faded. He touched my cheek lightly, and when he spoke again, his voice was low and raw. “I never want to see you in black again.”

I held his gaze. “Never,” I whispered.

He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a long red scarf. Gently, he wrapped it around my neck, hiding Morozova’s collar. “There,” he said, smiling again. “Perfect.”

“What am I going to do when summer comes?” I laughed.

“By then we’ll have found a way to get rid of it.”

“No!” I said sharply, surprised by how much the idea upset me. Mal recoiled, taken aback. “We can’t get rid of it,” I explained. “It’s Ravka’s only chance to be free of the Shadow Fold.”

It was the truth—just not all of it. We did need the collar. It was insurance against the Darkling’s strength and a promise that someday we’d return to Ravka and find a way to set things right. But what I couldn’t tell Mal was that the collar *belonged* to me, that the stag’s power felt like a part of me now, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to let it go.

Mal studied me, his brow furrowed. I thought of the Darkling’s warnings, of the bleak look I’d seen in his face and in Baghra’s.

“Alina …”

I tried for a reassuring smile. “We’ll get rid of it,” I promised. “As soon as we can.”

Seconds passed. “All right,” he said at last, but his expression was still wary. Then, he pushed the crumpled *kefta* with the toe of his boot. “What should we do with this?”

I looked down at the heap of tattered silk and felt anger and shame roll over me.

"Burn it," I said. And we did.

As the flames consumed the silk, Mal slowly pulled the rest of the golden pins from my curls, one by one, until my hair tumbled around my shoulders. Gently, he pushed my hair aside and kissed my neck, right above the collar. When the tears came, he pulled me close and held me, until there was nothing left but ashes.

AFTER

THE BOY AND THE GIRL stand at the railing of the ship, a true ship that rolls and rocks on the heaving back of the True Sea.

"*Goed morgen, fentomen!*" a deckhand shouts to them as he passes by, his arms full of rope.

All the ship's crew call them *fentomen*. It is the Kerch word for ghosts.

When the girl asks the quartermaster why, he laughs and says it's because they are so pale and because of the way they stand silent at the ship's railing, staring at the sea for hours, as if they've never seen water before. She smiles and does not tell him the truth: that they must keep their eyes on the horizon. They are watching for a ship with black sails.

Baghra's *Verloren* was long gone, so they had hidden in the slums of Os Kervo until the boy could use the gold pins from her hair to book passage on another ship. The city buzzed with the horror of what had happened in Novokribirsk. Some blamed the Darkling. Others blamed the Shu Han or Fjerdans. A few even claimed it was the righteous work of angry Saints.

Rumors began to reach them of strange happenings in Ravka. They heard that the Apparat had disappeared, that foreign troops were massing on the borders, that the First and Second Armies were threatening to go to war with each other, that the Sun Summoner was dead. They waited to hear word of the Darkling's death on the Fold, but it never came.

At night, the boy and the girl lie curled around each other in the belly of the ship. He holds her tight when she wakes from another nightmare, her teeth chattering, her ears ringing with the terrified screams of the men and women she left behind on the broken skiff, her limbs trembling with remembered power.

"It's all right," he whispers in the darkness. "It's all right."

She wants to believe him, but she's afraid to close her eyes.

The wind creaks in the sails. The ship sighs around them. They are alone again, as they were when they were young, hiding from the older children, from Ana Kuya's temper, from the things that seemed to move and slither in the dark.

They are orphans again, with no true home but each other and whatever life they can make together on the other side of the sea.

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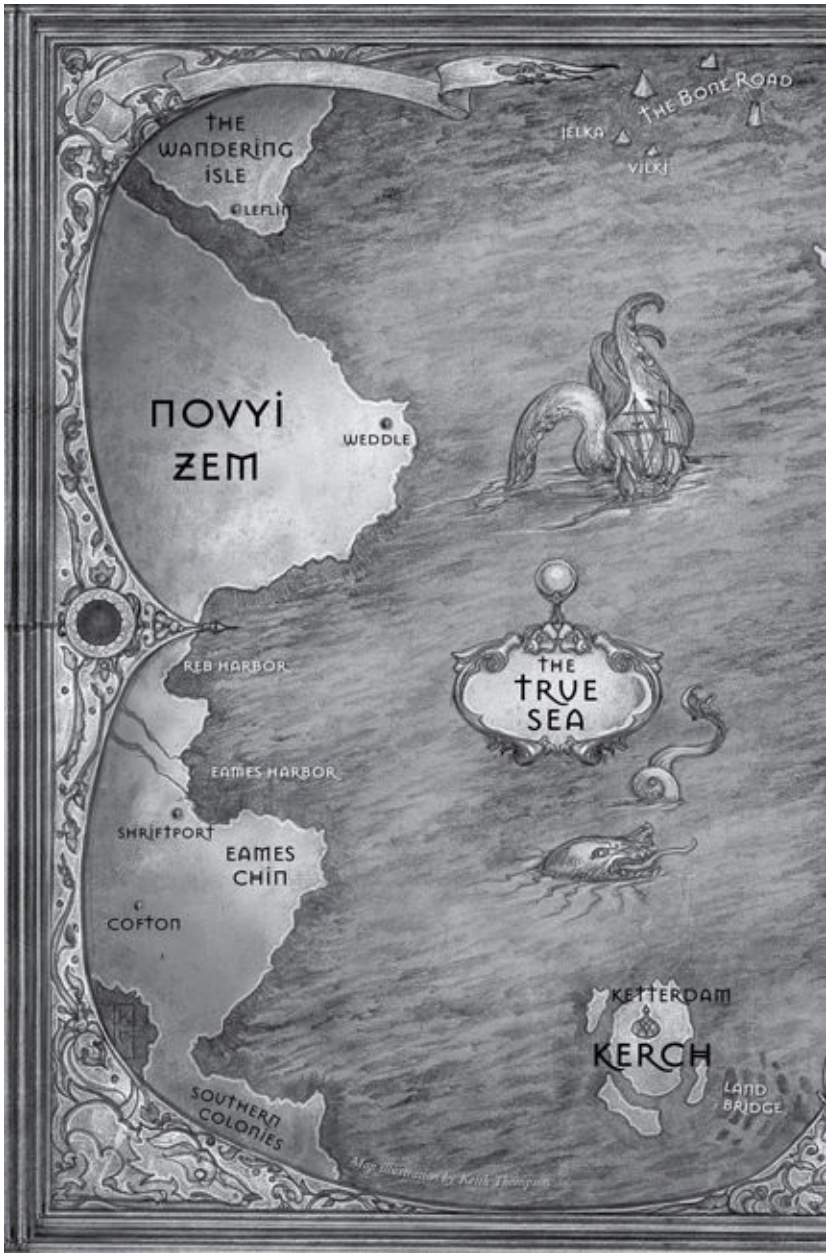
SIEGE AND STORM

LEIGH BARDUGO

For my mother, who believed even when I didn’t.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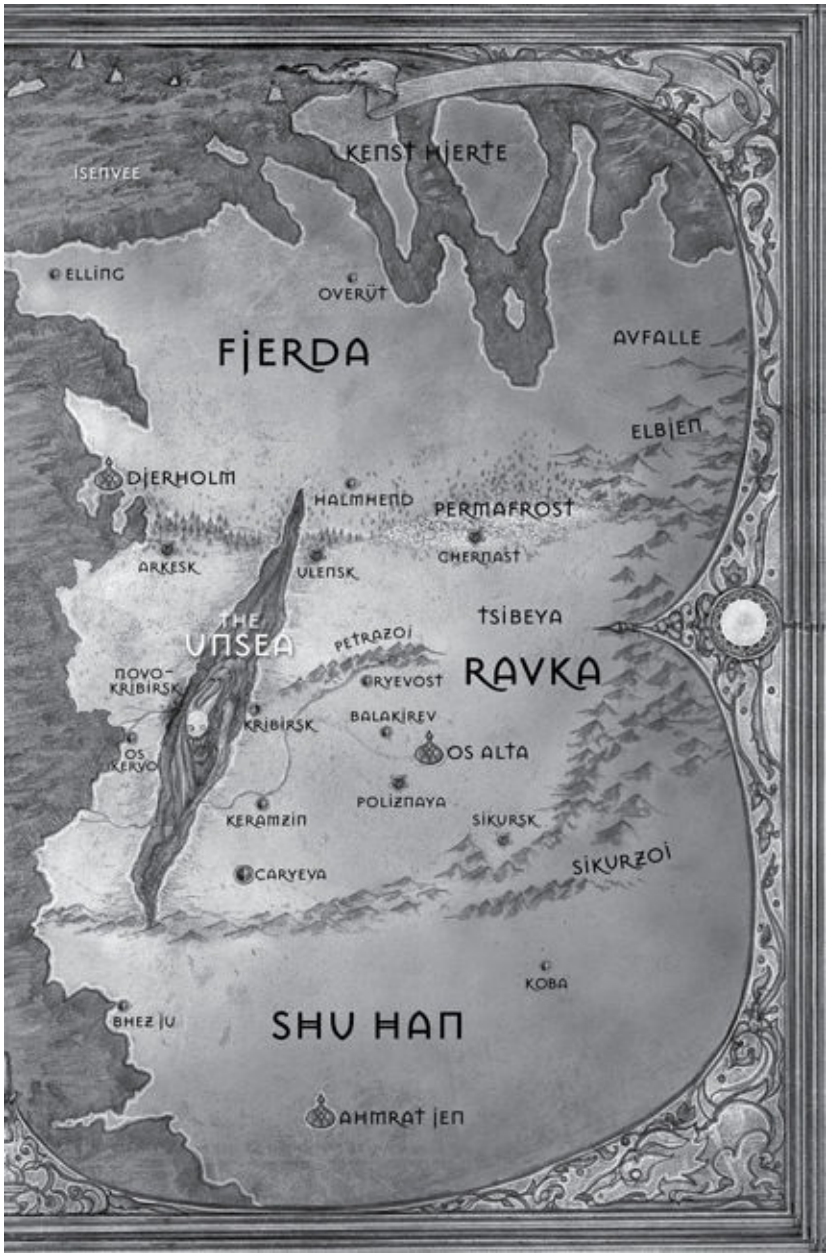
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CARYEVA
KOBA
SHU HAN
BHEZJU
AHMRAT JEN

THE GRISHA

SOLDIERS OF THE SECOND ARMY

MASTERS OF THE SMALL SCIENCE

CORPORALKI

(THE ORDER OF THE LIVING AND THE DEAD)

Heartrenders

Healers

ETHEREALKI

(THE ORDER OF SUMMONERS)

Squallers

Inferni

Tidemakers

MATERIALKI

(THE ORDER OF FABRIKATORS)

Durasts

Alkemi

BEFORE

THE BOY AND THE GIRL had once dreamed of ships, long ago, before they'd ever seen the True Sea. They were the vessels of stories, magic ships with masts hewn from sweet cedar and sails spun by maidens from thread of pure gold. Their crews were white mice who sang songs and scrubbed the decks with their pink tails.

The *Verrhader* was not a magic ship. It was a Kerch trader, its hold bursting with millet and molasses. It stank of unwashed bodies and the raw onions the sailors claimed would prevent scurvy. Its crew spat and swore and gambled for rum rations. The bread the boy and the girl were given spilled weevils, and their cabin was a cramped closet they were forced to share with two other passengers and a barrel of salt cod.

They didn't mind. They grew used to the clang of bells sounding the hour, the cry of the gulls, the unintelligible gabble of Kerch. The ship was their kingdom, and the sea a vast moat that kept their enemies at bay.

The boy took to life aboard ship as easily as he took to everything else. He learned to tie knots and mend sails, and as his wounds healed, he worked the lines beside the crew. He abandoned his shoes and climbed barefoot and fearless in the rigging. The sailors marveled at the way he spotted dolphins, schools of rays, bright striped tigerfish, the way he sensed the place a whale would breach the moment before its broad, pebbled back broke the waves. They claimed they'd be rich if they just had a bit of his luck.

The girl made them nervous.

Three days out to sea, the captain asked her to remain belowdecks as much as possible. He blamed it on the crew's superstition, claimed that they thought

women aboard ship would bring ill winds. This was true, but the sailors might have welcomed a laughing, happy girl, a girl who told jokes or tried her hand at the tin whistle.

This girl stood quiet and unmoving by the rail, clutching her scarf around her neck, frozen like a figurehead carved from white wood. This girl screamed in her sleep and woke the men dozing in the foretop.

So the girl spent her days haunting the dark belly of the ship. She counted barrels of molasses, studied the captain's charts. At night, she slipped into the shelter of the boy's arms as they stood together on deck, picking out constellations from the vast spill of stars: the Hunter, the Scholar, the Three Foolish Sons, the bright spokes of the Spinning Wheel, the Southern Palace with its six crooked spires.

She kept him there as long as she could, telling stories, asking questions. Because she knew when she slept, she would dream. Sometimes she dreamed of broken skiffs with black sails and decks slick with blood, of people crying out in the darkness. But worse were the dreams of a pale prince who pressed his lips to her neck, who placed his hands on the collar that circled her throat and called forth her power in a blaze of bright sunlight.

When she dreamed of him, she woke shaking, the echo of her power still vibrating through her, the feeling of the light still warm on her skin.

The boy held her tighter, murmured soft words to lull her to sleep.

"It's only a nightmare," he whispered. "The dreams will stop."

He didn't understand. The dreams were the only place it was safe to use her power now, and she longed for them.

* * *

ON THE DAY the *Verrhader* made land, the boy and girl stood at the rail together, watching as the coast of Novyi Zem drew closer.

They drifted into harbor through an orchard of weathered masts and bound sails. There were sleek sloops and little junks from the rocky coasts of the Shu Han, armed warships and pleasure schooners, fat merchantmen and Fjerdan whalers. A bloated prison galley bound for the southern colonies flew the red-tipped banner that warned there were murderers aboard. As they floated by, the girl could have sworn she heard the clink of chains.

The *Verrhader* found its berth. The gangway was lowered. The dockworkers and crew shouted their greetings, tied off ropes, prepared the cargo.

The boy and the girl scanned the docks, searching the crowd for a flash of Heartrender crimson or Summoner blue, for the glint of sunlight off Ravkan guns.

It was time. The boy slid his hand into hers. His palm was rough and calloused from the days he'd spent working the lines. When their feet hit the planks of the quay, the ground seemed to buck and roll beneath them.

The sailors laughed. "*Vaarwel, fentomen!*" they cried.

The boy and girl walked forward, and took their first rolling steps in the new world.

Please, the girl prayed silently to any Saints who might be listening, *let us be safe here. Let us be home.*

CHAPTER 1

TWO WEEKS WE'D been in Cofton, and I was still getting lost. The town lay inland, west of the Novyi Zem coast, miles from the harbor where we'd landed. Soon we would go farther, deep into the wilds of the Zemeni frontier. Maybe then we'd begin to feel safe.

I checked the little map I'd drawn for myself and retraced my steps. Mal and I met every day after work to walk back to the boardinghouse together, but today I'd gotten completely turned around when I'd detoured to buy our dinner. The calf and collard pies were stuffed into my satchel and giving off a very peculiar smell. The shopkeeper had claimed they were a Zemeni delicacy, but I had my doubts. It didn't much matter. Everything tasted like ashes to me lately.

Mal and I had come to Cofton to find work that would finance our trip west. It was the center of the *jurda* trade, surrounded by fields of the little orange flowers that people chewed by the bushel. The stimulant was considered a luxury in Ravka, but some of the sailors aboard the *Verrhader* had used it to stay awake on long watches. Zemeni men liked to tuck the dried blooms between lip and gum, and even the women carried them in embroidered pouches that dangled from their wrists. Each store window I passed advertised different brands: Brightleaf, Shade, Dhoka, the Burly. I saw a beautifully dressed girl in petticoats lean over and spit a stream of rust-colored juice right into one of the brass spittoons that sat outside every shop door. I stifled a gag. That was one Zemeni custom I didn't think I could get used to.

With a sigh of relief, I turned onto the city's main thoroughfare. At least now I knew where I was. Cofton still didn't feel quite real to me. There was

something raw and unfinished about it. Most of the streets were unpaved, and I always felt like the flat-roofed buildings with their flimsy wooden walls might tip over at any minute. And yet they all had glass windows. The women dressed in velvet and lace. The shop displays overflowed with sweets and baubles and all manner of finery instead of rifles, knives, and tin cookpots. Here, even the beggars wore shoes. This was what a country looked like when it wasn't under siege.

As I passed a gin shop, I caught a flash of crimson out of the corner of my eye. *Corporalki.* Instantly, I drew back, pressing myself into the shadowy space between two buildings, heart hammering, my hand already reaching for the pistol at my hip.

Dagger first, I reminded myself, sliding the blade from my sleeve. *Try not to draw attention. Pistol if you must. Power as a last resort.* Not for the first time, I missed the Fabrikator-made gloves that I'd had to leave behind in Ravka. They'd been lined with mirrors that gave me an easy way to blind opponents in a hand-to-hand fight—and a nice alternative to slicing someone in half with the Cut. But if I'd been spotted by a Corporalnik Heartrender, I might not have a choice in the matter. They were the Darkling's favored soldiers and could stop my heart or crush my lungs without ever landing a blow.

I waited, my grip slippery on the dagger's handle, then finally dared to peek around the wall. I saw a cart piled high with barrels. The driver had stopped to talk to a woman whose daughter danced impatiently beside her, fluttering and twirling in her dark red skirt.

Just a little girl. Not a Corporalnik in sight. I sank back against the building and took a deep breath, trying to calm down.

It won't always be this way, I told myself. *The longer you're free, the easier it will get.*

One day I would wake from a sleep free of nightmares, walk down a street unafraid. Until then, I kept my flimsy dagger close and wished for the sure heft of Grisha steel in my palm.

I pushed my way back into the bustling street and clutched at the scarf around my neck, drawing it tighter. It had become a nervous habit. Beneath it lay Morozova's collar, the most powerful amplifier ever known, as well as the only way of identifying me. Without it, I was just another dirty, underfed Ravkan

refugee.

I wasn't sure what I would do when the weather turned. I couldn't very well walk around in scarves and high-necked coats when summer came. But by then, hopefully, Mal and I would be far from crowded towns and unwanted questions. We'd be on our own for the first time since we'd fled Ravka. The thought sent a nervous flutter through me.

I crossed the street, dodging wagons and horses, still scanning the crowd, sure that at any moment I would see a troop of Grisha or *oprichniki* descending on me. Or maybe it would be Shu Han mercenaries, or Fjerdan assassins, or the soldiers of the Ravkan King, or even the Darkling himself. So many people might be hunting us. *Hunting me*, I amended. If it weren't for me, Mal would still be a tracker in the First Army, not a deserter running for his life.

A memory rose unbidden in my mind: black hair, slate eyes, the Darkling's face exultant in victory as he unleashed the power of the Fold. Before I'd snatched that victory away.

News was easy to come by in Novyi Zem, but none of it was good. Rumors had surfaced that the Darkling had somehow survived the battle on the Fold, that he had gone to ground to gather his forces before making another attempt on the Ravkan throne. I didn't want to believe it was possible, but I knew better than to underestimate him. The other stories were just as disturbing: that the Fold had begun to overflow its shores, driving refugees east and west; that a cult had risen up around a Saint who could summon the sun. I didn't want to think about it. Mal and I had a new life now. We'd left Ravka behind.

I hurried my steps, and soon I was in the square where Mal and I met every evening. I spotted him leaning against the lip of a fountain, talking with a Zemeni friend he'd met working at the warehouse. I couldn't remember his name … Jep, maybe? Jef?

Fed by four huge spigots, the fountain was less decorative than useful, a large basin where girls and house servants came to wash clothes. None of the washerwomen were paying much attention to the laundry, though. They were all gawking at Mal. It was hard not to. His hair had grown out of its short military cut and was starting to curl at the nape of his neck. The spray from the fountain had left his shirt damp, and it clung to skin bronzed by long days at sea. He threw his head back, laughing at something his friend had said, seemingly

oblivious to the sly smiles thrown his way.

He's probably so used to it, he doesn't even notice anymore, I thought irritably.

When he caught sight of me, his face broke into a grin and he waved. The washerwomen turned to look and then exchanged glances of disbelief. I knew what they saw: a scrawny girl with stringy, dull brown hair and sallow cheeks, fingers stained orange from packing *jurda.* I'd never been much to look at, and weeks of not using my power had taken their toll. I wasn't eating or sleeping well, and the nightmares didn't help. The women's faces all said the same thing: What was a boy like Mal doing with a girl like me?

I straightened my spine and tried to ignore them as Mal threw his arm around me and drew me close. "Where were you?" he asked. "I was getting worried."

"I was waylaid by a gang of angry bears," I murmured into his shoulder.

"You got lost again?"

"I don't know where you get these ideas."

"You remember Jes, right?" he said, nodding to his friend.

"How do you go?" Jes asked in broken Ravkan, offering me his hand. His expression seemed unduly grave.

"Very well, thank you," I replied in Zemeni. He didn't return my smile, but gently patted my hand. Jes was definitely an odd one.

We chatted a short while longer, but I knew Mal could see I was getting anxious. I didn't like to be out in the open for too long. We said our goodbyes, and before Jes left, he shot me another grim look and leaned in to whisper something to Mal.

"What did he say?" I asked as we watched him stroll away across the square.

"Hmm? Oh, nothing. Did you know you have pollen in your brows?" He reached out to gently brush it away.

"Maybe I wanted it there."

"My mistake."

As we pushed off from the fountain, one of the washerwomen leaned forward, practically spilling out of her dress.

"If you ever get tired of skin and bones," she called to Mal, "I've got something to tempt you."

I stiffened. Mal glanced over his shoulder. Slowly, he looked her up and

down. “No,” he said flatly. “You don’t.”

The girl’s face flushed an ugly red as the others jeered and cackled, splashing her with water. I tried for a haughtily arched brow, but it was hard to restrain the goofy grin pulling at the corners of my mouth.

“Thanks,” I mumbled as we crossed the square, heading toward our boardinghouse.

“For what?”

I rolled my eyes. “For defending my honor, you dullard.”

He yanked me beneath a shadowed awning. I had a moment’s panic when I thought he’d spotted trouble, but then his arms were around me and his lips were pressed to mine.

When he finally drew back, my cheeks were warm and my legs had gone wobbly.

“Just to be clear,” he said, “I’m not really interested in defending your honor.”

“Understood,” I managed, hoping I didn’t sound too ridiculously breathless.

“Besides,” he said, “I need to steal every minute I can before we’re back at the Pit.”

The Pit was what Mal called our boardinghouse. It was crowded and filthy and afforded us no privacy at all, but it was cheap. He grinned, cocky as ever, and pulled me back into the flow of people on the street. Despite my exhaustion, my steps felt decidedly lighter. I still wasn’t used to the idea of us together. Another flutter passed through me. On the frontier there would be no curious boarders or unwanted interruptions. My pulse gave a little jump—whether from nerves or excitement, I wasn’t sure.

“So what did Jes say?” I asked again, when my brain felt a bit less scrambled.

“He said I should take good care of you.”

“That’s all?”

Mal cleared his throat. “And … he said he would pray to the God of Work to heal your affliction.”

“My *what*?”

“I may have told him that you have a goiter.”

I stumbled. “I beg your pardon?”

“Well, I had to explain why you were always clinging to that scarf.”

I dropped my hand. I’d been doing it again without even realizing.

“So you told him I had a goiter?” I whispered incredulously.

“I had to say something. And it makes you quite a tragic figure. Pretty girl, giant growth, you know.”

I punched him hard in the arm.

“Ow! Hey, in some countries, goiters are considered very fashionable.”

“Do they like eunuchs, too? Because I can arrange that.”

“So bloodthirsty!”

“My goiter makes me cranky.”

Mal laughed, but I noticed that he kept his hand on his pistol. The Pit was located in one of the less savory parts of Cofton, and we were carrying a lot of coin, the wages we’d saved for the start of our new life. Just a few more days, and we’d have enough to leave Cofton behind—the noise, the pollen-filled air, the constant fear. We’d be safe in a place where nobody cared what happened to Ravka, where Grisha were scarce and no one had ever heard of a Sun Summoner.

And no one has any use for one. The thought soured my mood, but it had come to me more and more lately. What was I good for in this strange country? Mal could hunt, track, handle a gun. The only thing I’d ever been good at was being a Grisha. I missed summoning light, and each day I didn’t use my power, I grew more weak and sickly. Just walking beside Mal left me winded, and I struggled beneath the weight of my satchel. I was so frail and clumsy that I’d barely managed to keep my job packing *jurda* at one of the fieldhouses. It brought in mere pennies, but I’d insisted on working, on trying to help. I felt like I had when we were kids: capable Mal and useless Alina.

I pushed the thought away. I might not be the Sun Summoner anymore, but I wasn’t that sad little girl either. I’d find a way to be useful.

The sight of our boardinghouse didn’t exactly lift my spirits. It was two stories high and in desperate need of a fresh coat of paint. The sign in the window advertised hot baths and tick-free beds in five different languages. Having sampled the bathtub and the bed, I knew the sign lied no matter how you translated it. Still, with Mal beside me, it didn’t seem so bad.

We climbed the steps of the sagging porch and entered the tavern that took

up most of the lower floor of the house. It was cool and quiet after the dusty clamor of the street. At this hour, there were usually a few workers at the pockmarked tables drinking off their day's wages, but today it was empty save for the surly-looking landlord standing behind the bar.

He was a Kerch immigrant, and I'd gotten the distinct feeling he didn't like Ravkans. Or maybe he just thought we were thieves. We'd shown up two weeks ago, ragged and grubby, with no baggage and no way to pay for lodging except a single golden hairpin that he probably thought we'd stolen. But that hadn't stopped him from snapping it up in exchange for a narrow bed in a room that we shared with six other boarders.

As we approached the bar, he slapped the room key on the counter and shoved it across to us without being asked. It was tied to a carved piece of chicken bone. Another charming touch.

In the stilted Kerch he'd picked up aboard the *Verrhader*, Mal requested a pitcher of hot water for washing.

"Extra," the landlord grunted. He was a heavyset man with thinning hair and the orange-stained teeth that came from chewing *jurda*. He was sweating, I noticed. Though the day wasn't particularly warm, beads of perspiration had broken out over his upper lip.

I glanced back at him as we headed for the staircase on the other side of the deserted tavern. He was still watching us, his arms crossed over his chest, his beady eyes narrowed. There was something about his expression that set my nerves jangling.

I hesitated at the base of the steps. "That guy really doesn't like us," I said.

Mal was already headed up the stairs. "No, but he likes our money just fine. And we'll be out of here in a few days."

I shook off my nervousness. I'd been jumpy all afternoon.

"Fine," I grumbled as I followed after Mal. "But just so I'm prepared, how do you say 'you're an ass' in Kerch?"

"*Jer ven azel.*"

"Really?"

Mal laughed. "The first thing sailors teach you is how to swear."

The second story of the boardinghouse was in considerably worse shape than the public rooms below. The carpet was faded and threadbare, and the dim

hallway stank of cabbage and tobacco. The doors to the private rooms were all closed, and not a sound came from behind them as we passed. The quiet was eerie. Maybe everyone was out for the day.

The only light came from a single grimy window at the end of the hall. As Mal fumbled with the key, I looked down through the smudged glass to the carts and carriages rumbling by below. Across the street, a man stood beneath a balcony, peering up at the boardinghouse. He pulled at his collar and his sleeves, as if his clothes were new and didn't quite fit right. His eyes met mine through the window, then darted quickly away.

I felt a sudden pang of fear.

"Mal," I whispered, reaching out to him.

But it was too late. The door flew open.

"No!" I shouted. I threw up my hands and light burst through the hallway in a blinding cascade. Then rough hands seized me, yanking my arms behind my back. I was dragged inside the room, kicking and thrashing.

"Easy now," said a cool voice from somewhere in the corner. "I'd hate to have to gut your friend so soon."

Time seemed to slow. I saw the shabby, low-ceilinged room, the cracked washbasin sitting on the battered table, dust motes swirling in a slender beam of sunlight, the bright edge of the blade pressed to Mal's throat. The man holding him wore a familiar sneer. *Ivan.* There were others, men and women. All wore the fitted coats and breeches of Zemeni merchants and laborers, but I recognized some of their faces from my time with the Second Army. They were Grisha.

Behind them, shrouded in shadow, lounging in a rickety chair as if it were a throne, was the Darkling.

For a moment, everything in the room was silent and still. I could hear Mal's breathing, the shuffle of feet. I heard a man calling a hello down on the street. I couldn't seem to stop staring at the Darkling's hands—his long white fingers resting casually on the arms of the chair. I had the foolish thought that I'd never seen him in ordinary clothes.

Then reality crashed in on me. *This* was how it ended? Without a fight? Without so much as a shot fired or a voice raised? A sob of pure rage and frustration tore free from my chest.

"Take her pistol, and search her for other weapons," the Darkling said softly.

I felt the comforting weight of my firearm lifted from my hip, the dagger pulled from its sheath at my wrist. “I’m going to tell them to let you go,” he said when they were done, “with the knowledge that if you so much as raise your hands, Ivan will end the tracker. Show me that you understand.”

I gave a single stiff nod.

He raised a finger, and the men holding me let go. I stumbled forward and then stood frozen in the center of the room, my hands balled into fists.

I could cut the Darkling in two with my power. I could crack this whole saintsforsaken building right down the middle. But not before Ivan opened Mal’s throat.

“How did you find us?” I rasped.

“You leave a very expensive trail,” he said, and lazily tossed something onto the table. It landed with a *plink* beside the washbasin. I recognized one of the golden pins Genya had woven into my hair so many weeks ago. We’d used them to pay for passage across the True Sea, the wagon to Cofton, our miserable, not-quite-tick-free bed.

The Darkling rose, and a strange trepidation crackled through the room. It was as if every Grisha had taken a breath and was holding it, waiting. I could feel the fear coming off them, and that sent a spike of alarm through me. The Darkling’s underlings had always treated him with awe and respect, but this was something new. Even Ivan looked a little ill.

The Darkling stepped into the light, and I saw a faint tracery of scars over his face. They’d been healed by a Corporalnik, but they were still visible. So the volcra had left their mark. *Good,* I thought with petty satisfaction. It was small comfort, but at least he wasn’t quite as perfect as he had been.

He paused, studying me. “How are you finding life in hiding, Alina? You don’t look well.”

“Neither do you,” I said. It wasn’t just the scars. He wore his weariness like an elegant cloak, but it was still there. Faint smudges showed beneath his eyes, and the hollows of his sharp cheekbones cut a little deeper.

“A small price to pay,” he said, his lips quirking in a half smile.

A chill snaked up my spine. *For what?*

He reached out, and it took everything in me not to flinch backward. But all he did was take hold of one end of my scarf. He tugged gently, and the rough

wool slipped free, gliding over my neck and fluttering to the ground.

“Back to pretending to be less than you are, I see. The sham doesn’t suit you.”

A twinge of unease passed through me. Hadn’t I had a similar thought just minutes ago? “Thanks for your concern,” I muttered.

He let his fingers trail over the collar. “It’s mine as much as yours, Alina.”

I batted his hand away, and an anxious rustle rose from the Grisha. “Then you shouldn’t have put it around my neck,” I snapped. “What do you want?”

Of course, I already knew. He wanted everything—Ravka, the world, the power of the Fold. His answer didn’t matter. I just needed to keep him talking. I’d known this moment might come, and I’d prepared for it. I wasn’t going to let him take me again. I glanced at Mal, hoping he understood what I intended.

“I want to thank you,” the Darkling said.

Now, that I hadn’t expected. “Thank me?”

“For the gift you gave me.”

My eyes flicked to the scars on his pale cheek.

“No,” he said with a small smile, “not these. But they do make a good reminder.”

“Of what?” I asked, curious despite myself.

His gaze was gray flint. “That all men can be made fools. No, Alina, the gift you’ve given me is so much greater.”

He turned away. I darted another glance at Mal.

“Unlike you,” the Darkling said, “I understand gratitude, and I wish to express it.”

He raised his hands. Darkness tumbled through the room.

“Now!” I shouted.

Mal drove his elbow into Ivan’s side. At the same moment, I threw up my hands and light blazed out, blinding the men around us. I focused my power, honing it to a scythe of pure light. I had only one goal. I wasn’t going to leave the Darkling standing. I peered into the seething blackness, trying to find my target. But something was wrong.

I’d seen the Darkling use his power countless times before. This was different. The shadows whirled and skittered around the circle of my light, spinning faster, a writhing cloud that clicked and whirred like a fog of hungry

insects. I pushed against them with my power, but they twisted and wriggled, drawing ever nearer.

Mal was beside me. Somehow he'd gotten hold of Ivan's knife.

"Stay close," I said. Better to take my chances and open a hole in the floor than to just stand there doing nothing. I concentrated and felt the power of the Cut vibrate through me. I raised my arm … and something stepped out of the darkness.

It's a trick, I thought as the thing came toward us. *It has to be some kind of illusion.*

It was a creature wrought from shadow, its face blank and devoid of features. Its body seemed to tremble and blur, then form again: arms, legs, long hands ending in the dim suggestion of claws, a broad back crested by wings that roiled and shifted as they unfurled like a black stain. It was almost like a volcra, but its shape was more human. And it did not fear the light. It did not fear me.

It's a trick, my panicked mind insisted. *It isn't possible.* It was a violation of everything I knew about Grisha power. We couldn't make matter. We couldn't create life. But the creature was coming toward us, and the Darkling's Grisha were cringing up against the walls in very real terror. This was what had so frightened them.

I pushed down my horror and refocused my power. I swung my arm, bringing it down in a shining, unforgiving arc. The light sliced through the creature. For a moment, I thought it might just keep coming. Then it wavered, glowing like a cloud lit by lightning, and blew apart into nothing. I had time for the barest surge of relief before the Darkling lifted his hand and another monster took its place, followed by another, and another.

"This is the gift you gave me," said the Darkling. "The gift I earned on the Fold." His face was alive with power and a kind of terrible joy. But I could see strain there, too. Whatever he was doing, it was costing him.

Mal and I backed toward the door as the creatures stalked closer. Suddenly, one of them shot forward with astonishing speed. Mal slashed out with his knife. The thing paused, wavered slightly, then grabbed hold of him and tossed him aside like a child's doll. This was no illusion.

"Mal!" I cried.

I lashed out with the Cut and the creature burned away to nothing, but the

next monster was on me in seconds. It seized me, and revulsion shuddered through my body. Its grip was like a thousand crawling insects swarming over my arms.

It lifted me off my feet, and I saw how very wrong I'd been. It *did* have a mouth, a yawning, twisting hole that spread open to reveal row upon row of teeth. I felt them all as the thing bit deeply into my shoulder.

The pain was like nothing I'd ever known. It echoed inside me, multiplying on itself, cracking me open and scraping at the bone. From a distance, I heard Mal call my name. I heard myself scream.

The creature released me. I dropped to the floor in a limp heap. I was on my back, the pain still reverberating through me in endless waves. I could see the water-stained ceiling, the shadow creature looming high above, Mal's pale face as he knelt beside me. I saw his lips form the shape of my name, but I couldn't hear him. I was already slipping away.

The last thing I heard was the Darkling's voice—so clear, like he was lying right next to me, his lips pressed against my ear, whispering so that only I could hear: *Thank you.*

CHAPTER

2

DARKNESS AGAIN. *Something seething inside me. I look for the light, but it's out of my reach.*

"Drink."

I open my eyes. Ivan's scowling face comes into focus. "You do it," he grumbles to someone.

Then Genya leans over me, more beautiful than ever, even in a bedraggled red kefta*. Am I dreaming?*

She presses something against my lips. "Drink, Alina."

I try to knock the cup away, but I can't move my hands.

My nose is pinched shut, my mouth forced open. Some kind of broth slides down my throat. I cough and sputter.

"Where am I?" I try to say.

Another voice, cold and pure: "Put her back under."

* * *

I AM IN THE PONY CART, *riding back from the village with Ana Kuya. Her bony elbow jabs into my rib as we jounce up the road that will take us home to Keramzin. Mal is on her other side, laughing and pointing at everything we see.*

The fat little pony plods along, twitching its shaggy mane as we climb the last hill. Halfway up, we pass a man and a woman on the side of the road. He is whistling as they go, waving his walking stick in time with the music. The woman trudges along, head bent, a block of salt strapped to her back.

"Are they very poor?" I ask Ana Kuya.

“Not so poor as others.”

“Then why doesn’t he buy a donkey?”

“He doesn’t need a donkey,” says Ana Kuya. “He has a wife.”

“I’m going to marry Alina,” Mal says.

The cart rolls past. The man doffs his cap and calls a jolly greeting.

Mal shouts back gleefully, waving and smiling, nearly bouncing from his seat.

I look back over my shoulder, craning my neck to watch the woman slogging along behind her husband. She’s just a girl, really, but her eyes are old and worn.

Ana Kuya misses nothing. “That’s what happens to peasant girls who do not have the benefit of the Duke’s kindness. That is why you must be grateful and keep him every night in your prayers.”

* * *

THE CLINK OF CHAINS.

Genya’s worried face. “It isn’t safe to keep doing this to her.”

“Don’t tell me how to do my job,” Ivan snaps.

The Darkling, in black, standing in the shadows. The rhythm of the sea beneath me. The realization hits me like a blow: We’re on a ship.

Please let me be dreaming.

* * *

I’M ON THE ROAD *to Keramzin again, watching the pony’s bent neck as he labors up the hill. When I look back, the girl struggling beneath the weight of the salt block has my face. Baghra sits beside me in the cart, “The ox feels the yoke,” she says, “but does the bird feel the weight of its wings?”*

Her eyes are black jet. Be grateful, they say. Be grateful. She snaps the reins.

* * *

“DRINK.” MORE BROTH. *I don’t fight it now. I don’t want to choke again. I fall back, let my lids drop, drifting away, too weak to struggle.*

A hand on my cheek.

“Mal,” I manage to croak.

The hand is withdrawn.

Nothingness.

* * *

“WAKE UP.” THIS TIME, *I don’t recognize the voice. “Bring her out of it.”*

My lids flutter open. Am I still dreaming? A boy leans over me: ruddy hair, a broken nose. He reminds me of the too-clever fox, another of Ana Kuya’s stories, smart enough to get out of one trap, but too foolish to realize he won’t escape a second. There’s another boy standing behind him, but this one is a giant, one of the largest people I’ve ever seen. His golden eyes have the Shu tilt.

“Alina,” says the fox. How does he know my name?

The door opens, and I see another stranger’s face, a girl with short dark hair and the same golden gaze as the giant.

“They’re coming,” she says.

The fox curses. “Put her back down.” The giant comes closer. Darkness bleeds back in.

“No, please—”

It’s too late. The dark has me.

* * *

I AM A GIRL, *trudging up a hill. My boots squelch in the mud and my back aches from the weight of the salt upon it. When I think I cannot take another step, I feel myself lifted off the ground. The salt slips from my shoulders, and I watch it shatter on the road. I float higher, higher. Below me, I can see a pony cart, the three passengers looking up at me, their mouths open in surprise. I can see my shadow pass over them, pass over the road and the barren winter fields, the black shape of a girl, borne high by her own unfurling wings.*

* * *

THE FIRST THING I knew was real was the rocking of the ship—the creak of the rigging, the slap of water on the hull.

When I tried to turn over, a shard of pain sliced through my shoulder. I gasped and jolted upright, my eyes flying open, heart racing, fully awake. A wave of nausea rolled through me, and I had to blink back the stars that floated

across my vision. I was in a tidy ship's cabin, lying on a narrow bunk. Daylight spilled through the sidescuttle.

Genya sat at the edge of my bed. So I hadn't dreamed her. Or was I dreaming now? I tried to shake the cobwebs from my mind and was rewarded with another surge of nausea. The unpleasant smell in the air wasn't helping to settle my stomach. I forced myself to take a long, shaky breath.

Genya wore a red *kefta* embroidered in blue, a combination I'd never seen on any other Grisha. The garment was dirty and a bit worn, but her hair was arranged in flawless curls, and she looked more lovely than any queen. She held a tin cup to my lips.

"Drink," she said.

"What is it?" I asked warily.

"Just water."

I tried to take the cup from her and realized my wrists were in irons. I lifted my hands awkwardly. The water had a flat metallic tang, but I was parched. I sipped, coughed, then drank greedily.

"Slowly," she said, her hand smoothing the hair back from my face, "or you'll make yourself sick."

"How long?" I asked, glancing at Ivan, who leaned against the door watching me. "How long have I been out?"

"A little over a week," Genya said.

"A *week*?"

Panic seized me. A week of Ivan slowing my heart rate to keep me unconscious.

I shoved to my feet and blood rushed to my head. I would have fallen if Genya hadn't reached out to steady me. I willed the dizziness away, shook her off, then stumbled to the sidescuttle and peered through the foggy circle of glass. Nothing. Nothing but blue sea. No harbor. No coast. Novyi Zem was long gone. I fought the tears that rose behind my eyes.

"Where's Mal?" I asked. When no one answered, I turned around. "Where's Mal?" I demanded of Ivan.

"The Darkling wants to see you," he said. "Are you strong enough to walk, or do I have to carry you?"

"Give her a minute," said Genya. "Let her eat, wash her face at least."

“No. Take me to him.”

Genya frowned.

“I’m fine,” I insisted. Actually, I felt weak and woozy and terrified. But I wasn’t about to lie back down on that bunk, and I needed answers, not food.

As we left the cabin, we were engulfed in a wall of stench—not the usual ship smells of bilge and fish and bodies that I remembered from our voyage aboard the *Verrhader*, but something far worse. I gagged and clamped my mouth shut. I was suddenly glad I hadn’t eaten.

“What is that?”

“Blood, bone, rendered blubber,” said Ivan. We were aboard a whaler. “You get used to it,” he said.

“*You* get used to it,” retorted Genya, wrinkling her nose.

They brought me to a hatch that led to the deck above. Ivan clambered up the ladder, and I scrambled hastily after him, eager to be out of the dark bowels of the ship and free of that rotting stench. It was hard climbing with my hands in irons, and Ivan quickly lost patience. He hooked my wrists to haul me up the last few feet. I took in great gulps of cold air and blinked in the bright light.

The whaler was lumbering along at full sail, driven forward by three Grisha Squallers who stood by the masts with arms raised, their blue *kefta* flapping around their legs. Etherealki, the Order of Summoners. Just a few short months ago, I’d been one of them.

The ship’s crew wore roughspun, and many were barefoot, the better to grip the ship’s slippery deck. *No uniforms*, I noted. So they weren’t military, and the ship flew no colors that I could see.

The rest of the Darkling’s Grisha were easy to pick out among the crew, not just because of their brightly colored *kefta*, but because they stood idly at the railings, gazing out at the sea or talking while the regular sailors worked. I even saw a Fabrikator in her purple *kefta*, propped up against a coil of rope, reading.

As we passed by two massive cast-iron kettles set into the deck, I got a fierce whiff of the stink that had been so powerful below.

“The try-pots,” Genya said. “Where they render the oil. They haven’t been used on this voyage, but the smell never fades.”

Grisha and crewmen alike turned to stare as we walked the length of the ship. When we passed beneath the mizzenmast, I looked up and saw the dark-haired

boy and girl from my dream perched high above us. They hung from the rigging like two birds of prey, watching us with matching golden eyes.

So it hadn't been a dream at all. They'd been in my cabin.

Ivan led me to the prow of the ship, where the Darkling was waiting. He stood with his back to us, staring out over the bowsprit to the blue horizon beyond, his black *kefta* billowing around him like an inky banner of war.

Genya and Ivan made their bows and left us.

"Where's Mal?" I rasped, my throat still rusty.

The Darkling didn't turn, but shook his head and said, "You're predictable, at least."

"Sorry to bore you. Where is he?"

"How do you know he isn't dead?"

My stomach lurched. "Because I know you," I said with more confidence than I felt.

"And if he were? Would you throw yourself into the sea?"

"Not unless I could take you with me. Where is he?"

"Look behind you."

I whirled. Far down the stretch of the main deck, through the tangle of rope and rigging, I saw Mal. He was flanked by Corporalki guards, but his focus was trained on me. He'd been watching, waiting for me to turn. I stepped forward. The Darkling seized my arm.

"No farther," he said.

"Let me talk to him," I begged. I hated the desperation in my voice.

"Not a chance. You two have a bad habit of acting like fools and calling it heroic."

The Darkling lifted his hand, and Mal's guards started to lead him away. "Alina!" he yelled, and then grunted as a guard cuffed him hard across the face.

"Mal!" I shouted as they dragged him, struggling, belowdecks. "Mal!"

I flinched out of the Darkling's grip, my throat choked with rage. "If you hurt him—"

"I'm not going to hurt him," he said. "At least not while he can be of use to me."

"I don't want him harmed."

"He's safe for now, Alina. But don't test me. If one of you steps out of line,

the other will suffer. I've told him the same."

I shut my eyes, trying to push back the fury and hopelessness I felt. We were right back where we'd started. I nodded once.

Again, the Darkling shook his head. "You two make it so easy. I prick him, you bleed."

"And you can't begin to understand that, can you?"

He reached out and tapped Morozova's collar, letting his fingers graze the skin of my throat. Even that faint touch opened the connection between us, and a rush of power vibrated through me like a bell being struck.

"I understand enough," he said softly.

"I want to see him," I managed. "Every day. I want to know he's safe."

"Of course. I'm not cruel, Alina. Just cautious."

I almost laughed. "Is that why you had one of your monsters bite me?"

"That's not why," he said, his gaze steady. He glanced at my shoulder. "Does it hurt?"

"No," I lied.

The barest hint of a smile touched his lips. "It will get better," he said. "But the wound can never be fully healed. Not even by Grisha."

"Those creatures—"

"The *nichevo'ya*."

Nothings. I shuddered, remembering the skittering, clicking sounds they'd made, the gaping holes of their mouths. My shoulder throbbed. "What are they?"

His lips tilted. The faint tracery of scars on his face was barely visible, like the ghost of a map. One ran perilously close to his right eye. He'd almost lost it. He cupped my cheek with his hand, and when he spoke, his voice was almost tender.

"They're just the beginning," he whispered.

He left me standing on the foredeck, my skin still alive with the touch of his fingers, my head swimming with questions.

Before I could begin to sort through them, Ivan appeared and began yanking me back across the main deck. "Slow down," I protested, but he just gave another jerk on my sleeve. I lost my footing and pitched forward. My knees banged painfully on the deck, and I barely had time to put up my shackled palms to break my fall. I winced as a splinter dug into my flesh.

“Move,” Ivan ordered. I struggled to my knees. He nudged me with the toe of his boot, and my knee slipped out from beneath me, sending me back down to the deck with a loud thud. “I said *move*.”

Then a large hand scooped me up and gently set me on my feet. When I turned, I was surprised to see the giant and the dark-haired girl.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“This is none of your concern,” Ivan said angrily.

“She’s Sturmhond’s prisoner,” replied the girl. “She should be treated accordingly.”

Sturmhond. The name was familiar. Was this his ship, then? And his crew? There’d been talk of him aboard the *Verrhader*. He was a Ravkan privateer and a smuggler, infamous for breaking the Fjerdan blockade and for the fortune he’d made capturing enemy ships. But he wasn’t flying the double eagle flag.

“She’s the *Darkling’s* prisoner,” said Ivan, “and a traitor.”

“Maybe on land,” the girl shot back.

Ivan gabbled something in Shu that I didn’t understand. The giant just laughed.

“You speak Shu like a tourist,” he said.

“And we don’t take orders from you in any language,” the girl added.

Ivan smirked. “Don’t you?” His hand twitched, and the girl grabbed at her chest, buckling to one knee.

Before I could blink, the giant had a wickedly curved blade in his hand and was lunging at Ivan. Lazily, Ivan flicked his other hand out, and the giant grimaced. Still, he kept coming.

“Leave them alone,” I protested, tugging helplessly at my irons. I could summon light with my wrists bound, but I had no way to focus it.

Ivan ignored me. His hand tightened into a fist. The giant stopped in his tracks, and the sword fell from his fingers. Sweat broke out on his brow as Ivan squeezed the life from his heart.

“Let’s not get out of line, *ye zho*,” Ivan chided.

“You’re killing him!” I said, panicked now. I rammed my shoulder into Ivan’s side, trying to knock him down.

At that moment, a loud double *click* sounded.

Ivan froze, his smirk evaporating. Behind him stood a tall boy around my

age, maybe a few years older—ruddy hair, a broken nose. The too-clever fox.

He had a cocked pistol in his hand, the barrel pressed against Ivan's neck.

"I'm a gracious host, bloodletter. But every house has rules."

Host. So this must be Sturmhond. He looked too young to be a captain of anything.

Ivan dropped his hands.

The giant sucked in air. The girl rose to her feet, still clutching her chest. They were both breathing hard, and their eyes burned with hate.

"That's a good fellow," Sturmhond said to Ivan. "Now, I'll take the prisoner back to her quarters, and you can run off and do … whatever it is you do when everyone else is working."

Ivan scowled. "I don't think—"

"Clearly. Why start now?"

Ivan's face flushed in anger. "You don't—"

Sturmhond leaned in close, the laughter gone from his voice, his easy demeanor replaced by something with a sword's edge. "I don't care who you are on land. On this ship, you're nothing but ballast. Unless I put you over the side, in which case you're shark bait. I like shark. Cooks up tough, but it makes for a little variety. Remember that the next time you have a mind to threaten anyone aboard this vessel." He stepped back, his jolly manner restored. "Go on now, shark bait. Scurry back to your master."

"I won't forget this, Sturmhond," Ivan spat.

The captain rolled his eyes. "That's the idea."

Ivan turned on his heel and stomped off.

Sturmhond holstered his weapon and smiled pleasantly. "Amazing how quickly a ship feels crowded, no?" He reached out and gave the giant and the girl each a pat on the shoulder. "You did well," he said quietly.

Their attention was still on Ivan. The girl's fists were clenched.

"I don't want trouble," the captain warned. "Understood?"

They exchanged a glance, then nodded grudgingly.

"Good," said Sturmhond. "Get back to work. I'll take her belowdecks." They nodded again. Then, to my surprise, they each sketched a quick bow to me before they departed.

"Are they related?" I asked, watching them go.

“Twins,” he said. “Tolya and Tamar.”

“And you’re Sturmhond.”

“On my good days,” he replied. He wore leather breeches, a brace of pistols at his hips, and a bright teal frock coat with gaudy gold buttons and enormous cuffs. It belonged in a ballroom or on an opera stage, not on the deck of a ship.

“What’s a pirate doing on a whaler?” I asked.

“Privateer,” he corrected. “I have several ships. The Darkling wanted a whaler, so I got him one.”

“You mean you stole it.”

“Acquired it.”

“You were in my cabin.”

“Many women dream of me,” he said lightly as he steered me down the deck.

“I saw you when I woke up,” I insisted. “I need—”

He held up a hand. “Don’t waste your breath, lovely.”

“But you don’t even know what I was going to say.”

“You were about to plead your case, tell me you need my help, you can’t pay me but your heart is true, the usual thing.”

I blinked. That was exactly what I’d been about to do. “But—”

“Waste of breath, waste of time, waste of a fine afternoon,” he said. “I don’t like to see prisoners mistreated, but that’s as far as my interest goes.”

“You—”

He shook his head. “And I’m notoriously immune to tales of woe. So unless your story involves a talking dog, I don’t want to hear it. Does it?”

“Does it what?”

“Involve a talking dog.”

“No,” I snapped. “It involves the future of a kingdom and everyone in it.”

“A pity,” he said, and took me by the arm, leading me to the aft hatch.

“I thought you worked for Ravka,” I said angrily.

“I work for the fattest purse.”

“So you’d sell your country to the Darkling for a little gold?”

“No, for a *lot* of gold,” he said. “I assure you, I don’t come cheap.” He gestured to the hatch. “After you.”

With Sturmhond’s help, I made it back down to my cabin, where two Grisha guards were waiting to lock me inside. The captain bowed and left me without

another word.

I sat down on my bunk, resting my head in my hands. Sturmhond could play the fool all he wanted. I knew he'd been in my cabin, and there had to be a reason. Or maybe I was just grasping at any little bit of hope.

When Genya brought me my dinner tray, she found me curled up on my bunk, facing the wall.

"You should eat," she said.

"Leave me alone."

"Sulking gives you wrinkles."

"Well, lying gives you warts," I said sourly. She laughed, then entered and set down the tray. She crossed to the sidescuttle and glanced at her reflection in the glass. "Maybe I should go blond," she said. "Corporalki red clashes horribly with my hair."

I cast a glance over my shoulder. "You know you could wear baked mud and outshine every girl on two continents."

"True," she said with a grin.

I didn't return her smile. She sighed and studied the toes of her boots. "I missed you," she said.

I was surprised at how much those words hurt. I'd missed her, too. And I'd felt like a fool for it.

"Were you ever my friend?" I asked.

She sat down at the edge of the bunk. "Would it make a difference?"

"I like to know just how stupid I've been."

"I loved being your friend, Alina. But I'm not sorry for what I did."

"And what the Darkling did? Are you sorry for that?"

"I know you think he's a monster, but he's trying to do what's right for Ravka, for all of us."

I shoved up to my elbows. I'd lived with the knowledge of the Darkling's lies so long that it was easy to forget how few people knew what he really was. "Genya, he created the Fold."

"The Black Heretic—"

"There is no Black Heretic," I said, revealing the truth that Baghra had laid out before me months ago at the Little Palace. "He blamed his ancestor for the Fold, but there's only ever been one Darkling, and all he cares about is power."

“That’s impossible. The Darkling has spent his life trying to free Ravka from the Fold.”

“How can you say that after what he did to Novokribirsk?” The Darkling had used the power of the Unsea to destroy an entire town, a show of strength meant to cow his enemies and mark the start of his rule. And I’d made it possible.

“I know there was … an incident.”

“An incident? He killed hundreds of people, maybe thousands.”

“And what about the people on the skiff?” she said quietly.

I drew in a sharp breath and lay back. For a long moment, I studied the planks above me. I didn’t want to ask, but I knew I was going to. The question had haunted me over long weeks and miles of ocean. “Were there … were there other survivors?”

“Besides Ivan and the Darkling?”

I nodded, waiting.

“Two Inferni who helped them escape,” she said. “A few soldiers from the First Army made it back, and a Squaller named Nathalia got out, but she died of her injuries a few days later.”

I closed my eyes. How many people had been aboard that sandskiff? Thirty? Forty? I felt sick. I could hear the screams, the howls of the volcra. I could smell the gunpowder and blood. I’d sacrificed those people for Mal’s life, for my freedom, and in the end, they’d died for nothing. We were back in the Darkling’s grasp, and he was more powerful than ever.

Genya laid her hand over mine. “You did what you had to, Alina.”

I let out a harsh bark of laughter and yanked my hand away. “Is that what the Darkling tells you, Genya? Does that make it easier?”

“Not really, no.” She looked down at her lap, pleating and unpleating the folds of her *kefta*. “He freed me, Alina,” she said. “What am I supposed to do? Run back to the palace? Back to the King?” She gave a fierce shake of her head. “No. I made my choice.”

“What about the other Grisha?” I asked. “They can’t all have sided with the Darkling. How many of them stayed in Ravka?”

Genya stiffened. “I don’t think I’m supposed to talk about that with you.”

“Genya—”

“Eat, Alina. Try to get some rest. We’ll be in the ice soon.”

The ice. Then we weren't headed back to Ravka. We must be traveling north.

She stood up and brushed the dust off her *kefta*. She might joke about the color, but I knew how much it meant to her. It proved she was really a Grisha—protected, favored, a servant no more. I remembered the mysterious illness that had weakened the King just before the Darkling's coup. Genya had been one of the few Grisha with access to the royal family. She'd used that access to earn the right to wear red.

"Genya," I said as she reached the door. "One more question."

She paused, her hand on the latch.

It seemed so unimportant, so silly to mention it after all this time. But it was something that had bothered me for a long while. "The letters I wrote to Mal back at the Little Palace. He said he never got them."

She didn't turn back to me, but I saw her shoulders sag.

"They were never sent," she whispered. "The Darkling said you needed to leave your old life behind."

She closed the door, and I heard the bolt click home.

All those hours spent talking and laughing with Genya, drinking tea and trying on dresses. She'd been lying to me the whole time. The worst part about it was that the Darkling had been right. If I'd kept clinging to Mal and the memory of the love I had for him, I might never have mastered my power. But Genya didn't know that. She had just followed orders and let my heart break. I didn't know what that was, but it wasn't friendship.

I turned onto my side, feeling the gentle roll of the ship beneath me. Was this what it was like to be rocked to sleep in a mother's arms? I couldn't remember. Ana Kuya used to hum sometimes, under her breath, as she went about turning down the lamps and closing up the dormitories at Keramzin for the night. That was the closest Mal and I had ever come to a lullaby.

Somewhere above, I heard a sailor shout something over the wind. The bell rang to signal the change of the watch. *We're alive,* I reminded myself. *We escaped from him before. We can do it again.* But it was no good, and finally, I gave in and let the tears come. Sturmhond was bought and paid for. Genya had chosen the Darkling. Mal and I were alone as we'd always been, without friends or allies, surrounded by nothing but pitiless sea. This time, even if we escaped, there was nowhere to run.

CHAPTER

3

LESS THAN A WEEK LATER, I spotted the first ice floes. We were far north, where the sea darkened and ice bloomed from its depths in perilous spikes. Though it was early summer, the wind bit into our skin. In the morning, the ropes were hard with frost.

I spent hours pacing my cabin and staring out at the endless sea. Each morning, I was brought above deck, where I was given a chance to stretch my legs and see Mal from afar. Always, the Darkling stood by the railing, scanning the horizon, searching for something. Sturmhond and his crew kept their distance.

On the seventh day, we passed between two slate stone islands that I recognized from my time as a mapmaker: Jelka and Vilki, the Fork and Knife. We had entered the Bone Road, the long stretch of black water where countless ships had wrecked on the nameless islands that appeared and disappeared in its mists. On maps, it was marked by sailors' skulls, wide-mouthed monsters, mermaids with ice-white hair and the deep black eyes of seals. Only the most experienced Fjerdan hunters came here, seeking skins and furs, chancing death to claim rich prizes. But what prize did we seek?

Sturmhond ordered the sails trimmed, and our pace slowed as we drifted through the mist. An uneasy silence blanketed the ship. I studied the whaler's longboats, the racks of harpoons tipped in Grisha steel. It wasn't hard to guess what they were for. The Darkling was after some kind of amplifier. I surveyed the ranks of Grisha and wondered who might be singled out for another of the Darkling's "gifts." But a terrible suspicion had taken root inside me.

It's madness, I told myself. *He wouldn't dare attempt it.* The thought brought me little comfort. He always dared.

* * *

THE NEXT DAY, the Darkling ordered me brought to him.

"Who is it for?" I asked as Ivan deposited me by the starboard rail.

The Darkling just stared out into the waves. I considered shoving him over the railing. Sure, he was hundreds of years old, but could he swim?

"Tell me you're not contemplating what I think you are," I said. "Tell me the amplifier is for some other stupid, gullible girl."

"Someone less stubborn? Less selfish? Less hungry for the life of a mouse? Believe me," he said, "I wish I could."

I felt sick. "A Grisha can have only one amplifier. You told me that yourself."

"Morozova's amplifiers are different."

I gaped at him. "There's another like the stag?"

"They were meant to be used together, Alina. They are unique, just as we are."

I thought of the books I'd read on Grisha theory. Every one of them had said the same thing: Grisha power was not meant to be limitless; it had to be held in check.

"No," I said. "I don't want this. I want—"

"You *want*," the Darkling mocked. "I want to watch your tracker die slowly with my knife in his heart. I want to let the sea swallow you both. But our fates are entwined now, Alina, and there's nothing either of us can do about that."

"You're mad."

"I know it pleases you to think so," he said. "But the amplifiers must be brought together. If we have any hope of controlling the Fold—"

"You can't *control* the Fold. It has to be destroyed."

"Careful, Alina," he said with a slight smile. "I've had the same thought about you." He gestured to Ivan, who was waiting a respectful distance away. "Bring me the boy."

My heart leapt into my throat. "Wait," I said. "You told me you wouldn't hurt him."

He ignored me. Like a fool, I looked around. As if anyone on this saintsforsaken ship would hear my appeal. Sturmhond stood by the wheel, watching us, his face impassive.

I snatched at the Darkling's sleeve. "We had a deal. I haven't done anything. You said—"

The Darkling looked at me with cool quartz eyes, and the words died on my lips.

A moment later, Ivan appeared with Mal in tow and steered him over to the rail. He stood before us, squinting in the sunlight, hands bound. It was the closest we'd been in weeks. Though he looked tired and pale, he appeared unharmed. I saw the question in his wary expression, but I had no answer.

"All right, tracker," the Darkling said. "Track."

Mal glanced from the Darkling to me and back again. "Track what? We're in the middle of the ocean."

"Alina once told me that you could make rabbits out of rocks. I questioned the crew of the *Verrhader* myself, and they claim that you're just as capable at sea. They seemed to think you could make some lucky captain very rich with your expertise."

Mal frowned. "You want me to hunt whales?"

"No," said the Darkling. "I want you to hunt the sea whip."

We stared at him in shock. I almost laughed.

"You're looking for a dragon?" Mal said incredulously.

"The ice dragon," said the Darkling. "Rusalye."

Rusalye. In the stories, the sea whip was a cursed prince, forced to take the form of a sea serpent and guard the frigid waters of the Bone Road. That was Morozova's second amplifier?

"It's a fairy tale," Mal said, voicing my own thoughts. "A children's story. It doesn't actually exist."

"There have been sightings of the sea whip in these waters for years," said the Darkling.

"Along with mermaids and white selkies. It's a myth."

The Darkling arched a brow. "Like the stag?"

Mal glanced at me. I gave an infinitesimal shake of my head. Whatever the Darkling was doing, we weren't going to help.

Mal peered out at the waves. “I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“For her sake, I hope that’s not true.” The Darkling pulled a slender knife from the folds of his *kefta*. “Because every day we don’t find the sea whip, I’ll peel away a piece of her skin. Slowly. Then Ivan will heal her, and the next day, we’ll do it all over again.”

I felt the blood drain from my face.

“You won’t hurt her,” Mal said, but I could hear the fear in his voice.

“I don’t *want* to hurt her,” said the Darkling. “I want you to do as I ask.”

“It took me months to find the stag,” Mal said desperately. “I still don’t know how we did it.”

Sturmhond stepped forward. I’d been so focused on Mal and the Darkling, I’d nearly forgotten him. “I won’t have a girl tortured on my ship,” he said.

The Darkling turned his cold gaze on the privateer. “You work for me, Sturmhond. You’ll do your job or getting paid will be the least of your worries.”

An ugly ripple of disquiet passed over the ship. Sturmhond’s crew were sizing up the Grisha, and their expressions were not friendly. Genya had a hand pressed over her mouth, but she did not say a word.

“Give the tracker some time,” Sturmhond said quietly. “A week. At least a few days.”

The Darkling slid his fingers up my arm, pushing back my sleeve to reveal bare white flesh. “Shall I start with her arm?” he asked. He dropped the sleeve, then brushed his knuckles over my cheek. “Or with her face?” He nodded to Ivan. “Hold her.”

Ivan clasped the back of my head. The Darkling lifted the knife. I saw it glittering from the corner of my eye. I tried to cringe back, but Ivan held me in place. The blade met my cheek. I sucked in a frightened breath.

“Stop!” Mal shouted.

The Darkling waited.

“I … I can do it.”

“Mal, no,” I said with more courage than I felt.

Mal swallowed and said, “Tack southwest. Back the way we came.”

I stayed very still. Had he seen something? Or was he just trying to keep me from getting hurt?

The Darkling cocked his head to one side and studied him. “I think you know

better than to play games with me, tracker."

Mal gave a sharp nod. "I can do it. I can find it. Just … just give me time."

The Darkling sheathed his knife. I exhaled slowly and tried to suppress a shiver.

"You have a week," he said, turning away and disappearing into the hatch. "Bring her," he called to Ivan.

"Mal—" I began as Ivan grasped my arm.

Mal lifted his bound hands, reaching for me. His fingers grazed mine briefly, then Ivan was hauling me back toward the hatch.

My mind was racing as we descended into the dank belly of the ship. I stumbled along behind Ivan, trying to make sense of everything that had just happened. The Darkling had said that he wouldn't harm Mal as long as he needed him. I'd assumed he just meant to use him to keep me in line, but now it was clear there was more to it than that. Did Mal really think he could find the sea whip, or was he stalling for time? I wasn't sure what I wanted to be true. I didn't savor the idea of being tortured, but what if we did find the ice dragon? What would a second amplifier mean?

Ivan pulled me into a spacious cabin that looked like the captain's quarters. Sturmhond must have been squeezed in with the rest of his crew. A bed was pushed into one corner, and the deeply curved aft wall was studded with a row of thick-paned windows. They shed watery light on a desk behind which the Darkling seated himself.

Ivan bowed and darted from the room, closing the door behind him.

"He can't wait to get away from you," I said, hovering by the door. "He's afraid of what you've become. They all are."

"Do you fear me, Alina?"

"That's what you want, isn't it?"

The Darkling shrugged. "Fear is a powerful ally," he said. "And loyal."

He was watching me in that cold, assessing way that always made me feel as if he were reading me like words on a page, his fingers moving over the text, gleaning some secret knowledge that I could only guess at. I tried not to fidget, but the irons at my wrists chafed.

"I'd like to free you," he said quietly.

"Free me, flay me. So many options." I could still feel the press of his knife

at my cheek.

He sighed. “It was a threat, Alina. It accomplished what it needed to.”

“So you wouldn’t have cut me?”

“I didn’t say that.” His voice was pleasant and matter-of-fact, as always. He might have been threatening to carve me up or ordering his dinner.

In the dim light, I could just make out the fine traces of his scars. I knew I should stay quiet, force him to speak first, but my curiosity was too great.

“How did you survive?”

He ran his hand over the sharp line of his jaw. “It seems the volcra did not care for the taste of my flesh,” he said, almost idly. “Have you ever noticed that they do not feed on each other?”

I shuddered. They were his creations, just like the thing that had buried its teeth in my shoulder. The skin there still pulsed. “Like calls to like.”

“It’s not an experience I’d care to repeat. I’ve had my fill of the volcra’s mercy. And yours.”

I crossed the room, coming to stand before the desk. “Then why give me a second amplifier?” I asked desperately, grasping for an argument that would somehow make him see sense. “In case you’ve forgotten, I tried to kill you.”

“And failed.”

“Here’s to second chances. Why make me stronger?”

Again, he shrugged. “Without Morozova’s amplifiers, Ravka is lost. You were meant to have them, just as I was meant to rule. It can be no other way.”

“How convenient for you.”

He leaned back and folded his arms. “You have been anything but convenient, Alina.”

“You can’t combine amplifiers. All the books say the same thing—”

“Not *all* the books.”

I wanted to scream in frustration. “Baghra warned me. She said you were arrogant, blinded by ambition.”

“Did she now?” His voice was ice. “And what other treason did she whisper in your ear?”

“That she loved you,” I said angrily. “That she believed you could be redeemed.”

He looked away then, but not before I saw the flash of pain on his face. What

had he done to her? And what had it cost him?

"Redemption," he murmured. "Salvation. Penance. My mother's quaint ideas. Perhaps I should have paid closer attention." He reached into the desk and drew out a slender red volume. As he held it up, light glinted off the gold lettering on its cover: *Istorii Sankt'ya.* "Do you know what this is?"

I frowned. *The Lives of Saints.* A dim memory came back to me. The Apparat had given me a copy months ago at the Little Palace. I'd thrown it in the drawer of my dressing table and never spared it another thought.

"It's a children's book," I said.

"Have you read it?"

"No," I admitted, suddenly wishing I had. The Darkling was watching me too closely. What could be so important about an old collection of religious drawings?

"Superstition," he said glancing down at the cover. "Peasant propaganda. Or so I thought. Morozova was a strange man. He was a bit like you, drawn to the ordinary and the weak."

"Mal isn't weak."

"He's gifted, I grant you, but no Grisha. He can never be your equal."

"He's my equal and more," I spat.

The Darkling shook his head. If I hadn't known better, I might have mistaken the look on his face for pity. "You think you've found a family with him. You think you've found a future. But you will grow powerful, and he will grow old. He will live his short *otkazat'sya* life, and you will watch him die."

"Shut up."

He smiled. "Go on, stamp your foot, fight your true nature. All the while, your country suffers."

"Because of you!"

"Because I put my trust in a girl who cannot stand the thought of her own potential." He rose and rounded the desk. Despite my anger, I took a step back, banging into the chair behind me.

"I know what you feel when you're with the tracker," he said.

"I doubt that."

He gave a dismissive wave. "No, not the absurd pining you've yet to outgrow. I know the truth in your heart. The loneliness. The growing knowledge

of your own difference." He leaned in closer. "The ache of it."

I tried to hide the shock of recognition that went through me. "I don't know what you're talking about," I said, but the words sounded false to my ears.

"It will never fade, Alina. It will only grow worse, no matter how many scarves you hide behind or what lies you tell, no matter how far or how fast you run."

I tried to turn away, but he reached out and took hold of my chin, forcing me to look at him. He was so close I could feel his breath. "There are no others like us, Alina," he whispered. "And there never will be."

I lurched away from him, knocking the chair over, nearly losing my balance. I pounded on the door with my iron-bound fists, calling out to Ivan as the Darkling looked on. He didn't come until the Darkling gave the order.

Dimly, I registered Ivan's hand at my back, the stench of the corridor, a sailor letting us pass, then the quiet of my narrow cabin, the door locking behind me, the bunk, the scratch of rough fabric as I pressed my face into the covers, trembling, trying to drive the Darkling's words from my head. Mal's death. The long life before me. The pain of otherness that would never ease. Each fear sank into me, a barbed talon burrowing deep into my heart.

I knew he was a practiced liar. He could fake any emotion, play on any human failing. But I couldn't deny what I'd felt in Novyi Zem or the truth of what the Darkling had shown me: my own sadness, my own longing, reflected back to me in his bleak gray eyes.

* * *

THE MOOD HAD changed aboard the whaler. The crew had grown restless and watchful, the slight to their captain still fresh in their minds. The Grisha muttered amongst themselves, their nerves worn thin by our slow progress through the waters of the Bone Road.

Each day, the Darkling had me brought above deck to stand beside him at the prow. Mal was kept well guarded at the other end of the ship. Sometimes, I heard him call out bearings to Sturmhond or saw him gesture to what looked like deep scratches just above the waterline on the large ice shelves we passed.

I peered at the rough grooves. They might be claw marks. They might be nothing at all. Still, I'd seen what Mal was capable of in Tsibeya. When we were

tracking the stag, he had shown me broken branches, trampled grass, signs that seemed obvious once he pointed them out but that had been invisible moments before. The crewmen seemed skeptical. The Grisha were outright contemptuous.

At dusk, when another day had come and gone, the Darkling would parade me across the deck and down through the hatch directly in front of Mal. We weren't permitted to speak. I tried to hold his gaze, to tell him silently that I was all right, but I could see his fury and desperation growing, and I was powerless to reassure him.

Once, when I stumbled by the hatch, the Darkling caught me up against himself. He might have let me go, but he lingered, and before I could pull away, he let his hand graze the small of my back.

Mal surged forward, and it was only the grip of his Grisha guards that kept him from charging the Darkling.

"Three more days, tracker."

"Leave her alone," Mal snarled.

"I've kept my end of the bargain. She's still unharmed. But perhaps that isn't what you fear?"

Mal looked frayed to the point of snapping. His face was pale, his mouth a taut line, the muscles of his forearms knotted as he strained against his bonds. I couldn't bear it.

"I'm fine," I said softly, risking the Darkling's knife. "He can't hurt me." It was a lie, but it felt good on my lips.

The Darkling looked from me to Mal, and I glimpsed that bleak, yawning fissure within him. "Don't worry, tracker. You'll know when our deal is up." He shoved me belowdecks, but not before I heard his parting words to Mal—"I'll be certain you hear it when I make her scream."

* * *

THE WEEK WORE ON, and on the sixth day, Genya woke me early. As I gathered my wits, I realized it was barely dawn. Fear sliced through me. Maybe the Darkling had decided to cut short my reprieve and make good on this threats.

But Genya was beaming.

"He found something!" she crowed, bouncing on the soles of her feet, practically dancing as she helped me from the bunk. "The tracker says we're

close!”

“His name is Mal,” I muttered, pulling away from her. I ignored her stricken look.

Can it be true? I wondered as Genya led me above. Or did Mal simply hope to buy me more time?

We emerged into the dim gray light of early morning. The deck was crowded with Grisha gazing out at the water while the Squallers worked the winds, and Sturmhond’s crew managed the sails above.

The mist was heavier than the day before. It clung thick against the water and crawled in damp tendrils over the ship’s hull. The silence was broken only by Mal’s directions and the orders Sturmhond called.

When we entered a wide, open stretch of sea, Mal turned to the Darkling and said, “I think we’re close.”

“You *think*?”

Mal gave a single nod.

The Darkling considered. If Mal was stalling, his efforts were doomed to be short-lived, and the price would be high.

After what felt like an eternity, the Darkling nodded to Sturmhond.

“Trim the sails,” commanded the privateer, and the topmen moved to obey.

Ivan tapped the Darkling’s shoulder and gestured to the southern horizon. “A ship, *moi soverenyi*.”

I squinted at the tiny smudge.

“Are they flying colors?” the Darkling asked Sturmhond.

“Probably fishermen,” Sturmhond said. “But we’ll keep an eye on her just in case.” He signaled to one of his crewmen, who went scurrying up the main royal with a long glass in hand.

The longboats were prepared and, in minutes, they were being lowered over the starboard side, loaded with Sturmhond’s men and bristling with harpoons. The Darkling’s Grisha crowded by the rail to view the boats’ progress. The mist seemed to magnify the steady slap of the oars against the waves.

I took a step toward Mal. Everyone’s attention was focused on the men in the water. Only Genya was watching me. She hesitated, then deliberately turned and joined the others at the railing.

Mal and I faced forward, but we were close enough that our shoulders

touched.

“Tell me you’re all right,” he murmured, his voice raw.

I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat. “I’m fine,” I said softly. “Is it out there?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. There were times when I was tracking the stag that I thought we were close and … Alina, if I’m wrong—”

I turned then, not caring who saw us or what punishment I might receive. The mist was rising off the water now, creeping along the deck. I looked up at him, taking in every detail of his face: the bright blue of his irises, the curve of his lip, the scar that ran the length of his jaw. Behind him, I glimpsed Tamar scampering up the rigging, a lantern in her hands.

“None of this is your fault, Mal. None of it.”

He lowered his head, setting his forehead against mine. “I won’t let him hurt you.”

We both knew he was powerless to stop it, but the truth of that was too painful, so I just said, “I know.”

“You’re humoring me,” he said with the hint of a grin.

“You require a lot of coddling.”

He pressed his lips to the top of my head. “We’ll find a way out of this, Alina. We always do.”

I rested my ironbound hands against his chest and closed my eyes. We were alone on an icy sea, prisoners of a man who could literally make monsters, and yet somehow I believed. I leaned into him, and for the first time in days, I let myself hope.

A cry rang out: “Two points off the starboard bow!”

As one, our heads turned, and I stilled. Something was moving in the mist, a shimmering, undulating white shape.

“Saints,” Mal breathed.

At that moment, the creature’s back breached the waves, its body cutting through the water in a sinuous arch, rainbows sparking off the iridescent scales on its back.

Rusalye.

CHAPTER 4

RUSALYE WAS A folk story, a fairy tale, a creature of dreams that lived on the edges of maps. But there could be no doubt. The ice dragon was real, and Mal had found it, just as he had found the stag. It felt wrong, like everything was happening too quickly, as if we were rushing toward something we didn't understand.

A shout from the longboats drew my attention. A man on the boat nearest the sea whip stood up, a harpoon in his hand, taking aim. But the dragon's white tail lashed through the sea, split the waves, and came down with a slap, sending a rolling wall of water up against the boat's hull. The man with the harpoon sat down hard as the longboat tipped precariously, then righted itself at the last moment.

Good, I thought. *Fight them.*

Then the other boat let fly their harpoons. The first went wide and splashed harmlessly in the water. The second lodged in the sea whip's hide.

It bucked, tail whipping back and forth, then reared up like a snake, hurling its body out of the water. For a moment, it hung suspended in the air: translucent winglike fins, gleaming scales, and wrathful red eyes. Beads of water flew from its mane and its massive jaws opened, revealing a pink tongue and rows of gleaming teeth. It came down on the nearest boat with a loud crash of splintering wood. The slender craft split in two, and men poured into the sea. The dragon's maw snapped closed over a sailor's legs and he vanished, screaming, beneath the waves. With furious strokes, the rest of the crewmen swam through the bloodstained water, making for the remaining longboat, where they were hauled

over the side.

I glanced back up to the whaler's rigging. The tops of the masts were shrouded in mist now, but I could still make out the light of Tamar's lantern burning steadily atop the main royal.

Another harpoon found its target and the sea whip began to sing, a sound more lovely than anything I'd ever heard, a choir of voices lifted in a plaintive, wordless song. *No,* I realized, *not a song*. The sea whip was crying out, writhing and rolling in the waves as the longboats gave chase, struggling to shake the hooked tips of the harpoons free. *Fight,* I pleaded silently. *Once he has you, he'll never let you go.*

But I could already see the dragon slowing, its movements growing sluggish as its cries wavered, mournful now, their music bleak and fading.

Part of me wished the Darkling would just end it. Why didn't he? Why not use the Cut on the sea whip and bind me to him as he had done with the stag?

"Nets!" shouted Sturmhond. But the mist had grown so thick that I couldn't quite tell where his voice was coming from. I heard a series of thunks from somewhere near the starboard rail.

"Clear the mist," ordered the Darkling. "We're losing the longboat."

I heard the Grisha calling to one another and then felt the billow of Squaller winds tugging at the hem of my coat.

The mist lifted, and my jaw dropped. The Darkling and his Grisha still stood on the starboard side, attention focused on the longboat that now seemed to be rowing away from the whaler. But on the port side, another ship had appeared as if from nowhere, a sleek schooner with gleaming masts and colors flying: a red dog on a teal field—and below it, in pale blue and gold, the Ravkan double eagle.

I heard another series of thunks and saw steel claws studding the whaler's portside rail. *Grappling hooks,* I realized.

And then everything seemed to happen at once. A howl went up from somewhere, like a wolf baying at the moon. Men swarmed over the rail onto the whaler's deck, pistols strapped to their chests, cutlasses in their hands, yowling and barking like a pack of wild dogs. I saw the Darkling turn, confusion and rage on his face.

"What the hell is going on?" Mal said, stepping in front of me as we edged

toward the meager protection of the mizzenmast.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “Something very good or something very, very bad.”

We stood back-to-back, my hands still trapped in irons, his still bound, powerless to defend ourselves as the deck erupted into fighting. Pistol shots rang out. The air came alive with Inferni fire. “To me, hounds!” Sturmhond shouted, and plunged into the action, a saber in his hands.

Barking, yipping, snarling men were descending on the Darkling’s Grisha from all sides—not just from the railing of the schooner but from the rigging of the whaler as well. *Sturmhond’s* men. Sturmhond was turning against the Darkling.

The privateer had clearly lost his mind. Yes, the Grisha were outnumbered, but numbers didn’t matter in a fight with the Darkling.

“Look!” Mal shouted.

Down in the water, the men in the remaining longboat had the struggling sea whip in tow. They had raised a sail, and a brisk wind was driving them, not toward the whaler but directly toward the schooner instead. The stiff breeze that carried them seemed to come from nowhere. I looked closer. A crewman was standing in the longboat, arms raised. There was no mistaking it: Sturmhond had a Squaller working for him.

Suddenly, an arm seized me around the waist and I was lifted off my feet. The world seemed to upend itself, and I shrieked as I was thrown over a huge shoulder.

I lifted my head, struggling against the arm that held me like a steel band, and saw Tamar rushing toward Mal, a knife gleaming in her hands. “No!” I screamed. “Mal!”

He put up his hands to defend himself, but all she did was slice through his bonds. “Go!” she shouted, tossing him the knife and drawing a sword from the scabbard at her hip.

Tolya clutched me tighter as he sprinted over the deck. Tamar and Mal were close behind.

“What are you doing?” I squawked, my head jouncing against the giant’s back.

“Just run!” Tamar replied, slashing at a Corporalnik who threw himself into

her path.

“I can’t run,” I shouted back. “Your idiot brother has me slung over his shoulder like a ham!”

“Do you want to be rescued or not?”

I didn’t have time to answer.

“Hold tight,” Tolya said. “We’re going over.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, preparing to tumble into the icy water. But Tolya hadn’t gone more than a few steps when he gave a sudden grunt and fell to one knee, losing his grip on me. I toppled to the deck and rolled clumsily onto my side. When I looked up, I saw Ivan and a blue-robed Inferni standing over us.

Ivan’s hand was outstretched. He was crushing Tolya’s heart, and this time, Sturmhond wasn’t there to stop him.

The Inferni advanced on Tamar and Mal, flint in hand, arm already moving in an arc of flame. *Over before it began*, I thought miserably. But in the next moment, the Inferni stopped and gasped. His flames died on the air.

“What are you waiting for?” Ivan snarled.

The Inferni’s only response was a choked hiss. His eyes bulged. He clawed at his throat.

Tamar held her sword in her right hand, but her left fist was clenched.

“Good trick,” she said, swatting away the paralyzed Inferni’s flint. “I know a good trick, too.” She raised her blade, and as the Inferni stood helpless, desperate for air, she ran him through with one vicious thrust.

The Inferni crumpled to the deck. Ivan stared in confusion at Tamar standing over the lifeless body, her sword dripping blood. His concentration must have wavered, because in that moment, Tolya came up from his knee with a terrifying roar.

Ivan clenched his fist, refocusing his efforts. Tolya grimaced, but he did not fall. Then the giant’s hand shot out, and Ivan’s face spasmed in pain and bewilderment.

I looked from Tolya to Tamar, realization dawning. They were Grisha. Heartrenders.

“Do you like that, little man?” Tolya asked as he stalked toward Ivan. Desperately, Ivan cast out another hand. He was shaking, and I could see he was struggling for breath.

Tolya bobbled slightly but kept coming. “Now we learn who has the stronger heart,” he growled.

He strode slowly forward, like he was walking against a hard wind, his face beaded with sweat, his teeth bared in feral glee. I wondered if he and Ivan would both just fall down dead.

Then the fingers of Tolya’s outstretched hand curled into a fist. Ivan convulsed. His eyes rolled up in his head. A bubble of blood blossomed and burst on his lips. He collapsed onto the deck.

Dimly, I was aware of the chaos raging around me. Tamar was struggling with a Squaller. Two other Grisha had leapt onto Tolya. I heard a gunshot and realized Mal had gotten hold of a pistol. But all I could see was Ivan’s lifeless body.

He was dead. The Darkling’s right hand. One of the most powerful Heartrenders in the Second Army. He’d survived the Fold and the volcra, and now he was dead.

A tiny sob drew me out of my reverie. Genya stood gazing down at Ivan, her hands over her mouth.

“Genya—” I said.

“Stop them!” The shout came from across the deck. I turned and saw the Darkling grappling with an armed sailor.

Genya was shaking. She reached into the pocket of her *kefta* and drew out a pistol. Tolya lunged toward her.

“No!” I said, stepping between them. I wasn’t going to watch him kill Genya.

The heavy pistol trembled in her hand.

“Genya,” I said quietly, “are you really going to shoot me?” She looked around wildly, unsure of where to aim. I laid a hand on her sleeve. She flinched and turned the barrel on me.

A crack like thunder rent the air, and I knew the Darkling had gotten free. I looked back and saw a wave of darkness tumbling toward us. *It’s over,* I thought. *We’re done for.* But in the next instant, I glimpsed a bright flash and a shot rang out. The swell of darkness blew away to nothing, and I saw the Darkling clutching his arm, his face contorted in fury and pain. In disbelief, I realized he’d been shot.

Sturmhond was racing toward us, pistols in hand. “Run!” he shouted.

“Come on, Alina!” Mal cried, reaching for my arm.

“Genya,” I said desperately, “come with us.”

Her hand was shaking so badly I thought the pistol might fly from her grip. Tears spilled over her cheeks.

“I can’t,” she sobbed brokenly. She lowered her weapon. “Go, Alina,” she said. “Just go.”

In the next instant, Tolya had tossed me over his shoulder again. I beat futilely at his broad back. “No!” I yelled. “Wait!”

But no one paid me any mind. Tolya took a running leap and vaulted over the railing. I screamed as we plummeted toward the icy water, bracing for the impact. Instead, we were scooped up by what could only have been a Squaller wind and deposited on the attacking schooner’s deck with a bone-jarring thud. Tamar and Mal followed, with Sturmhond close behind.

“Give the signal,” Sturmhond shouted, springing to his feet.

A piercing whistle blew.

“Privyet,” he called to a crewman I didn’t recognize, “how many do we have?”

“Eight men down,” replied Privyet. “Four remaining on the whaler. Cargo on its way up.”

“Saints,” Sturmhond swore. He looked back to the whaler, struggling with himself. “Musketeers!” he shouted to the men on the schooner’s maintop. “Lend them cover!”

The musketeers began firing their rifles down onto the deck of the whaler. Tolya tossed Mal a rifle, then slung another over his back. He leapt into the rigging and began to climb. Tamar drew a pistol from her hip. I was still sprawled on the deck in an undignified tangle, my hands held useless in irons.

“Sea whip is secured, *kapitan*!” shouted Privyet.

Two more of Sturmhond’s men hurdled over the whaler’s railing and flew through the air, arms pinwheeling wildly, to crash in a heap on the schooner’s deck. One was bleeding badly from a wound to his arm.

Then it came again, the boom of thunder.

“He’s up!” called Tamar.

Blackness tumbled toward us, engulfing the schooner, blotting out everything in its path.

“Free me!” I pleaded. “Let me help!”

Sturmhond threw Tamar the keys and shouted, “Do it!”

Tamar reached for my wrists, fumbling with the key as darkness rolled over us.

We were blind. I heard someone scream. Then the lock clicked free. The irons fell from my wrists and hit the deck with a dull *clang.*

I raised my hands, and light blazed through the dark, pushing the blackness back over the whaler. A cheer went up from Sturmhond’s crew, but it withered on their lips as another sound filled the air—a grating shriek, piercing in its wrongness, the creak of a door swinging open, a door that should have remained forever shut. The wound in my shoulder gave a sharp throb. *Nichevo’ya.*

I turned to Sturmhond. “We have to get out of here,” I said. “*Now*.”

He hesitated, battling himself. Two of his men were still aboard the whaler. His expression hardened. “Topmen make sail!” he shouted. “Squallers due east!”

I saw a row of sailors standing by the masts raise their arms and heard a *whump* as the canvas above us swelled with a hard-driving wind. Just how many Grisha did the privateer have in his crew?

But the Darkling’s Squallers had arranged themselves on the whaler’s deck and were sending their own winds to buffet us. The schooner rocked unsteadily.

“Portside guns!” roared Sturmhond. “Rolling broadside. On my signal!”

I heard two shrill whistle blasts. A deafening *boom* shook the ship, then another and another, as the schooner’s guns opened up a gaping hole in the whaler’s hull. A panicked shout went up from the Darkling’s ship. Sturmhond’s Squallers seized the advantage, and the schooner surged free.

As the smoke from the cannons cleared, I saw a figure in black step up to the railing of the disabled whaler. Another wave of darkness rushed toward us, but this one was different. It writhed over the water as if it were clawing its way forward, and with it came the eerie clicking of a thousand angry insects.

The darkness frothed and foamed, like a wave breaking over a boulder, and began to separate itself into shapes. Beside me, Mal muttered a prayer and lifted his rifle to his shoulder. I focused my power and slashed out with the Cut, burning through the black cloud, trying to destroy the *nichevo’ya* before they could take their full form. But I couldn’t stop them all. They came on in a moaning horde of black teeth and claws.

Sturmhond's crew opened fire.

The *nichevo'ya* reached the masts of the schooner, whirling around the sails, plucking sailors from the rigging like fruit. Then they were skittering down onto the deck. Mal fired again and again as the crewmen drew their sabers, but bullets and blades seemed only to slow the monsters. Their shadow bodies wavered and re-formed, and they just kept coming.

The schooner was still moving ahead, widening the distance between itself and the whaler. Not fast enough. I heard that shrieking moan, and another wave of shifting, slithering dark was headed toward us, already separating into winged bodies, reinforcements for the shadow soldiers.

Sturmhond saw it, too. He pointed to one of the Squallers still summoning wind to the sails. "Lightning," he shouted.

I flinched. He couldn't mean it. Squallers were never permitted to draw lightning. It was too unpredictable, too dangerous—and on open seas? With wooden ships? But Sturmhond's Grisha didn't hesitate. The Squallers clapped their hands together, rubbing their palms back and forth. My ears popped as the pressure plummeted. The air crackled with current.

We had just enough time to hurl ourselves to the deck as jagged bolts of lightning zigzagged across the sky. The new wave of *nichevo'ya* scattered in momentary confusion.

"Go!" Sturmhond bellowed. "Squallers at full!" Mal and I were thrown against the railing as the schooner shot forward. The sleek ship seemed to fly over the waves.

I saw another black swell billow out from the side of the whaler. I lurched to my feet and braced myself, gathering my strength for another onslaught.

But it did not come. It seemed there was a limit to the Darkling's power. We'd edged out of his range.

I leaned over the railing. The wind and sea spray stung my skin as the Darkling's ship and his monsters disappeared from view. Something between a laugh and a sob racked my chest.

Mal threw his arms around me, and I held tight, feeling the wet press of his shirt against my cheek, listening to the pounding of his heart, clinging to the unbelievable truth that we were still alive.

Then, despite the blood they'd shed and the friends they'd lost, the

schooner’s crew broke into cheers. They whooped and hollered and barked and growled. In the rigging, Tolya lifted his rifle with one hand and threw his head back, releasing a howl of triumph that lifted the hair on my arms.

Mal and I drew apart, gazing at the crewmen yipping and laughing around us. I knew we were both thinking the same thing: Just what had we gotten ourselves into?

CHAPTER

5

WE SLUMPED BACK against the railing and scooted down until we were seated beside each other, exhausted and dazed. We'd escaped the Darkling, but we were on a strange ship, surrounded by a bunch of crazed Grisha dressed as sailors and howling like mad dogs.

"You all right?" Mal asked.

I nodded. The wound in my shoulder felt like it was on fire, but I was unhurt and my whole body was thrumming from using my power again.

"You?" I asked.

"Not a scratch on me," Mal said in disbelief.

The ship rode the waves at seemingly impossible speed, driven forward by Squallers and what I realized were Tidemakers. As the terror and thrill of the battle receded, I noticed I was soaked. My teeth began to chatter. Mal put his arm around me, and at some point, one of the crew dropped a blanket over us.

Finally, Sturmhond called a halt and ordered the sails trimmed. The Squallers and Tidemakers dropped their arms and fell against each other, completely spent. Their power had left their faces glowing, their eyes alight.

The schooner slowed until it rocked gently in what suddenly seemed like an overwhelming silence.

"Keep a watch," Sturmhond commanded, and Privyet sent a sailor up into the shrouds with a long glass. Mal and I slowly got to our feet.

Sturmhond walked down the row of exhausted Etherealki, clapping Squallers and Tidemakers on the back and saying quiet words to a few of them. I saw him directing injured sailors belowdecks, where I assumed they'd be seen by a ship's

surgeon or maybe a Corporalki Healer. The privateer seemed to have every kind of Grisha in his employ.

Then Sturmhond strode toward me, pulling a knife from his belt. My hands went up, and Mal stepped in front of me, leveling his rifle at Sturmhond's chest. Instantly, I heard swords being drawn and pistols cocking all around us as the crew drew their weapons.

"Easy, Oretsev," Sturmhond said, his steps slowing. "I've just gone to a lot of trouble and expense to put you on my ship. Be a shame to fill you full of holes now." He flipped the knife over, offering the hilt to me. "This is for the beast."

The sea whip. In the excitement of the battle, I'd almost forgotten.

Mal hesitated, then cautiously lowered his rifle.

"Stand down," Sturmhond instructed his crew. They holstered their pistols and put up their swords.

Sturmhond nodded to Tamar. "Haul it in."

On Tamar's orders, a group of sailors leaned over the starboard rail and unlashed a complex webbing of ropes. They heaved, and slowly raised the sea whip's body over the schooner's side. It thumped to the deck, still struggling weakly in the silvery confines of the net. It gave a vicious thrash, its huge teeth snapping. We all jumped back.

"As I understand it, you have to be the one," said Sturmhond, holding the knife out to me once more. I eyed the privateer, wondering how much he might know about amplifiers, and this amplifier in particular.

"Go on," he said. "We need to get moving. The Darkling's ship is disabled, but it won't stay that way."

The blade in Sturmhond's hand gleamed dully in the sun. Grisha steel. Somehow I wasn't surprised.

Still, I hesitated.

"I just lost thirteen good men," Sturmhond said quietly. "Don't tell me it was all for nothing."

I looked at the sea whip. It lay twitching on the deck, air fluttering through its gills, its red eyes cloudy, but still full of rage. I remembered the stag's dark, steady gaze, the quiet panic of its final moments.

The stag had lived so long in my imagination that, when it had finally stepped from the trees and into the snowy glade, it had been almost familiar to

me, known. The sea whip was a stranger, more myth than reality, despite the sad and solid truth of its broken body.

“Either way, it won’t survive,” the privateer said.

I grasped the knife’s hilt. It felt heavy in my hand. *Is this mercy?* It certainly wasn’t the same mercy I had shown Morozova’s stag.

Rusalye. The cursed prince, guardian of the Bone Road. In the stories, he lured lonely maidens onto his back and carried them, laughing, over the waves, until they were too far from shore to cry for help. Then he dove down, dragging them beneath the surface to his underwater palace. The girls wasted away, for there was nothing to eat there but coral and pearls. Rusalye wept and sang his mournful song over their bodies, then returned to the surface to claim another queen.

Just stories, I told myself. *It’s not a prince, just an animal in pain.*

The sea whip’s sides heaved. It snapped its jaws uselessly in the air. Two harpoons extended from its back, watery blood trickling from the wounds. I held up the knife, unsure of what to do, where to put the blade. My arms shook. The sea whip gave a wheezing, pitiful sigh, a weak echo of that magical choir.

Mal strode forward. “End it, Alina,” he said hoarsely. “For Saints’ sake.”

He pulled the knife from my grip and dropped it to the deck. He took hold of my hands and closed them over the shaft of one of the harpoons. With one clean thrust, we drove it home.

The sea whip shuddered and then went still, its blood pooling on the deck.

Mal looked down at his hands, then wiped them on his torn shirt and turned away.

Tolya and Tamar came forward. My stomach churned. I knew what had to come next. *That isn’t true*, said a voice in my head. *You can walk away. Leave it be.* Again, I had the sense that things were moving too fast. But I couldn’t just throw an amplifier like this back into the sea. The dragon had already given up its life. And taking the amplifier didn’t necessarily mean that I would use it.

The sea whip’s scales were an iridescent white that shimmered with soft rainbows, except for a single strip that began between its large eyes and ran over the ridge of its skull into its soft mane—those were edged in gold.

Tamar slid a dagger from her belt and, with Tolya’s help, worked the scales free. I didn’t let myself look away. When they were done, they handed me seven

perfect scales, still wet with blood.

“Let us bow our heads for the men lost today,” Sturmhond said. “Good sailors. Good soldiers. Let the sea carry them to safe harbor, and may the Saints receive them on a brighter shore.”

He repeated the Sailor’s Prayer in Kerch, then Tamar murmured the words in Shu. For a moment, we stood on the rocking ship, heads bent. A lump rose in my throat.

More men dead and another magical, ancient creature gone, its body desecrated by Grisha steel. I laid my hand on the sea whip’s shimmering hide. It was cool and slick beneath my fingers. Its red eyes were cloudy and blank. I gripped the golden scales in my palm, feeling their edges dig into my flesh. What Saints waited for creatures like this?

A long minute passed and then Sturmhond murmured, “Saints receive them.”

“Saints receive them,” replied the crew.

“We need to move,” Sturmhond said quietly. “The whaler’s hull was cracked, but the Darkling has Squallers and a Fabrikator or two, and for all I know, those monsters of his can be trained to use a hammer and nails. Let’s not take any chances.” He turned to Privyet. “Give the Squallers a few minutes to rest and get me a damage report, then make sail.”

“*Da, kapitan*,” Privyet responded crisply. He hesitated. “*Kapitan* … could be people will pay good money for dragon scales, no matter the color.”

Sturmhond frowned, but then gave a terse nod. “Take what you want, then clear the deck and get us moving. You have our coordinates.”

Several of the crew fell on the sea whip’s body to cut away its scales. This I couldn’t watch. I turned my back on them, my gut in knots.

Sturmhond came up beside me.

“Don’t judge them too harshly,” he said, glancing over his shoulder.

“It’s not them I’m judging,” I said. “You’re the captain.”

“And they have purses to fill, parents and siblings to feed. We just lost nearly half our crew and took no rich prize to ease the sting. Not that you aren’t fetching.”

“What am I doing here?” I asked. “Why did you help us?”

“Are you so sure I have?”

“Answer the question, Sturmhond,” said Mal, joining us. “Why hunt the sea

whip if you only meant to turn it over to Alina?"

"I wasn't hunting the sea whip. I was hunting you."

"That's why you raised a mutiny against the Darkling?" I asked. "To get at me?"

"You can't very well *mutiny* on your own ship."

"Call it what you like," I said, exasperated. "Just explain yourself."

Sturmhond leaned back and rested his elbows on the rail, surveying the deck. "As I would have explained to the Darkling had he bothered to ask—which, thankfully, he didn't—the problem with hiring a man who sells his honor is that you can always be outbid."

I gaped at him. "You betrayed the Darkling for *money*?"

"'Betrayed' seems a strong word. I hardly know the fellow."

"You're mad," I said. "You know what he can do. No prize is worth that."

Sturmhond grinned. "That remains to be seen."

"The Darkling will hunt you for the rest of your days."

"Then you and I will have something in common, won't we? Besides, I like to have powerful enemies. Makes me feel important."

Mal crossed his arms and considered the privateer. "I can't decide if you're crazy or stupid."

"I have so many good qualities," Sturmhond said. "It can be hard to choose."

I shook my head. The privateer was out of his mind. "If the Darkling was outbid, then who hired you? Where are you taking us?"

"First answer a question for me," Sturmhond said, reaching into his frock coat. He drew a little red volume from his pocket and tossed it to me. "Why was the Darkling carrying this around with him? He doesn't strike me as the religious type."

I caught it and turned it over, but I already knew what it was. Its gold lettering sparkled in the sun.

"You stole it?" I asked.

"And a number of other documents from his cabin. Although, again, since it was technically *my* cabin, I'm not sure you can call it theft."

"*Technically*," I observed in irritation, "the cabin belongs to the whaling captain you stole the ship from."

"Fair enough," admitted Sturmhond. "If this whole Sun Summoner thing

doesn’t work out, you might consider a career as a barrister. You seem to have the carping disposition. But I should point out that this actually belongs to you.”

He reached out and flipped the book open. My name was inscribed inside the cover: *Alina Starkov.*

I tried to keep my face blank, but my mind was suddenly racing. This was my *Istorii Sankt’ya*, the very copy the Apparat had given to me months ago in the library of the Little Palace. The Darkling would have had my room searched after I fled Os Alta, but why take this book? And why had he been so concerned that I might have read it?

I thumbed through the pages. The volume was beautifully illustrated, though given that it was meant for children, it was awfully gruesome. Some of the Saints were depicted performing miracles or acts of charity: Sankt Feliks among the apple boughs. Sankta Anastasia ridding Arkesk of the wasting plague. But most of the pages showed the Saints in their martyrdoms: Sankta Lizabeta being drawn and quartered, the beheading of Sankt Lubov, Sankt Ilya in Chains. I froze. This time I could not disguise my reaction.

“Interesting, no?” said Sturmhond. He tapped the page with one long finger. “Unless I’m very much mistaken, that’s the creature we just captured.”

There was no hiding it: Behind Sankt Ilya, splashing around in the waves of a lake or an ocean, was the distinctive shape of the sea whip. But that wasn’t all. Somehow, I kept my hand from straying to the collar at my neck.

I shut the book and shrugged. “Just another story.”

Mal shot me a baffled look. I didn’t know if he’d seen what was on that page.

I didn’t want to return the *Istorii Sankt’ya* to Sturmhond, but he was already suspicious enough. I made myself hold it out to him, hoping he couldn’t see the tremor in my hand.

Sturmhond studied me, then levered himself up and shook out his cuffs. “Keep it. It *is* yours, after all. As I’m sure you’ve noticed, I have a deep respect for personal property. Besides, you’ll need something to keep you occupied until we get to Os Kervo.”

Mal and I both gave a start.

“You’re taking us to West Ravka?” I asked.

“I’m taking you to meet my client, and that’s really all I can tell you.”

“Who is he? What does he want from me?”

“Are you so sure it’s a he? Maybe I’m delivering you to the Fjerdan Queen.”

“Are you?”

“No. But it’s always wise to keep an open mind.”

I blew out a frustrated breath. “Do you ever answer a question directly?”

“Hard to say. Ah, there, I’ve done it again.”

I turned to Mal, fists clenched. “I’m going to kill him.”

“Answer the question, Sturmhond,” Mal growled.

Sturmhond lifted a brow. “Two things you should know,” he said, and this time I heard that hint of steel in his voice. “One, captains don’t like taking orders on their own ships. Two, I’d like to offer you a deal.”

Mal snorted. “Why would we ever trust you?”

“You don’t have much choice,” Sturmhond said pleasantly. “I’m well aware that you could sink this ship and consign us all to the watery deep, but I hope you’ll take your chances with my client. Listen to what he has to say. If you don’t like what he proposes, I swear to help you make your escape. Take you anywhere in the world.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “So you crossed the Darkling, and now you’re going to turn right around and betray your new client, too?”

“Not at all,” said Sturmhond, genuinely affronted. “My client paid me to *get* you to Ravka, not to *keep* you there. That would be extra.”

I looked at Mal. He lifted a shoulder and said, “He’s a liar and probably insane, but he’s also right. We don’t have much choice.”

I rubbed my temples. I felt a headache coming on. I was tired and confused, and Sturmhond had a way of talking that made me want to shoot someone. Preferably him. But he’d freed us from the Darkling, and once Mal and I were off his ship, we might find our own way to escape. For now, I couldn’t think much beyond that.

“All right,” I said.

He smiled. “So good to know you won’t be drowning us all.” He beckoned a deckhand who had been hovering nearby. “Fetch Tamar and tell her she’ll be sharing her quarters with the Summoner,” he instructed. Then he pointed to Mal. “He can stay with Tolya.”

Before Mal could open his mouth to protest, Sturmhond forestalled him. “That’s the way of things on this ship. I’m giving you both free run of the

Volkvolny until we reach Ravka, but I beg you not to trifle with my generous nature. The ship has rules, and I have limits."

"You and me both," Mal said through gritted teeth.

I laid my hand on Mal's arm. I would have felt safer staying together, but this wasn't the time to quibble with the privateer. "Let it go," I said. "I'll be fine."

Mal scowled, then turned on his heel and strode across the deck, disappearing into the ordered chaos of rope and sail. I took a step after him.

"Might want to leave him alone," Sturmhond said. "That type needs plenty of time for brooding and self-recrimination. Otherwise they get cranky."

"Do you take anything seriously?"

"Not if I can help it. Makes life so tedious."

I shook my head. "This client—"

"Don't bother asking. Needless to say, I've had plenty of bidders. You're in very high demand since you disappeared from the Fold. Of course, most people think you're dead. Tends to drive the price down. Try not to take it personally."

I looked across the deck to where the crew were hefting the sea whip's body over the ship's rail. With a straining heave, they rolled it over the side of the schooner. It struck the water with a loud splash. That quickly, Rusalye was gone, swallowed by the sea.

A long whistle blew. The crewmen scattered to their stations, and the Squallers took their places. Seconds later, the sails bloomed like great white flowers—the schooner was once more on its way, tacking southeast to Ravka, to home.

"What are you going to do with those scales?" Sturmhond asked.

"I don't know."

"Don't you? Despite my dazzling good looks, I'm not quite the pretty fool I appear to be. The Darkling intended for you to wear the sea whip's scales."

So why didn't he kill it? When the Darkling had murdered the stag and placed Morozova's collar around my neck, he'd bound us forever. I shivered, remembering the way he had reached across that connection, seizing hold of my power as I stood by, helpless. Would the dragon's scales have given him the same control? And if so, why not take it?

"I already have an amplifier," I said.

"A powerful one, if the stories are true."

The most powerful amplifier the world had ever known. So the Darkling had told me, and so I'd believed. But what if there was more to it? What if I'd only touched the beginnings of the stag's power? I shook my head. That was madness.

"Amplifiers can't be combined."

"I saw the book," he replied. "It certainly looks like they can."

I felt the weight of the *Istorii Sankt'ya* in my pocket. Had the Darkling feared I might learn Morozova's secrets from the pages of a children's book?

"You don't understand what you're saying," I told Sturmhond. "No Grisha has ever taken a second amplifier. The risks—"

"Now, that's a word best not used around me. I tend to be overfond of risk."

"Not this kind," I said grimly.

"Pity," he murmured. "If the Darkling catches up to us, I doubt this ship or this crew will survive another battle. A second amplifier might even the odds. Better yet, give us an edge. I do so hate a fair fight."

"Or it could kill me or sink the ship or create another Shadow Fold, or worse."

"You certainly have a flare for the dire."

My fingers snaked into my pocket, seeking out the damp edges of the scales. I had so little information, and my knowledge of Grisha theory was sketchy at best. But this rule had always seemed fairly clear: one Grisha, one amplifier. I remembered the words from one of the convoluted philosophy texts I'd been required to read: "*Why can a Grisha possess but one amplifier? I will answer this question instead: What is infinite? The universe and the greed of men."* I needed time to think.

"Will you keep your word?" I said at last. "Will you help us escape?" I didn't know why I bothered asking. If he intended to betray us, he certainly wouldn't say so.

I expected him to reply with some kind of joke, so I was surprised when he said, "Are you so eager to leave your country behind once again?"

I stilled. *All the while, your country suffers*. The Darkling had accused me of abandoning Ravka. He was wrong about a lot of things, but I couldn't help feeling that he was right about that. I'd left my country to the mercy of the Shadow Fold, to a weak king and grasping tyrants like the Darkling and the

Apparat. Now, if the rumors could be believed, the Fold was expanding and Ravka was falling apart. Because of the Darkling. Because of the collar. Because of me.

I lifted my face to the sun, feeling the rush of sea air over my skin, and said, "I'm eager to be free."

"As long as the Darkling lives, you'll never be free. And neither will your country. You know that."

I'd considered the possibility that Sturmhond was greedy or stupid, but it hadn't occurred to me that he might actually be a patriot. He was Ravkan, after all, and even if his exploits had lined his own pockets, they'd probably done more to help his country than all of the feeble Ravkan navy.

"I want the choice," I said.

"You'll have it," he replied. "On my word as a liar and cutthroat." He set off across the deck but then turned back to me. "You are right about one thing, Summoner. The Darkling is a powerful enemy. You might want to think about making some powerful friends."

* * *

I WANTED NOTHING MORE than to pull the copy of the *Istorii Sankt'ya* from my pocket and spend an hour studying the illustration of Sankt Ilya, but Tamar was already waiting to escort me to her quarters.

Sturmhond's schooner wasn't at all like the sturdy merchant ship that had carried Mal and me to Novyi Zem or the clunky whaler we'd just left behind. It was sleek, heavily armed, and beautifully built. Tamar told me that he'd captured the schooner from a Zemeni pirate who was picking off Ravkan ships near the ports of the southern coast. Sturmhond had liked the vessel so much that he'd taken it for his own flagship and renamed it *Volkvolny*, Wolf of the Waves.

Wolves. Stormhound. The red dog on the ship's flag. At least I knew why the crew were always howling and yapping.

Every inch of space on the schooner was put to use. The crew slept on the gun deck. In case of engagement, their hammocks could be quickly stowed and the cannon slotted into place. I'd been right about the fact that, with Corporalki on board, there was no need for an *otkazat'sya* surgeon. The doctor's quarters and supply room had been turned into Tamar's berth. The cabin was tiny, with

barely enough room for two hammocks and a chest. The walls were lined with cupboards full of unused ointments and salves, arsenic powder, tincture of lead antimony.

I balanced carefully in one of the hammocks, my feet resting on the floor, acutely conscious of the red book tucked inside my coat as I watched Tamar throw open the lid of her trunk and begin divesting herself of weapons: the brace of pistols that crossed her chest, two slender axes from her belt, a dagger from her boot, and another from the sheath secured around her thigh. She was a walking armory.

"I feel sorry for your friend," she said as she pulled what looked like a sock full of ball bearings from one of her pockets. It hit the bottom of the chest with a loud *thunk.*

"Why?" I asked, making a circle on the planks with the toe of my boot.

"My brother snores like a drunk bear."

I laughed. "Mal snores, too."

"Then they can perform a duet." She disappeared and then returned a moment later with a bucket. "The Tidemakers filled the rain barrels," she said. "Feel free to wash if you like."

Fresh water was usually a luxury aboard ship, but I supposed that with Grisha in the crew, there would be no need to ration it.

She dunked her head in the bucket and ruffled her short dark hair. "He's handsome, the tracker."

I rolled my eyes. "You don't say."

"Not my type, but handsome."

My brows shot up. In my experience, Mal was just about everyone's type. But I wasn't going to start asking Tamar personal questions. If Sturmhond couldn't be trusted, then neither could his crew, and I didn't need to grow attached to any of them. I'd learned my lesson with Genya, and one shattered friendship was enough. Instead, I said, "There are Kerch in Sturmhond's crew. Aren't they superstitious about having a girl onboard?"

"Sturmhond does things his own way."

"And they don't … bother you?"

Tamar grinned, her white teeth flashing against her bronze skin. She tapped the gleaming shark's tooth hanging around her neck, and I realized it was an

amplifier. “No,” she said simply.

“Ah.”

Faster than I could blink, she pulled yet another knife from her sleeve. “This comes in handy, too,” she said.

“However do you choose?” I breathed faintly.

“Depends on my mood.” Then she flipped the knife over in her hand and offered it to me. “Sturmhond’s given orders that you’re to be left alone, but just in case someone gets drunk and forgetful … you do know how to take care of yourself?”

I nodded. I didn’t walk around with thirty knives hidden about my person, but I wasn’t completely incompetent.

She dunked her head again, then said, “They’re throwing dice above deck, and I’m ready for my ration. You can come if you like.”

I didn’t care much for gambling or rum, but I was still tempted. My whole body was crackling with the feeling of using my power against the *nichevo’ya*. I was restless and positively famished for the first time in weeks. But I shook my head. “No thanks.”

“Suit yourself. I have debts to collect. Privyet wagered we wouldn’t be coming back. I swear he looked like a mourner at a funeral when we came over that rail.”

“He bet you’d be killed?” I said, aghast.

She laughed. “I don’t blame him. To go up against the Darkling and his Grisha? Everyone knew it was suicide. The crew ended up drawing straws to see who got stuck with the honor.”

“And you and your brother are just unlucky?”

“Us?” Tamar paused in the doorway. Her hair was damp, and the lamplight glinted off her Heartrender’s grin. “We didn’t draw anything,” she said as she stepped through the door. “We volunteered.”

* * *

I DIDN’T HAVE A CHANCE to talk to Mal alone until late that night. We’d been invited to dine with Sturmhond in his quarters, and it had been a strange supper. The meal was served by the steward, a servant of impeccable manners, who was several years older than anyone else on the ship. We ate better than we

had in weeks: fresh bread, roasted haddock, pickled radishes, and a sweet iced wine that set my head spinning after just a few sips.

My appetite was fierce, as it always was after I'd used my power, but Mal ate little and said less until Sturmhond mentioned the shipment of arms he was bringing back to Ravka. Then he seemed to perk up and they spent the rest of the meal talking about guns, grenades, and exciting ways to make things explode. I couldn't seem to pay attention. As they yammered on about the repeating rifles used on the Zemeni frontier, all I could think about were the scales in my pocket and what I intended to do with them.

Did I dare claim a second amplifier for myself? I had taken the sea whip's life—that meant its power belonged to me. But if the scales functioned like Morozova's collar, then the dragon's power was also mine to bestow. I could give the scales to one of Sturmhond's Heartrenders, maybe even Tolya, try to take control of him the way the Darkling had once taken control of me. I might be able to force the privateer to sail us back to Novyi Zem. But I had to admit that wasn't what I wanted.

I took another sip of wine. I needed to talk to Mal.

To distract myself, I cataloged the trappings of Sturmhond's cabin. Everything was gleaming wood and polished brass. The desk was littered with charts, the pieces of a dismembered sextant, and strange drawings of what looked like the hinged wing of a mechanical bird. The table glittered with Kerch porcelain and crystal. The wines bore labels in a language I didn't recognize. *All plunder*, I realized. Sturmhond had done well for himself.

As for the captain, I took the opportunity to really look at him for the first time. He was probably four or five years older than I was, and there was something very odd about his face. His chin was overly pointy. His eyes were a muddy green, his hair a peculiar shade of red. His nose looked like it had been broken and badly set several times. At one point, he caught me studying him, and I could have sworn he turned his face away from the light.

When we finally left Sturmhond's cabin, it was past midnight. I herded Mal above deck to a secluded spot by the ship's prow. I knew there were men on watch in the foretop above us, but I didn't know when I'd have another chance to get him alone.

"I like him," Mal was saying, a little unsteady on his feet from the wine. "I

mean, he talks too much, and he'd probably steal the buttons from your boots, but he's not a bad guy, and he seems to know a lot about—"

"Would you shut up?" I whispered. "I want to show you something."

Mal peered at me blearily. "No need to be rude."

I ignored him and pulled the red book out of my pocket. "Look," I said, holding the page open and casting a glow over Sankt Ilya's exultant face.

Mal went still. "The stag," he said. "And Rusalye." I watched him examine the illustration and saw the moment that realization struck. "Saints," he breathed. "There's a third."

CHAPTER

6

SANKT ILYA STOOD barefoot on the shore of a dark sea. He wore the ragged remnants of a purple robe, his arms outstretched, his palms turned upward. His face had the blissful, placid expression Saints always seemed to wear in paintings, usually before they were murdered in some horrific way. Around his neck he wore an iron collar that had once been connected to the heavy fetters around his wrists by thick chains. Now the chains hung broken by his sides.

Behind Sankt Ilya, a sinuous white serpent splashed in the waves.

A white stag lay at his feet, gazing out at us with dark, steady eyes.

But neither of these creatures held our attention. Mountains crowded the background behind the Saint's left shoulder, and there, barely visible in the distance, a bird circled a towering stone arch.

Mal's finger traced its long tailfeathers, rendered in white and the same pale gold that illuminated Sankt Ilya's halo. "It can't be," he said.

"The stag was real. So was the sea whip."

"But this is … different."

He was right. The firebird didn't belong to one story, but to a thousand. It was at the heart of every Ravkan myth, the inspiration for countless plays and ballads, novels and operas. Ravka's borders were said to have been sketched by the firebird's flight. Its rivers ran with the firebird's tears. Its capital was said to have been founded where a firebird's feather fell to earth. A young warrior had picked up that feather and carried it into battle. No army had been able to stand against him, and he became the first king of Ravka. Or so the legend went.

The firebird *was* Ravka. It was not meant to be brought down by a tracker's

arrow, its bones worn for the greater glory of some upstart orphan.

“Sankt Ilya,” Mal said.

“Ilya Morozova.”

“A Grisha Saint?”

I touched the tip of my finger to the page, to the collar, to the two fetters on Morozova’s wrists. “Three amplifiers. Three creatures. And we have two of them.”

Mal gave his head a firm shake, probably trying to clear away the haze of wine. Abruptly, he shut the book. For a second, I thought he might throw it into the sea, but then he handed it back to me.

“What are we supposed to do with this?” he said. He sounded almost angry.

I’d thought about that all afternoon, all evening, throughout that interminable dinner, my fingers straying to the sea whip’s scales again and again, as if anxious for the feel of them.

“Mal, Sturmhond has Fabrikators in his crew. He thinks I should use the scales … and I think he might be right.”

Mal’s head snapped around. “What?”

I swallowed nervously and plunged ahead. “The stag’s power isn’t enough. Not to fight the Darkling. Not to destroy the Fold.”

“And your answer is a second amplifier?”

“For now.”

“*For now?*” He ran a hand through his hair. “Saints,” he swore. “You want all three. You want to hunt the firebird.”

I felt suddenly foolish, greedy, even a little ridiculous. “The illustration—”

“It’s just a picture, Alina,” he whispered furiously. “It’s a drawing by some dead monk.”

“But what if it’s more? The Darkling said Morozova’s amplifiers were different, that they were meant to be used together.”

“So now you’re taking advice from murderers?”

“No, but—”

“Did you make any other plans with the Darkling while you were holed up together belowdecks?”

“We weren’t holed up together,” I said sharply. “He was just trying to get under your skin.”

“Well, it worked.” He gripped the ship’s railing, his knuckles flexing white. “Someday I’m going to put an arrow through that bastard’s neck.”

I heard the echo of the Darkling’s voice. *There are no others like us.* I pushed it aside and reached out to lay my hand on Mal’s arm. “You found the stag, and you found the sea whip. Maybe you were meant to find the firebird, too.”

He laughed outright, a rueful sound, but I was relieved to hear the bitter edge was gone. “I’m a good tracker, Alina, but I’m not that good. We need someplace to start. The firebird could be anywhere in the world.”

“You can do it. I know you can.”

Finally, he sighed and covered my hand with his own. “I don’t remember anything about Sankt Ilya.”

That was no surprise. There were hundreds of Saints, one for every tiny village and backwater in Ravka. Besides, at Keramzin, religion was considered a peasant preoccupation. We’d gone to church only once or twice a year. My thoughts strayed to the Apparat. He had given me the *Istorii Sankt’ya*, but I had no way of knowing what he intended by it, or if he even knew the secret it contained.

“Me neither,” I said. “But that arch must mean something.”

“Do you recognize it?”

When I’d first glanced at the illustration, the arch had seemed almost familiar. But I’d looked at countless books of maps during my training as a cartographer. My memory was a blur of valleys and monuments from Ravka and beyond. I shook my head. “No.”

“Of course not. That would be too easy.” He released a long breath, then drew me closer, studying my face in the moonlight. He touched the collar at my neck. “Alina,” he said, “how do we know what these things will do to you?”

“We don’t,” I admitted.

“But you want them anyway. The stag. The sea whip. The firebird.”

I thought of the surge of exultation that had come from using my power in the battle against the Darkling’s horde, the way my body fizzed and thrummed when I wielded the Cut. What might it feel like to have that power doubled? Trebled? The thought made me dizzy.

I looked up at the star-filled sky. The night was velvety black and strewn with jewels. The hunger struck me suddenly. *I want them*, I thought. All that

light, all that power. *I want it all.*

A restless shiver moved over me. I ran my thumb down the spine of the *Istorii Sankt'ya.* Was my greed making me see what I wanted to see? Maybe it was the same greed that had driven the Darkling so many years ago, the greed that had turned him into the Black Heretic and torn Ravka in two. But I couldn't escape the truth that without the amplifiers, I was no match for him. Mal and I were low on options.

"We need them," I said. "All three. If we ever want to stop running. If we ever want to be free."

Mal traced the line of my throat, the curve of my cheek, and all the while, he held my gaze. I felt like he was looking for an answer there, but when he finally spoke, he just said, "All right."

He kissed me once, gently, and though I tried to ignore it, there was something mournful in the brush of his lips.

* * *

I DIDN'T KNOW if I was eager or simply afraid I'd lose my nerve, but we ignored the late hour and went to Sturmhond that night. The privateer greeted our request with his usual good cheer, and Mal and I returned to the deck to wait beneath the mizzenmast. A few minutes later, the captain appeared, a Materialnik in tow. With her hair in braids and yawning like a sleepy child, she didn't look very impressive, but if Sturmhond said she was his best Fabrikator, I had to take him at his word. Tolya and Tamar trailed behind, carrying lanterns to help the Fabrikator at her work. If we survived whatever came next, everyone aboard the *Volkvolny* would know about the second amplifier. I didn't like it, but there was nothing to be done about it.

"Evening, all," said Sturmhond, slapping his hands together, seemingly oblivious to our somber mood. "Perfect night for tearing a hole in the universe, no?"

I scowled at him and slipped the scales from my pocket. I'd rinsed them in a bucket of seawater, and they gleamed golden in the lamplight.

"Do you know what to do?" I asked the Fabrikator.

She had me turn and show her the back of the collar. I'd only ever glimpsed it in mirrors, but I knew the surface must be near perfect. Certainly my fingers

had never been able to detect any seam where David had joined the two pieces of antler together.

I handed the scales to Mal, who held one out to the Fabrikator.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” she asked. She was gnawing on her lip so agressively, I thought she might draw blood.

“Of course not,” said Sturmhond. “Anything worth doing always starts as a bad idea.”

The Fabrikator plucked the scale from Mal’s fingers and rested it against my wrist, then held out her hand for another. She bent to her work.

I felt the heat first, radiating from the scales as their edges began to come apart and then re-form. One after another, they melded together, fusing into an overlapping row as the fetter grew around my wrist. The Fabrikator worked in silence, her hands moving infinitesimal degrees. Tolya and Tamar kept the lamps steady, their faces so still and solemn they might have been icons themselves. Even Sturmhond had gone quiet.

Finally, the two ends of the cuff were nearly touching and only one scale remained. Mal stared down at it, cupped in his palm.

“Mal?” I said.

He didn’t look at me, but touched one finger to the bare skin of my wrist, the place where my pulse beat, where the fetter would close. Then he handed the last scale to the Fabrikator.

In moments, it was done.

Sturmhond peered at the glittering cuff of scales. “Huh,” he murmured. “I thought the end of the world would be more exciting.”

“Stand back,” I said.

The group shuffled over to the rail.

“You too,” I told Mal. Reluctantly, he complied. I saw Privyet peering at us from his place by the wheel. Above, the ropes creaked as the men on watch craned their necks to get a better view.

I took a deep breath. I had to be careful. No heat. Just light. I wiped my damp palms on my coat and spread my arms. Almost before I’d formed the call, the light was rushing toward me.

It came from every direction, from a million stars, from a sun still hidden below the horizon. It came with relentless speed and furious intent.

“Oh, Saints,” I had time to whisper. Then the light was blazing through me and the night came apart. The sky exploded into brilliant gold. The surface of the water glittered like a massive diamond, reflecting piercing white shards of sunlight. Despite my best intentions, the air shimmered with heat.

I closed my eyes against the brightness, trying to focus, to regain control. I heard Baghra’s harsh voice in my head, demanding that I trust my power: *It isn’t an animal that shies away from you or chooses whether or not to come when you call it.* But this was like nothing I’d felt before. It *was* an animal, a creature of infinite fire that breathed with the stag’s strength and the sea whip’s wrath. It coursed through me, stealing my breath, breaking me up, dissolving my edges, until all I knew was light.

Too much, I thought in desperation. And at the same time, all I could think was, *More*.

From somewhere far away, I heard voices shouting. I felt the heat billowing around me, lifting my coat, singeing the hair on my arms. I didn’t care.

“Alina!”

I felt the ship rocking as the sea began to crackle and hiss.

“Alina!” Suddenly Mal’s arms were around me, pulling me back. He held me in a crushing grip, his eyes shut tight against the blaze around us. I smelled sea salt and sweat and, beneath it, his familiar scent—Keramzin, meadow grass, the dark green heart of the woods.

I remembered my arms, my legs, the press of my ribs, as he held me tighter, piecing me back together. I recognized my lips, my teeth, my tongue, my heart, and these new things that were a part of me: collar and fetter. They were bone and breath, muscle and flesh. They were mine.

Does the bird feel the weight of its wings?

I inhaled, felt sense return. I didn’t have to take hold of the power. It clung to me, as if it were grateful to be home. In a single glorious burst, I released the light. The bright sky fractured, letting the night back in, and all around us, sparks fell like fading fireworks, a dream of shining petals blown loose from a thousand flowers.

The heat relented. The sea calmed. I drew the last scraps of light together and wove them into a soft sheen that pulsed over the deck of the ship.

Sturmhond and the others were crouched by the railing, their mouths open in

what might have been awe or fear. Mal had me crushed to his chest, his faced pressed to my hair, his breath coming in harsh gasps.

"Mal," I said quietly. He clutched me tighter. I squeaked. "Mal, I can't breathe."

Slowly, he opened his eyes and looked down at me. I dropped my hands, and the light disappeared entirely. Only then did he ease his grip.

Tolya lit a lamp, and the others got to their feet. Sturmhond dusted off the gaudy folds of his teal coat. The Fabrikator looked like she was going to be sick, but it was harder to read the twins' faces. Their golden eyes were alight with something I couldn't name.

"Well, Summoner," said Sturmhond, a slight wobble to his voice, "you certainly know how to put on a show."

Mal bracketed my face with his hands. He kissed my brow, my nose, my lips, my hair, then drew me tight against him once again.

"You're all right?" he asked. His voice was rough.

"Yes," I replied.

But that wasn't quite true. I felt the collar at my throat, the pressure of the fetter at my wrist. My other arm felt naked. I was incomplete.

* * *

STURMHOND ROUSED HIS CREW, and we were well on our way as dawn broke. We couldn't be sure how far the light I'd created might have stretched, but there was a good chance I'd given away our location. We needed to move fast.

Every crewman wanted a look at the second amplifier. Some were wary, others just curious, but Mal was the one I was worried about. He watched me constantly, as if he was afraid that at any moment, I might lose control. When dusk fell and we went belowdecks, I cornered him in one of the narrow passageways.

"I'm fine," I said. "Really."

"How do you know?"

"I just do. I can feel it."

"You didn't see what I saw. It was—"

"It got away from me. I didn't know what to expect."

He shook his head. “You were like a stranger, Alina. Beautiful,” he said. “Terrible.”

“It won’t happen again. The fetter is a part of me now, like my lungs or my heart.”

“Your heart,” he said flatly.

I took his hand in mine and pressed it against my chest. “It’s still the same heart, Mal. It’s still yours.”

I lifted my other hand and cast a soft tide of sunlight over his face. He flinched. *He can never understand your power, and if he does, he will only come to fear you.* I pushed the Darkling’s voice from my mind. Mal had every right to be afraid.

“I can do this,” I said gently.

He shut his eyes and turned his face toward the sunlight that radiated from my hand. Then he tilted his head, resting his cheek against my palm. The light glowed warm against his skin.

We stood that way, in silence, until the watch bell rang.

CHAPTER 7

THE WINDS WARMED, and the waters turned from gray to blue as the *Volkvolny* carried us southeast to Ravka. Sturmhond's crew was made up of sailors and rogue Grisha who worked together to keep the ship running smoothly. Despite the stories that had spread about the power of the second amplifier, they didn't pay Mal or me much attention, though they occasionally came to watch me practice at the schooner's stern. I was careful, never pushing too hard, always summoning at noon, when the sun was high in the sky and there was no chance of my efforts being spotted. Mal was still wary, but I'd spoken the truth: The sea whip's power was a part of me now. It thrilled me. It buoyed me. I didn't fear it.

I was fascinated by the rogues. They all had different stories. One had an aunt who had spirited him away rather than let him be turned over to the Darkling. Another had deserted the Second Army. Another had been hidden in a root cellar when the Grisha Examiners arrived to test her.

"My mother told them I'd been killed by the fever that had swept through our village the previous spring," the Tidemaker said. "The neighbors cut my hair and passed me off as their dead *otkazat'sya* son until I was old enough to leave."

Tolya and Tamar's mother had been a Grisha stationed on Ravka's southern border when she met their father, a Shu Han mercenary.

"When she died," Tamar explained, "she made my father promise not to let us be drafted into the Second Army. We left for Novyi Zem the next day."

Most rogue Grisha ended up in Novyi Zem. Aside from Ravka, it was the only place where they didn't have to fear being experimented on by Shu doctors or burned by Fjerdan witchhunters. Even so, they had to be cautious about

displaying their power. Grisha were valued slaves, and less scrupulous Kerch traders were known to round them up and sell them in secret auctions.

These were the very threats that had led so many Grisha to take refuge in Ravka and join the Second Army in the first place. But the rogues thought differently. For them, a life spent looking over their shoulders and moving from one place to the next to avoid discovery was preferable to a life in service to the Darkling and the Ravkan King. It was a choice I understood.

After a few monotonous days on the schooner, Mal and I asked Tamar if she would show us some Zemeni combat techniques. It helped ease the tedium of shipboard life and the awful anxiety of returning to West Ravka.

Sturmhond's crew had confirmed the disturbing rumors we'd picked up in Novyi Zem. Crossings of the Fold had all but ceased, and refugees were fleeing its expanding shores. The First Army was close to revolt, and the Second Army was in tatters. I was most frightened by the news that the Apparat's cult of the Sun Saint was growing. No one knew how he'd managed to escape the Grand Palace after the Darkling's failed coup, but he had resurfaced somewhere in the network of monasteries spread across Ravka.

He was circulating the story that I'd died on the Fold and been resurrected as a Saint. Part of me wanted to laugh, but turning through the bloody pages of the *Istorii Sankt'ya* late at night, I couldn't summon so much as a chuckle. I remembered the Apparat's smell, that unpleasant combination of incense and mildew, and pulled my coat tighter around me. He had given me the red book. I had to wonder why.

Despite the bruises and bumps, my practices with Tamar helped to dull the edge of my constant worry. Girls were drafted right along with boys into the King's Army when they came of age, so I'd seen plenty of girls fight and had trained alongside them. But I'd never seen anyone, male or female, fight the way Tamar did. She had a dancer's grace and a seemingly unerring instinct for what her opponent would do next. Her weapons of choice were two double-bit axes that she wielded in tandem, the blades flashing like light off water, but she was nearly as dangerous with a saber, a pistol, or her bare hands. Only Tolya could match her, and when they sparred, all the crew stopped to watch.

The giant spoke little and spent most of his time working the lines or standing around looking intimidating. But occasionally, he stepped in to help

with our lessons. He wasn't much of a teacher. "Move faster" was about all we could get out of him. Tamar was a far better instructor, but my lessons got less challenging after Sturmhond caught us practicing on the foredeck.

"Tamar," Sturmhond chided, "please don't damage the cargo."

Immediately, Tamar snapped to attention and gave a crisp, "*Da, kapitan*."

I shot him a sour look. "I'm not a package you're delivering, Sturmhond."

"More's the pity," he said, sauntering past. "Packages don't talk, and they stay where you put them."

But when Tamar started us on rapiers and sabers, even Sturmhond joined in. Mal improved daily, though Sturmhond still beat him easily every time. And yet, Mal didn't seem to mind. He took his thumpings with a kind of good humor I never seemed able to muster. Losing made me irritable; Mal just laughed it all off.

"How did you and Tolya learn to use your powers?" I asked Tamar one afternoon as we watched Mal and Sturmhond sparring with dulled swords on deck. She'd found me a marlinspike, and when she wasn't pummeling me, she was trying to teach me knots and splices.

"Keep your elbows in!" Sturmhond berated Mal. "Stop flapping them like some kind of chicken."

Mal let out a disturbingly convincing cluck.

Tamar raised a brow. "Your friend seems to be enjoying himself."

I shrugged. "Mal's always been like that. You could drop him in a camp full of Fjerdan assassins, and he'd come out carried on their shoulders. He just blooms wherever he's planted."

"And you?"

"I'm more of a weed," I said drily.

Tamar grinned. In combat, she was cold and silent fire, but when she wasn't fighting, her smiles came easily. "I like weeds," she said, pushing herself off from the railing and gathering her scattered lengths of rope. "They're survivors."

I caught myself returning her smile and quickly went back to working on the knot that I was trying to tie. The problem was that I liked being aboard Sturmhond's ship. I liked Tolya and Tamar and the rest of the crew. I liked sitting at meals with them, and the sound of Privyet's lilting tenor. I liked the afternoons when we took target practice, lining up empty wine bottles to shoot

off the fantail, and making harmless wagers.

It was a bit like being at the Little Palace, but with none of the messy politics and constant jockeying for status. The crew had an easy, open way with each other. They were all young, and poor, and had spent most of their lives in hiding. On this ship, they'd found a home, and they welcomed Mal and me into it with little fuss.

I didn't know what was waiting for us in West Ravka, and I felt fairly sure it was madness to be going back at all. But aboard the *Volkvolny*, with the wind blowing and the white canvas cutting crisp lines across a broad blue sky, I could forget the future and my fear.

And I had to admit, I liked Sturmhond, too. He was cocky and brash, and always used ten words when two would do, but I was impressed with the way he led his crew. He didn't bother with any of the tricks I'd seen the Darkling employ, yet they followed him without hesitation. He had their respect, not their fear.

"What's Sturmhond's real name?" I asked Tamar. "His Ravkan name?"

"No idea."

"You've never asked?"

"Why would I?"

"But where in Ravka is he from?"

She squinted up at the sky. "Do you want to go another round with sabers?" she asked. "We should have time before my watch starts."

She always changed the subject when I brought up Sturmhond. "He didn't just drop out of the sky onto a ship, Tamar. Don't you care where he came from?"

Tamar picked up the swords and handed them over to Tolya, who served as the ship's Master of Arms. "Not particularly. He lets us sail, and he lets us fight."

"And he doesn't make us dress up in red silk and play lapdog," said Tolya, unlocking the rack with the key he wore around his thick neck.

"A sorry lapdog you'd make." Tamar laughed.

"Anything's better than following orders from some puffed-up cully in black," Tolya grumbled.

"You follow Sturmhond's orders," I pointed out.

“Only when he feels like it.”

I jumped. Sturmhond was standing right behind me.

“You try telling that ox what to do and see what happens,” the privateer said.

Tamar snorted, and she and Tolya began stowing the rest of the weapons.

Sturmhond leaned in and murmured, “If you want to know something about me, lovely, all you need to do is ask.”

“I was just wondering where you’re from,” I said defensively. “That’s all.”

“Where are *you* from?”

“Keramzin. You know that.”

“But where are you from?”

A few dim memories flashed through my mind. A shallow dish of cooked beets, the slippery feel of them between my fingers as they stained my hands red. The smell of egg porridge. Riding on someone’s shoulders—maybe my father’s—down a dusty road. At Keramzin, even mentioning our parents had been considered a betrayal of the Duke’s kindness and a sign of ingratitude. We’d been taught never to speak of our lives before we arrived at the estate, and eventually most of the memories just disappeared.

“Nowhere,” I said. “The village I was born in was too small to be worth a name. Now, what about you, Sturmhond? Where did you come from?”

The privateer grinned. Again I was struck by the thought that there was something off about his features.

“My mother was an oyster,” he said with a wink. “And I’m the pearl.”

He strolled away, whistling an off-key tune.

* * *

TWO NIGHTS LATER, I woke to find Tamar looming over me, shaking my good shoulder.

“Time to go,” she said.

“Now?” I asked blearily. “What time is it?”

“Coming on three bells.”

“In the morning?” I yawned and threw my legs over the side of my hammock. “Where are we?”

“Fifteen miles off the coast of West Ravka. Come on, Sturmhond is waiting.” She was dressed and had her canvas ditty bag slung over her shoulder.

I had no belongings to gather, so I pulled on my boots, patted the inner pocket of my coat to make sure I had the red book, and followed her out the door.

On deck, Mal stood by the ship's starboard rail with a small group of crewmen. I had a moment of confusion when I realized Privyet was wearing Sturmhond's garish teal frock coat. I wouldn't have recognized Sturmhond himself if he hadn't been giving orders. He was swaddled in a voluminous greatcoat, the collar turned up, a wool hat pulled low over his ears.

A cold wind was blowing. The stars were bright in the sky, and a sickle moon sat low on the horizon. I peered across the moonlit waves, listening to the steady sigh of the sea. If land was nearby, I couldn't see it.

Mal tried to rub some warmth into my arms.

"What's happening?" I asked.

"We're going ashore." I could hear the wariness in his voice.

"In the middle of the night?"

"The *Volkvolny* will raise my colors near the Fjerdan coast," said Sturmhond. "The Darkling doesn't need to know that you're back on Ravkan soil just yet."

As Sturmhond bent his head in conversation with Privyet, Mal drew me over to the portside rail. "Are you sure about this?"

"Not at all," I admitted.

He rested his hands on my shoulders and said, "There's a good chance I'll be arrested if we're found, Alina. You may be the Sun Summoner, but I'm just a soldier who defied orders."

"The Darkling's orders."

"That may not matter."

"I'll make it matter. Besides, we're not going to be found. We're going to get into West Ravka, meet Sturmhond's client, and decide what we want to do."

Mal pulled me closer. "Were you always this much trouble?"

"I like to think of myself as delightfully complex."

As he bent to kiss me, Sturmhond's voice cut through the dark. "Can we get to the cuddling later? I want us ashore before dawn."

Mal sighed. "Eventually, I'm going to punch him."

"I will support you in that endeavor."

He took my hand, and we returned to the group.

Sturmhond gave Privyet an envelope sealed with a blob of pale blue wax, then clapped him on the back. Maybe it was the moonlight, but the first mate looked like he might cry. Tolya and Tamar slipped over the railing, holding tight to the weighted ladder secured to the schooner.

I peered over the side. I'd expected to see an ordinary longboat, so I was surprised at the little craft I saw bobbing alongside the *Volkvolny*. It was like no boat I'd ever seen. Its two hulls looked like a pair of hollowed-out shoes, and they were held together by a deck with a giant hole in its center.

Mal and I followed, stepping gingerly onto one of the craft's curved hulls. We picked our way across it and descended to the central deck, where a sunken cockpit was nestled between two masts. Sturmhond leapt down after us, then swung up onto a raised platform behind the cockpit and took his place at the ship's wheel.

"What is this thing?" I asked.

"I call her the *Hummingbird*," he said, consulting some kind of chart that I couldn't see, "though I'm thinking of renaming her the *Firebird*." I drew in a sharp breath, but Sturmhond just grinned and ordered, "Cut anchor and release!"

Tamar and Tolya unhitched the knots of the grapples that held us to the *Volkvolny*. I saw the anchor line slither like a live snake over the *Hummingbird*'s stern, the end slipping silently into the sea. I would have thought we'd need an anchor when we made port, but I supposed Sturmhond knew what he was doing.

"Make sail," called Sturmhond.

The sails unfurled. Though the *Hummingbird*'s masts were considerably shorter than those aboard the schooner, its double sails were huge, rectangular things, and required two crewmen each to maneuver them into position.

A light breeze caught the canvas, and we pulled farther from the *Volkvolny*. I looked up and saw Sturmhond watching the schooner slip away. I couldn't see his face, but I had the distinct sense that he was saying goodbye. He shook himself, then called out, "Squallers!"

A Grisha was positioned in each hull. They raised their arms, and wind billowed around us, filling the sails. Sturmhond adjusted our course and called for more speed. The Squallers obliged, and the strange little boat leapt forward.

"Take these," said Sturmhond. He dropped a pair of goggles into my lap and tossed another pair to Mal. They looked similar to those worn by Fabrikators in

the workshops of the Little Palace. I glanced around. All of the crew seemed to be wearing them, along with Sturmhond. We pulled them over our heads.

I was grateful for them seconds later, when Sturmhond called for yet more speed. The sails rattled in the rigging above us, and I felt a twinge of nervousness. Why was he in such a hurry?

The *Hummingbird* sped over the water, its shallow double hulls skating from wave to wave, barely seeming to touch the surface of the sea. I held tight to my seat, my stomach floating upward with every jounce.

"All right, Squallers," commanded Sturmhond, "take us up. Sailors to wings, on my count."

I turned to Mal. "What does that mean, 'take us up'?"

"Five!" shouted Sturmhond.

The crewmen started to move counterclockwise, pulling on the lines.

"Four!"

The Squallers spread their hands wider.

"Three!"

A boom lifted between the two masts, the sails gliding along its length.

"Two!"

"Heave!" cried the sailors. The Squallers lifted their arms in a massive swoop.

"One!" yelled Sturmhond.

The sails billowed up and out, snapping into place high above the deck like two gigantic wings. My stomach lurched, and the unthinkable happened: The *Hummingbird* took flight.

I gripped my seat, mumbling old prayers under my breath, squeezing my eyes shut as the wind buffeted my face and we rose into the night sky.

Sturmhond was laughing like a loon. The Squallers were calling out to each other in a volley, making sure they kept the updraft steady. I thought my heart would pound right through my chest.

Oh, Saints, I thought queasily. *This can't be happening.*

"Alina," Mal yelled over the rush of the wind.

"What?" I forced the word through tightly clenched lips.

"Alina, open your eyes. You've got to see this."

I gave a terse shake of my head. That was exactly what I did *not* need to do.

Mal's hand slid into mine, taking hold of my frozen fingers. "Just try it."

I took a trembling breath and forced my lids open. We were surrounded by stars. Above us, white canvas stretched in two broad arcs, like the taut curves of an archer's bow.

I knew I shouldn't, but I couldn't stop myself from craning my neck over the cockpit's edge. The roar of the wind was deafening. Below—far below—the moonlit waves rippled like the bright scales of a slow-moving serpent. If we fell, I knew we would shatter on its back.

A little laugh, somewhere between elation and hysteria, burbled out of me. We were flying. *Flying.*

Mal squeezed my hand and gave an exultant shout.

"This is impossible!" I yelled.

Sturmhond whooped. "When people say impossible, they usually mean improbable." With the moonlight gleaming off the lenses of his goggles and his greatcoat billowing around him, he looked like a complete madman.

I tried to breathe. The wind was holding steady. The Squallers and the crew seemed focused, but calm. Slowly, very slowly, the knot in my chest loosened, and I began to relax.

"Where did this thing come from?" I shouted up to Sturmhond.

"I designed her. I built her. And I crashed a few prototypes."

I swallowed hard. *Crash* was the last word I wanted to hear.

Mal leaned over the lip of the cockpit, trying to get a better view of the gigantic guns positioned at the foremost points of the hulls.

"Those guns," he said. "They have multiple barrels."

"And they're gravity fed. No need to stop to reload. They fire two hundred rounds per minute."

"That's—"

"Impossible? The only problem is overheating, but it isn't so bad on this model. I have a Zemeni gunsmith trying to work out the flaws. Barbaric little bastards, but they know their way around a gun. The aft seats rotate so you can shoot from any angle."

"And fire down on the enemy," Mal shouted almost giddily. "If Ravka had a fleet of these—"

"Quite an advantage, no? But the First and Second Armies would have to

work together."

I thought of what the Darkling had said to me so long ago. *The age of Grisha power is coming to an end.* His answer had been to turn the Fold into a weapon. But what if Grisha power could be transformed by men like Sturmhond? I looked over the deck of the *Hummingbird*, at the sailors and Squallers working side by side, at Tolya and Tamar seated behind those frightening guns. It wasn't impossible.

He's a privateer, I reminded myself. *And he'd stoop to war profiteer in a second.* Sturmhond's weapons could give Ravka an advantage, but those guns could just as easily be used by Ravka's enemies.

I was pulled from my thoughts by a bright light shining off the port bow. The great lighthouse at Alkhem Bay. We were close now. If I craned my neck, I could just make out the glittering towers of Os Kervo's harbor.

Sturmhond did not make directly for it but tacked southwest. I assumed we'd set down somewhere offshore. The thought of landing made me queasy. I decided to keep my eyes shut for that, no matter what Mal said.

Soon I lost sight of the lighthouse beam. Just how far south did Sturmhond intend to take us? He'd said he wanted to reach the coast before dawn, and that couldn't be more than an hour or two away.

My thoughts drifted, lost to the stars around us and the clouds scudding across the wide sky. The night wind bit into my cheeks and seemed to cut right through the thin fabric of my coat.

I glanced down and gulped back a scream. We weren't over the water anymore. We were over land—solid, unforgiving land.

I tugged on Mal's sleeve and gestured frantically to the countryside below us, painted in moonlit shades of black and silver.

"Sturmhond!" I shouted in a panic. "What are you doing?"

"You said you were taking us to Os Kervo—" Mal yelled.

"I said I was taking you to meet my client."

"Forget that," I wailed. "Where are we going to land?"

"Not to worry," said Sturmhond. "I have a lovely little lake in mind."

"How little?" I squeaked. But then I saw that Mal was climbing out of the cockpit, his face furious. "Mal, sit down!"

"You lying, thieving—"

“I’d stay where you are. I don’t think you want to be jostling around when we enter the Fold.”

Mal froze. Sturmhond began to whistle that same off-key little tune. It was snatched away by the wind.

“You can’t be serious,” I said.

“Not on a regular basis, no,” said Sturmhond. “There’s a rifle secured beneath your seat, Oretsev. You may want to grab it. Just in case.”

“You can’t take this thing into the Fold!” Mal bellowed.

“Why not? From what I understand, I’m traveling with the one person who can guarantee safe passage.”

I clenched my fists, rage suddenly driving fear from my mind. “Maybe I’ll just let the volcra have you and your crew for a late-night snack!”

Sturmhond kept one hand on the wheel and consulted his timepiece. “More of an early breakfast. We really are behind schedule. Besides,” he said, “it’s a long way down. Even for a Sun Summoner.”

I glanced at Mal and knew his fury must be mirrored on my own face.

The landscape was unrolling beneath us at a terrifying pace. I stood up, trying to get a sense for where we were.

“Saints,” I swore.

Behind us lay stars, moonlight, the living world. Ahead of us, there was nothing. He was really going to do it. He was taking us into the Fold.

“Gunners, at your stations,” Sturmhond called. “Squallers, hold steady.”

“Sturmhond, I’m going to kill you!” I shouted. “Turn this thing around right now!”

“Wish I could oblige. I’m afraid if you want to kill me, you’ll just have to wait until we land. Ready?”

“No!” I shrieked.

But the next moment, we were in darkness. It was like no night ever known—a perfect, deep, unnatural blackness that seemed to close around us in a suffocating grip. We were in the Fold.

CHAPTER

8

THE MOMENT WE entered the Unsea, I knew something had changed.

Hurriedly, I braced my feet against the deck and threw up my hands, casting a wide golden swath of sunlight around the *Hummingbird*. As angry as I was with Sturmhond, I wasn't going to let a flock of volcra bring us down only to prove a point.

With the power of both amplifiers, I barely had to think to summon the light. I tested its edges carefully, sensing none of the wild disruption that had overcome me the first time I'd used the fetter. But something was very wrong. The Fold *felt* different. I told myself it was just imagination, but it seemed like the darkness had a texture. I could almost feel it moving over my skin. The edges of the wound at my shoulder began to itch and pull, as if the flesh were restless.

I'd been on the Unsea twice before, and both times I'd felt like a stranger, like a vulnerable interloper in a dangerous, unnatural world that did not want me there. But now it was as if the Fold was reaching out to me, welcoming me. I knew it made no sense. The Fold was a dead and empty place, not a living thing.

It knows me, I thought. *Like calls to like.*

I was being ridiculous. I cleared my head and thrust the light out farther, letting the power pulse warm and reassuring around me. *This* was what I was. Not the darkness.

"They're coming," Mal said beside me. "Listen."

Over the rush of the wind, I heard a cry echo through the Fold, and then the steady pounding of volcra wings. They'd found us quickly, drawn by the smell

of human prey.

Their wings beat the air around the circle of light I'd created, pushing the darkness back at us in fluttering ripples. With crossings of the Fold at a standstill, they'd been too long without food. Appetite made them bold.

I spread my arms, letting the light bloom brighter, driving them back.

"No," said Sturmhond. "Bring them closer."

"What? Why?" I asked. The volcra were pure predators. They weren't to be toyed with.

"They hunt us," he said, raising his voice so everyone could hear him. "Maybe it's time we hunted them."

A warlike whoop went up from the crew, followed by a series of barks and howls.

"Pull back the light," Sturmhond told me.

"He's out of his mind," I said to Mal. "Tell him he's out of his mind."

But Mal hesitated. "Well…"

"Well *what*?" I asked, incredulously. "In case you've forgotten, one of those things tried to eat you!"

He shrugged, and a grin touched his lips. "Maybe that's why I'd like to see what those guns can do."

I shook my head. I didn't like this. Any of it.

"Just for a moment," pressed Sturmhond. "Indulge me."

Indulge him. Like he was asking for another slice of cake.

The crew was waiting. Tolya and Tamar were hunched over the protruding barrels of their guns. They looked like leather-backed insects.

"All right," I said. "But don't say I didn't warn you."

Mal lifted his rifle to his shoulder.

"Here we go," I muttered. I curled my fingers. The circle of light contracted, shrinking around the ship.

The volcra shrieked in excitement.

"All the way!" commanded Sturmhond.

I gritted my teeth in frustration, then did as he asked. The Fold went dark.

I heard a rustle of wings. The volcra dove.

"Now, Alina!" Sturmhond shouted. "Throw it wide!"

I didn't stop to think. I cast the light out in a blazing wave. It showed the

horror surrounding us in the harsh, unforgiving light of a noonday sun. There were volcra everywhere, suspended in the air around the ship, a mass of gray, winged, writhing bodies, milky, sightless eyes, and jaws crowded with teeth. Their resemblance to the *nichevo'ya* was unmistakable, and yet they were so much more grotesque, so much more clumsy.

"Fire!" Sturmhond cried.

Tolya and Tamar opened fire. It was a sound like I'd never heard, a relentless, skull-shattering thunder that shook the air around us and rattled my bones.

It was a massacre. The volcra plummeted from the skies around us, chests blown open, wings torn from their bodies. The spent cartridges pinged to the deck of the ship. The sharp burn of gunpowder filled the air.

Two hundred rounds per minute. So this was what a modern army could do.

The monsters didn't seem to know what was happening. They whirled and beat the air, driven into a tizzy of bloodlust, hunger, and fear, tearing at each other in their confusion and desire to escape. Their screams … Baghra had once told me the volcra's ancestors were human. I could have sworn I heard it in their cries.

The gunfire died away. My ears rang. I looked up and saw smears of black blood and bits of flesh on the canvas sails. A cold sweat had broken out over my brow. I thought I might be ill.

The quiet lasted only moments before Tolya threw back his head and gave a triumphant howl. The rest of the crew joined in, barking and yapping. I wanted to scream at all of them to shut up.

"Do you think we can draw another flock?" one of the Squallers asked.

"Maybe," Sturmhond said. "But we should probably head east. It's almost dawn, and I don't want us to be spotted."

Yes, I thought. *Let's head east. Let's get out of here.* My hands shook. The wound at my shoulder burned and throbbed. What was wrong with me? The volcra were monsters. They would have torn us apart without a thought. I knew that. And yet, I could still hear their cries.

"There are more of them," Mal said suddenly. "A lot more."

"How do you know?" asked Sturmhond.

"I just do."

Sturmhond hesitated. Between the goggles, his hat, and the high collar, it was impossible to read his expression. “Where?” he said finally.

“Just a little north,” Mal said. “That way.” He pointed into the dark, and I had the urge to slap his hand. Just because he *could* track the volcra didn’t mean he had to.

Sturmhond called the bearing. My heart sank.

The *Hummingbird* dipped its wings and turned as Mal called out directions and Sturmhond corrected our course. I tried to focus on the light, on the comforting presence of my power, tried to ignore the sick feeling in my gut.

Sturmhond took us lower. My light shimmered over the Fold’s colorless sand and touched the shadowy bulk of a wrecked sandskiff.

A tremor passed through me as we drew closer. The skiff had been broken in half. One of its masts had snapped in two, and I could just make out the remnants of three ragged black sails. Mal had led us to the ruins of the Darkling’s skiff.

The little bit of calm I’d managed to pull together vanished.

The *Hummingbird* sank lower. Our shadow passed over the splintered deck.

I felt the tiniest bit of relief. Illogical as it was, I’d expected to see the bodies of the Grisha I’d left behind spread out on the deck, the skeletons of the King’s emissary and the foreign ambassadors huddled in a corner. But of course they were long gone, food for the volcra, their bones scattered over the barren reaches of the Fold.

The *Hummingbird* banked starboard. My light pierced the murky depths of the broken hull. The screams began.

“Saints,” Mal swore, and raised his rifle.

Three large volcra cringed beneath the skiff’s hull, their backs to us, their wings spread wide. But it was what they were trying to shield with their bodies that sent a spike of fear and revulsion quaking through me: a sea of wriggling, twisted shapes, tiny, glistening arms, little backs split by the transparent membranes of barely formed wings. They mewled and whimpered, slithering over each other, trying to get away from the light.

We’d uncovered a nest.

The crew had gone silent. There was no barking or yapping now.

Sturmhond brought the ship around in another low arc. Then he shouted,

“Tolya, Tamar, *grenatki*.”

The twins rolled out two cast-iron shells and hefted them to the edge of the rail.

Another wave of dread washed over me. *They’re volcra*, I reminded myself. *Look at them. They’re monsters.*

“Squallers, on my signal,” Sturmhond said grimly. “Fuses!” he shouted, then “Gunners, drop heavy!”

The instant the shells were released, Sturmhond roared, “Now!” and cut the ship’s wheel hard to the right.

The Squallers threw up their arms, and the *Hummingbird* shot skyward.

A silent second passed, then a massive *boom* sounded beneath us. The heat and force of the explosion struck the *Hummingbird* in a powerful gust.

“Steady!” Sturmhond bellowed.

The little craft foundered wildly, swinging like a pendulum beneath its canvas wings. Mal planted a hand to either side of me, shielding my body with his as I fought to keep my balance and hold the light alive around us.

Finally, the ship stopped swaying and settled into a smooth arc, tracing a wide circle high above the burning wreckage of the skiff.

I was shaking hard. The air stank of charred flesh. My lungs felt singed, and each breath seared my chest. Sturmhond’s crew were howling and barking again. Mal joined in, raising his rifle in the air in triumph. Above the cheering, I could hear the volcra’s screams, helpless and human to my ears, the keening of mothers mourning their young.

I closed my eyes. It was all I could do to keep from clamping my hands to my ears and crumpling to the deck.

“Enough,” I whispered. No one seemed to hear me. “Please,” I rasped. “Mal—”

“You’ve become quite the killer, Alina.”

That cool voice. My eyes flew open.

The Darkling stood before me, his black *kefta* rippling over the *Hummingbird*’s deck. I gasped and stepped back, staring wildly around me, but no one was watching. They were whooping and shouting, gazing down at the flames.

“Don’t worry,” the Darkling said gently. “It gets easier with time. Here, I’ll

show you.”

He slid a knife from the sleeve of his *kefta*, and before I could cry out, he slashed toward my face. I threw my hands up to defend myself, a scream tearing loose from my throat. The light vanished, and the ship was plunged into darkness. I fell to my knees, huddling on the deck, ready to feel the piercing sting of Grisha steel.

It didn’t come. People were yelling in the darkness around me. Sturmhond was shouting my name. I heard the echoing shriek of a volcra. *Close. Too close*.

Someone wailed, and the ship listed sharply. I heard the thump of boots as the crew scrambled to keep their footing.

“Alina!” Mal’s voice this time.

I felt him fumbling toward me in the dark. Some bit of sense returned. I threw the light back up in a shining cascade.

The volcra that had descended upon us yowled and wheeled back into darkness, but one of the Squallers lay bleeding on the deck, his arm nearly torn from its socket. The sail above him flapped uselessly. The *Hummingbird* tilted, listing hard to starboard, rapidly losing altitude.

“Tamar, help him!” Sturmhond ordered. But Tolya and Tamar were already scrambling over the hulls toward the downed Squaller.

The other Squaller had both hands raised, her face rigid with strain as she tried to summon a strong enough current to keep us aloft. The ship bobbled and wavered. Sturmhond held fast to the wheel, yelling orders to the crewmen working the sails.

My heart hammered. I looked frantically over the deck, torn between terror and confusion. I’d seen the Darkling. I’d *seen* him.

“Are you all right?” Mal was asking beside me. “Are you hurt?”

I couldn’t look at him. I shook so badly that I thought I might fly apart. I focused all my effort on keeping the light blazing around us.

“Is she injured?” shouted Sturmhond.

“Just get us out of here!” Mal replied.

“Oh, is *that* what I should be trying to do?” Sturmhond barked back.

The volcra were shrieking and whirling, beating at the circle of light. Monsters they might be, but I wondered if they understood vengeance. The *Hummingbird* rocked and shuddered. I looked down and saw gray sands rushing

up to meet us.

And then suddenly we were out of the darkness, bursting through the last black wisps of the Fold as we shot into the blue light of early dawn.

The ground loomed terrifyingly close beneath us.

“Lights out!” Sturmhond commanded.

I dropped my hands and took desperate hold of the cockpit’s rail. I could see a long stretch of road, a town’s lights glowing in the distance, and there, beyond a low rise of hills, a slender blue lake, morning light glinting off its surface.

“Just a little farther!” cried Sturmhond.

The Squaller let out a sob of effort, her arms trembling. The sails dipped. The *Hummingbird* continued to fall. Branches scraped the hull as we skimmed the treetops.

“Everyone get low and hold on tight!” shouted Sturmhond. Mal and I hunkered down into the cockpit, arms and legs braced against the sides, hands clasped. The little ship rattled and shook.

“We aren’t going to make it,” I rasped.

He said nothing, just squeezed my fingers tighter.

“Get ready!” Sturmhond roared.

At the last second, he hurled himself into the cockpit in a tangle of limbs. He just had time to say, “This is cozy,” before we struck land with a bone-shattering jolt.

Mal and I were thrown into the nose of the cockpit as the ship tore into the ground, clattering and banging, its hull splintering apart. There was a loud splash, and suddenly we were skimming across the water. I heard a terrible wrenching sound and knew that one of the hulls had broken free. We bounced roughly over the surface and then, miraculously, shuddered to a halt.

I tried to get my bearings. I was on my back, pressed up against the side of the cockpit. Someone was breathing hard beside me.

I shifted gingerly. I’d taken a hard knock to the head and cut open both of my palms, but I seemed to be in one piece.

Water was flooding in through the cockpit’s floor. I heard splashing, people calling to one another.

“Mal?” I ventured, my voice a quavery squeak.

“I’m okay,” he replied. He was somewhere to my left. “We need to get out of

here.”

I peered around, but Sturmhond was nowhere to be seen.

As we clambered out of the cockpit, the broken ship began to tilt alarmingly. We heard a creaking sigh, and one of the masts gave way, collapsing into the lake beneath the weight of its sails.

We threw ourselves into the water, kicking hard as the lake tried to swallow us along with the ship.

One of the crewmen was tangled in the ropes. Mal dove down to help extricate him, and I nearly wept with relief when they both broke the surface.

I saw Tolya and Tamar paddling free, followed by the other crewmen. Tolya had the wounded Squaller in tow. Sturmhond swam behind, supporting an unconscious sailor beneath his arm. We made for the shore.

My bruised limbs felt heavy, weighted down by my sodden clothes, but finally we reached the shallows. We hauled ourselves out of the water, slogging through patches of slimy reeds, and threw our bodies down on the wide crescent of beach.

I lay there panting, listening to the oddly ordinary sounds of early morning: crickets in the grass, birds calling from somewhere in the woods, a frog’s low, tentative croak. Tolya was ministering to the injured Squaller, finishing the business of healing his arm, instructing him to flex his fingers, bend his elbow. I heard Sturmhond come ashore and hand the last sailor into Tamar’s care.

“He’s not breathing,” Sturmhond said, “and I don’t feel a pulse.”

I forced myself to sit up. The sun was rising behind us, warming my back, gilding the lake and the edges of the trees. Tamar had her hands pressed to the sailor’s chest, using her power to draw the water from his lungs and drive life back into his heart. The minutes seemed to stretch as the sailor lay motionless on the sand. Then he gasped. His eyes fluttered open, and he spewed lake water over his shirt.

I heaved a sigh of relief. One less death on my conscience.

Another crewman was clutching his side, testing to see if he’d broken any ribs. Mal had a nasty gash across his forehead. But we were all there. We’d made it.

Sturmhond waded back into the water. He stood knee deep in it, contemplating the smooth surface of the lake, his greatcoat pooling out behind

him. Other than a torn-up stretch of earth along the shore, there was no sign that the *Hummingbird* had ever been.

The uninjured Squaller turned on me. “What happened back there?” she spat. “Kovu was almost killed. We all were!”

“I don’t know,” I said, resting my head against my knees.

Mal drew his arm around me, but I didn’t want comfort. I wanted an explanation for what I’d seen.

“You don’t know?” she said incredulously.

“I don’t know,” I repeated, surprised at the surge of anger that came with the words. “I didn’t ask to be shoved into the Fold. I’m not the one who went looking for a fight with the volcra. Why don’t you ask your captain what happened?”

“She’s right,” Sturmhond said, trudging out of the water and up the shore toward us as he stripped off his ruined gloves. “I should have given her more warning, and I shouldn’t have gone after the nest.”

Somehow the fact that he was agreeing with me just made me angrier. Then Sturmhond removed his hat and goggles, and my rage disappeared, replaced by complete and utter bewilderment.

Mal was on his feet in an instant. “What the hell is this?” he said, his voice low and dangerous.

I sat paralyzed, my pain and exhaustion eclipsed by the bizarre sight before me. I didn’t know what I was looking at, but I was glad Mal saw it, too. After what had happened on the Fold, I didn’t trust myself.

Sturmhond sighed and ran a hand over his face—a stranger’s face.

His chin had lost its pronounced point. His nose was still slightly crooked, but nothing like the busted lump it had been. His hair was no longer ruddy brown but dark gold, neatly cut to military length, and those strange, muddy green eyes were now a clear, bright hazel. He looked completely different, but he was unmistakably Sturmhond.

And he’s handsome, I thought with a baffling jab of resentment.

Mal and I were the only ones staring. None of Sturmhond’s crew seemed remotely surprised.

“You have a Tailor,” I said.

Sturmhond winced.

“I am *not* a Tailor,” Tolya said angrily.

“No, Tolya, your gifts lie elsewhere,” Sturmhond said soothingly. “Mostly in the celebrated fields of killing and maiming.”

“Why would you do this?” I asked, still trying to adapt to the jarring experience of Sturmhond’s voice coming from a different person’s mouth.

“It was essential that the Darkling not recognize me. He hasn’t seen me since I was fourteen, but it wasn’t something I wanted to chance.”

“Who are you?” Mal asked furiously.

“That’s a complicated question.”

“Actually, it’s pretty straightforward,” I said, springing to my feet. “But it does require telling the truth. Something you seem thoroughly incapable of.”

“Oh, I can do it,” Sturmhond said, shaking water from one of his boots. “I’m just not very good at it.”

“Sturmhond,” Mal snarled, advancing on him. “You have exactly ten seconds to explain yourself, or Tolya’s going to have to make you a whole new face.”

Then Tamar leapt to her feet. “Someone’s coming.”

We all quieted, listening. The sounds came from beyond the wood surrounding the lake: hoofbeats—lots of them, the snap and rustle of broken branches as men moved toward us through the trees.

Sturmhond groaned. “I knew we’d been sighted. We spent too long on the Fold.” He heaved a ragged sigh. “A wrecked ship and a crew that looks like a bunch of drowned possums. This is not what I had in mind.”

I wanted to know exactly what he did have in mind, but there was no time to ask.

The trees parted, and a group of mounted men charged onto the beach. Ten … twenty … thirty soldiers of the First Army. King’s men, heavily armed. Where had they all come from?

After the slaughter of the volcra and the crash, I didn’t think I had any fear left, but I was wrong. Panic shot through me as I remembered what Mal had said about deserting his post. Were we about to be arrested as traitors? My fingers twitched. I wasn’t going to be taken prisoner again.

“Easy, Summoner,” the privateer whispered. “Let me handle this.”

“Since you’ve handled everything else so well, Sturmhond?”

“It might be wise if you didn’t call me that for a while.”

“And why is that?” I bit out.

“Because it’s not my name.”

The soldiers cantered to a halt in front of us, the morning light glittering off their rifles and sabers. A young captain drew his blade. “In the name of the King of Ravka, throw down your arms.”

Sturmhond stepped forward, placing himself between the enemy and his wounded crew. He raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. “Our weapons are at the bottom of the lake. We are unarmed.”

Knowing what I did of both Sturmhond and the twins, I seriously doubted that.

“State your name and business here,” commanded the young captain.

Slowly, Sturmhond peeled his sodden greatcoat from his shoulders and handed it to Tolya.

An uneasy stir went through the line of soldiers. Sturmhond wore Ravkan military dress. He was soaked through to the skin, but there was no mistaking the olive drab and brass buttons of the Ravkan First Army—or the golden double eagle that indicated an officer’s rank. What game was the privateer playing?

An older man broke through the lines, wheeling his horse around to confront Sturmhond. With a start, I recognized Colonel Raevsky, the commander of the military encampment at Kribirsk. Had we crashed so close to town? Was that how the soldiers had gotten here so quickly?

“Explain yourself, boy!” the colonel commanded. “State your name and business before I have you stripped of that uniform and strung up from a high tree.”

Sturmhond seemed unconcerned. When he spoke, his voice had a quality I’d never heard in it before. “I am Nikolai Lantsov, Major of the Twenty-Second Regiment, Soldier of the King’s Army, Grand Duke of Udova, and second son to His Most Royal Majesty, King Alexander the Third, Ruler of the Double Eagle Throne, may his life and reign be long.”

My jaw dropped. Shock passed like a wave through the row of soldiers. A nervous titter rose from somewhere in the ranks. I didn’t know what joke this madman thought he was making, but Raevsky did not look amused. He leapt from his horse, tossing the reins to a soldier.

“You listen to me, you disrespectful whelp,” he said, his hand already on the

hilt of his sword, his weathered features set in lines of fury as he strode directly up to Sturmhond. “Nikolai Lantsov served under me on the northern border and…”

His voice faded away. He was nose to nose with the privateer now, but Sturmhond did not blink. The colonel opened his mouth, then closed it. He took a step back and scanned Sturmhond’s face. I watched his expression change from scorn to disbelief to what could only be recognition.

Abruptly, he dropped to one knee and bent his head.

“Forgive me, *moi tsarevich*,” he said, gaze trained on the ground before him. “Welcome home.”

The soldiers exchanged confused glances.

Sturmhond turned a cold and expectant eye on them. He radiated command. A pulse seemed to pass through the ranks. Then, one by one, they slipped from their horses and dropped to their knees, heads bent.

Oh, Saints.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Mal muttered.

I’d hunted a magical stag. I wore the scales of a slain ice dragon around my wrist. I’d seen an entire city swallowed by darkness. But this was the strangest thing I’d ever witnessed. It had to be another one of Sturmhond’s deceptions, one that was sure to get us all killed.

I stared at the privateer. Was it even possible? I couldn’t seem to get my mind to work. I was too exhausted, too drained from fear and panic. I scoured my memory for the little bit I knew about the Ravkan king’s two sons. I’d met the eldest briefly at the Little Palace, but the younger son hadn’t been seen at court in years. He was supposed to be off somewhere apprenticing with a gunsmith or studying shipbuilding.

Or maybe he had done both.

I felt dizzy. *Sobachka,* Genya had called the prince. Puppy. *He insisted on doing his military service in the infantry.*

Sturmhond. Storm hound. Wolf of the Waves.

Sobachka. It couldn’t be. It just couldn’t.

“Rise,” commanded Sturmhond—or whoever he was. His whole bearing seemed to have changed.

The soldiers got to their feet and stood at attention.

“It’s been too long since I was home,” boomed the privateer. “But I did not return empty-handed.”

He stepped to the side, then threw his arm out, gesturing to me. Every face turned, waiting, expectant.

“Brothers,” he said, “I have brought the Sun Summoner back to Ravka.”

I couldn’t help myself. I hauled off and punched him in the face.

CHAPTER

9

“YOU’RE LUCKY YOU didn’t get shot,” Mal said angrily.

He was pacing back and forth in a simply furnished tent, one of the few that remained in the Grisha camp next to Kribirsk. The Darkling’s glorious black silk pavilion had been pulled down. All that survived was a broad swath of dead grass littered with bent nails and the broken remnants of what had once been a polished wood floor.

I took a seat at the rough-hewn table and glanced outside to where Tolya and Tamar flanked the entrance to the tent. Whether they were guarding us or keeping us from escaping, I couldn’t be sure.

“It was worth it,” I replied. “Besides, no one’s going to shoot the Sun Summoner.”

“You just punched a prince, Alina. I guess we can add one more act of treason to our list.”

I shook out my sore hand. My knuckles smarted. “First of all, are we so sure he really *is* a prince? And second, you’re just jealous.”

“Of course I’m jealous. I thought *I* was going to get to punch him. That isn’t the point.”

Chaos had erupted after my outburst, and only some fast talking by Sturmhond and some very aggressive crowd control by Tolya had kept me from being taken away in chains or worse.

Sturmhond had escorted us through Kribirsk to the military encampment. When he left us at the tent, he’d said quietly, “All I ask is that you stay long enough to let me explain. If you don’t like what you hear, you’re free to go.”

“Just like that?” I scoffed.

“Trust me.”

“Every time you say ‘trust me,’ I trust you a little less,” I hissed.

But Mal and I did stay, unsure of what our next move might be. Sturmhond hadn’t bound us or put us under heavy guard. He’d provided us with clean, dry clothes. If we wanted to, we could try to slip past Tolya and Tamar and escape back across the Fold. It wasn’t as if anyone could follow us. We could emerge anywhere we liked along its western shore. But where would we go after that? Sturmhond had changed; our situation hadn’t. We had no money, no allies, and we were still being hunted by the Darkling. And I wasn’t eager to return to the Fold, not after what had happened aboard the *Hummingbird*.

I pushed down a bleak bubble of laughter. If I was actually thinking of taking refuge on the Unsea, things were very bad indeed.

A servant entered with a large tray. He set down a pitcher of water, a bottle of *kvas* and glasses, and several small plates of *zakuski.* Each of the dishes was bordered in gold and emblazoned with a double eagle.

I considered the food: smoked sprats on black bread, marinated beets, stuffed eggs. We hadn’t had a meal since the previous night, aboard the *Volkvolny,* and using my power had left me famished, but I was too nervous to eat.

“What happened back there?” Mal asked as soon as the servant departed.

I shook out my knuckles again. “I lost my temper.”

“That’s not what I meant. What happened on the Fold?”

I studied a little pot of herbed butter, turning the dish in my hands. *I saw him.*

“I was just tired,” I said lightly.

“You used a lot more of your power when we escaped from the *nichevo’ya*, and you never faltered. Is it the fetter?”

“The fetter makes me stronger,” I said, tugging the edge of my sleeve over the sea whip’s scales. Besides, I’d been wearing it for weeks. There was nothing wrong with my power, but there might be something wrong with me. I traced an invisible pattern on the tabletop. “When we were fighting the volcra, did they sound different to you?” I asked.

“Different how?”

“More … human?”

Mal frowned. “No, they sounded pretty much like they always do. Like

monsters who want to eat us." He laid his hand over mine. "What happened, Alina?"

I saw him. "I told you: I was tired. I lost focus."

He drew back. "If you want to lie to me, go ahead. But I'm not going to pretend to believe you."

"Why not?" asked Sturmhond, stepping into the tent. "It's only common courtesy."

Instantly, we were on our feet, ready to fight.

Sturmhond stopped short and lifted his hands in a gesture of peace. He'd changed into a dry uniform. A bruise was beginning to form on his cheek. Cautiously, he removed his sword and hung it on a post by the tent flap.

"I'm just here to talk," he said.

"So talk," Mal retorted. "Who are you, and what are you playing at?"

"Nikolai Lantsov, but please don't make me recite my titles again. It's no fun for anybody, and the only important one is 'prince.'"

"And what about Sturmhond?" I asked.

"I'm also Sturmhond, commander of the *Volkvolny*, scourge of the True Sea."

"Scourge?"

"Well, I'm vexing at the very least."

I shook my head. "Impossible."

"Improbable."

"This is *not* the time to try to be entertaining."

"Please," he said in a conciliatory tone. "Sit. I don't know about you, but I find everything much more understandable when seated. Something about circulation, I suspect. Reclining is, of course, preferable, but I don't think we're on those kinds of terms yet."

I didn't budge. Mal crossed his arms.

"All right, well, I'm going to sit. I find playing the returning hero a most wearying task, and I'm positively worn out." He crossed to the table, poured himself a glass of *kvas*, and settled into a chair with a contented sigh. He took a sip and grimaced. "Awful stuff," he said. "Never could stomach it."

"Then order some brandy, *your highness*," I said irritably. "I'm sure they'll bring you all you want."

His face brightened. “True enough. I suppose I could bathe in a tub of it. I may just.”

Mal threw up his hands in exasperation and walked to the flap of the tent to look out at the camp.

“You can’t honestly expect us to believe any of this,” I said.

Sturmhond wiggled his fingers to better display his ring. “I do have the royal seal.”

I snorted. “You probably stole it from the real Prince Nikolai.”

“I served with Raevsky. He knows me.”

“Maybe you stole the prince’s face, too.”

He sighed. “You have to understand, the only place I could safely reveal my identity was here in Ravka. Only the most trusted members of my crew knew who I really was—Tolya, Tamar, Privyet, a few of the Etherealki. The rest … well, they’re good men, but they’re also mercenaries and pirates.”

“So you deceived your own crew?” I asked.

“On the seas, Nikolai Lantsov is more valuable as a hostage than as a captain. Hard to command a ship when you’re constantly worrying about being bashed on the head late at night and then ransomed to your royal papa.”

I shook my head. “None of this makes any sense. Prince Nikolai is supposed to be off somewhere studying boats or—”

“I did apprentice with a Fjerdan shipbuilder. And a Zemeni gunsmith. And a civil engineer from the Han Province of Bolh. Tried my hand at poetry for a while. The results were … unfortunate. These days, being Sturmhond requires most of my attention.”

Mal leaned against the tent post, arms crossed. “So one day you decided to cast off your life of luxury and try your hand at playing pirate?”

“Privateer,” he said. “And I wasn’t *playing* at anything. I knew I could do more for Ravka as Sturmhond than lazing about at court.”

“And just where do the King and Queen think you are?” I asked.

“The university at Ketterdam,” he replied. “Lovely place. Very lofty. There’s an extremely well-compensated shipping clerk sitting through my philosophy classes as we speak. Gets passable grades, answers to Nikolai, drinks copiously and often so no one gets suspicious.”

Was there no end to this? “Why?”

“I tried, I really did. But I’ve never been good at sitting still. Drove my nanny to distraction. Well, nannies. There was quite an army of them, as I recall.”

I should have hit him harder. “I mean, why go through this whole charade?”

“I’m second in line for the Ravkan throne. I nearly had to run away to do my military service. I don’t think my parents would approve of my picking off Zemeni pirates and breaking Fjerdan blockades. They’re rather fond of Sturmhond, though.”

“Fine,” said Mal from the doorway. “You’re a prince. You’re a privateer. You’re a prat. What do you want with us?”

Sturmhond took another tentative sip of *kvas* and shuddered. “Your help,” he said. “The game has changed. The Fold is expanding. The First Army is close to outright revolt. The Darkling’s coup may have failed, but it shattered the Second Army, and Ravka is on the brink of collapse.”

I felt a sinking sensation. “And let me guess: You’re just the one to put things right?”

Sturmhond leaned forward. “Did you meet my brother, Vasily, when you were at court? He cares more about horses and his next drink of whiskey than his people. My father never had more than a passing interest in governing Ravka, and reports are he’s lost even that. This country is coming apart. Someone needs to put it back together before it’s too late.”

“Vasily is the heir,” I observed.

“I think he can be convinced to step aside.”

“That’s why you dragged us back here?” I said in disgust. “Because you want to be King?”

“I dragged you back here because the Apparat has practically turned you into a living Saint, and the people love you. I dragged you back here because your power is the key to Ravka’s survival.”

I banged my hands down on the table. “You dragged me back here so you could make a grand entrance with the Sun Summoner and steal your brother’s throne!”

Sturmhond leaned back. “I’m not going to apologize for being ambitious. It doesn’t change the fact that I’m the best man for the job.”

“Of course you are.”

“Come back to Os Alta with me.”

“Why? So you can show me off like some kind of prize goat?”

“I know you don’t trust me. You have no reason to. But I’ll abide by what I promised you aboard the *Volkvolny*. Listen to what I have to offer. If you’re still not interested, Sturmhond’s ships will take you anywhere in the world. I think you’ll stay. I think I can give you something no one else can.”

“This ought to be good,” muttered Mal.

“I can give you the chance to change Ravka,” said Sturmhond. “I can give you the chance to bring your people hope.”

“Oh, is that all?” I said sourly. “And just how am I supposed to do that?”

“By helping me unite the First and Second Armies. By becoming my Queen.”

Before I could blink, Mal had shoved the table aside and closed in on Sturmhond, lifting him off his feet and slamming him into the tent post. Sturmhond winced but made no move to fight back.

“Easy, now. Mustn’t get blood on the uniform. Let me explain—”

“Try explaining with my fist in your mouth.”

Sturmhond twisted, and in a flash, he’d slipped from Mal’s grip. A knife was in his hand, pulled from somewhere up his sleeve.

“Step back, Oretsev. I’m keeping my temper for her sake, but I’d just as soon gut you like a carp.”

“Try it,” Mal snarled.

“Enough!” I threw out a bright shard of light that blinded them both. They put up their hands against the glare, momentarily distracted. “Sturmhond, sheathe that weapon, or you’ll be the one who gets gutted. Mal, stand down.”

I waited until Sturmhond tucked away his knife, then slowly let the light fade.

Mal dropped his hands, his fists still clenched. They eyed each other warily. Just a few hours ago, they’d been friends. Of course, Sturmhond had been a completely different person then.

Sturmhond straightened the sleeves of his uniform. “I’m not proposing a love match, you heartsick oaf, just a political alliance. If you’d stop and think for a minute, you’d see it makes good sense for the country.”

Mal let out a harsh bark of laughter. “You mean it makes good sense for you.”

“Can’t both things be true? I’ve served in the military. I understand warfare, and I understand weaponry. I know the First Army will follow me. I may be second in line, but I have a blood right to the throne.”

Mal jabbed his finger in Sturmhond’s face. “You don’t have a right to her.”

Some of Sturmhond’s composure seemed to leave him. “What did you think was going to happen? Did you think you could just carry off one of the most powerful Grisha in the world like some peasant girl you tumbled in a barn? Is that how you think this story ends? I’m trying to keep a country from falling apart, not steal your best girl.”

“That’s enough,” I said quietly.

“You can stay at the palace,” Nikolai continued. “Perhaps as the captain of her personal guard? It wouldn’t be the first such arrangement.”

A muscle jumped in Mal’s jaw. “You make me sick.”

Sturmhond gave a dismissive wave. “I’m a depraved monster, I know. Just think about what I’m saying for a moment.”

“I don’t need to think about it,” Mal shouted. “And neither does she. It isn’t going to happen.”

“It would be a marriage in name only,” Sturmhond insisted. Then, as if he couldn’t help himself, he flashed Mal a taunting grin. “Except for the matter of producing heirs.”

Mal surged forward, and Sturmhond reached for his knife, but I saw what was coming and stepped between them.

“Stop!” I shouted. “Just stop it. And stop talking about me as if I’m not here!”

Mal released a frustrated growl and began pacing back and forth again. Sturmhond picked up a chair that had toppled and reseated himself, making a great show of stretching out his legs and pouring himself another glass of *kvas.*

I took a breath. “Your highness—”

“Nikolai,” he corrected. “But I’ve also been known to answer to ‘sweetheart’ or ‘handsome.’”

Mal whirled, but I silenced him with a pleading look.

“You need to stop that right now, *Nikolai,*” I said. “Or I’ll knock those princely teeth out myself.”

Nikolai rubbed his darkening bruise. “I know you’re good for it.”

“I am,” I said firmly. “And I’m not going to marry you.”

Mal released a breath, and some of the stiffness went out of his shoulders. It bothered me that he had thought there was any possibility I might accept Nikolai’s offer, and I knew he wasn’t going to like what I had to say next.

I steeled myself and said, “But I will return to Os Alta with you.”

Mal’s head jerked up. “Alina—”

“Mal, we always said we’d find a way to come back to Ravka, that we’d find a way to help. If we don’t do something, there may not be a Ravka to come back to.” He shook his head, but I turned to Nikolai and plunged on. “I’ll return to Os Alta with you, and I’ll consider helping you make a bid for the throne.” I took a deep breath. “But I want the Second Army.”

The tent got very quiet. They were looking at me like I was mad. And, truth be told, I didn’t feel entirely sane. But I was done being shuffled across the True Sea and half of Ravka by people trying to use me and my power.

Nikolai gave a nervous laugh. “The people love you, Alina, but I was thinking of a more symbolic title—”

“I’m not a symbol,” I snapped. “And I’m tired of being a pawn.”

“No,” Mal said. “It’s too dangerous. It would be like painting a target on your back.”

“I already have a target on my back,” I said. “And neither of us will ever be safe until the Darkling is defeated.”

“Have you even held a command?” Nikolai asked.

I’d once led a seminar of junior mapmakers, but I didn’t think that was what he meant.

“No,” I admitted.

“You have no experience, no precedent, and no claim,” he said. “The Second Army has been led by Darklings since it was founded.”

By one Darkling. But this wasn’t the time to explain that.

“Age and birthright don’t matter to the Grisha. All they care about is power. I’m the only Grisha to ever wear two amplifiers. And I’m the only Grisha alive powerful enough to take on the Darkling or his shadow soldiers. No one else can do what I can.”

I tried to put confidence in my voice, even though I wasn’t sure what had come over me. I just knew I was tired of living in fear. I was tired of running.

And if Mal and I were to have any hope of locating the firebird, we needed answers. The Little Palace might be the only place to find them.

For a long moment, the three of us just stood there.

"Well," Nikolai said. "Well."

He drummed his fingers on the tabletop, considering. Then he rose and offered me his hand.

"All right, Summoner," he said. "Help me win the people, and the Grisha are yours."

"Really?" I blurted.

Nikolai laughed. "If you plan to lead an army, you'd better learn to act the part. The proper response is, 'I knew you'd see sense.'"

I took his hand. It was roughly calloused. The hand of a pirate, not a prince. We shook.

"As for my proposal," he began.

"Don't push your luck," I said, snatching my hand back. "I said I'd go with you to Os Alta, and that's it."

"And where will I go?" Mal said quietly.

He stood with his arms crossed, watching us with steady blue eyes. There was blood on his brow from the crash of the *Hummingbird.* He looked tired and very, very far away.

"I … I thought you'd go with me," I stammered.

"As what?" he asked. "The captain of your personal guard?"

I flushed.

Nikolai cleared his throat. "As much as I'd love to see how this plays out, I do have some arrangements to make. Unless, of course—"

"Get out," Mal ordered.

"Right, then. I'll leave you to it." He hastened away, stopping only to retrieve his sword.

The silence in the tent seemed to stretch and expand.

"Where is all this going, Alina?" Mal asked. "We fought our way out of this saintsforsaken place, and now we're sinking right back into the swamp."

I lowered myself to the cot and rested my head in my hands. I was exhausted, and every bone in my body ached.

"What am I supposed to do?" I pleaded. "What's happening here, what's

happening to Ravka—part of the blame belongs to me."

"That isn't true."

I gave a hollow laugh. "Oh yes it is. If it weren't for me, the Fold wouldn't be growing. Novokribirsk would still be standing."

"Alina," Mal said, crouching down in front of me and laying his hands on my knees, "even with all the Grisha and a thousand of Sturmhond's guns, you aren't strong enough to stop him."

"If we had the third amplifier—"

"But we don't!"

I gripped his hands. "We will."

He held my gaze. "Did it ever occur to you that I might say no?"

My stomach dropped. It hadn't. It had never entered my mind that Mal might refuse, and I felt suddenly ashamed. He had given up everything to be with me, but that didn't mean he was happy about it. Maybe he'd had enough of fighting and fear and uncertainty. Maybe he'd had enough of me.

"I thought … I thought we both wanted to help Ravka."

"Is that what we both wanted?" he asked.

He stood up and turned his back on me. I swallowed hard, forcing down the sudden ache in my throat.

"Then you won't go to Os Alta?"

He paused at the entrance of the tent. "You wanted to wear the second amplifier. You have it. You want to go to Os Alta? Fine, we'll go. You say you need the firebird. I'll find a way to get it for you. But when all this is over, Alina, I wonder if you'll still want me."

I shot to my feet. "Of course I will! Mal—"

Whatever I might have said, he didn't wait to hear it. He stepped out into the sunlight and was gone.

I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes, trying to push down the tears that threatened. What was I doing? I wasn't a queen. I wasn't a saint. And I certainly didn't know how to lead an army.

I caught a glimpse of myself in a soldier's shaving mirror that had been propped on the bedside table. I pulled my coat and shirt to the side, baring the wound at my shoulder. The puncture marks from the *nichevo'ya* stood out, puckered and black against my skin. The Darkling had said they would never

heal completely.

What wound couldn't be healed by Grisha power? One made by something that never should have existed in the first place.

I saw him. The Darkling's face, pale and beautiful, the slash of the knife. It had been so real. What had happened on the Fold?

Going back to Os Alta, taking control of the Second Army, was as good as a declaration of war. The Darkling would know where to find me, and when he was strong enough, he'd come looking. Ready or not, we'd have no choice but to make a stand. It was a terrifying thought, but I was surprised to find that it also brought me some relief.

I would face him. And one way or another, this would end.

CHAPTER

10

WE DIDN'T LEAVE for Os Alta right away, but spent the next three days transporting shipments of goods across the Fold. We operated out of what was left of the military encampment at Kribirsk. Most of the troops had been pulled back when the Fold started expanding. A new watchtower had been erected to monitor the black shores of the Unsea, and only a skeleton crew stayed on to operate the drydocks.

Not a single Grisha remained at the encampment. After the Darkling's attempted coup and the destruction of Novokribirsk, a wave of anti-Grisha sentiment had swept through Ravka and the ranks of the First Army. I wasn't surprised. An entire town was gone, its people food for monsters. Ravka wouldn't soon forget. Neither could I.

Some Grisha had fled to Os Alta to seek the protection of the King. Others had gone into hiding. Nikolai suspected that most of them had sought out the Darkling and defected to his side. But with the help of Nikolai's rogue Squallers, we managed two trips across the Fold on the first day, three on the second, and four on the last. Sandskiffs journeyed to West Ravka empty and returned with huge cargos of Zemeni rifles, crates full of ammunition, parts for repeating guns similar to those Nikolai had used aboard the *Hummingbird*, and a few tons of sugar and *jurda*—all courtesy of Sturmhond's smuggling.

"Bribes," Mal said as we watched giddy soldiers tear into a shipment being unloaded on the dock, hooting and marveling over the glittering array of weaponry.

"Gifts," Nikolai corrected. "You'll find the bullets work, regardless of my

motives.” He turned to me. “I think we can fit in one more trip today. Game?”

I wasn’t, but I nodded.

He smiled and clapped me on the back. “I’ll give the orders.”

I could feel Mal watching me as I turned to look into the shifting darkness of the Fold. There hadn’t been a recurrence of the incident aboard the *Hummingbird*. Whatever I’d seen that day—vision, hallucination, I couldn’t name it—it hadn’t happened again. Still, I spent each moment on the Unsea alert and wary, trying to hide just how frightened I really was.

Nikolai wanted to use the crossings to hunt volcra, but I refused. I told him that I still felt weak and that I wasn’t sure enough about my power to guarantee our safety. My fear was real, but the rest was a lie. My power was stronger than ever. It flowed from me in pure and vibrant waves, radiant with the strength of the stag and the scales. But I couldn’t bear the thought of hearing those screams again. I kept the light in a wide, glowing dome around the skiffs, and though the volcra shrieked and beat their wings, they kept their distance.

Mal accompanied us on all the crossings, staying close by my side, rifle at the ready. I knew he sensed my anxiousness, but he didn’t press me for an explanation. In fact, he hadn’t said much at all since our argument in the tent. I was afraid that when he did start talking, I wouldn’t like what he had to say. I hadn’t changed my mind about returning to Os Alta, but I was worried that he might.

The morning we decamped for the capital, I searched the crowd for him, terrified that he might just decide not to show up. I said a little prayer of thanks when I glimpsed him, straight-backed and silent in his saddle, waiting to join the column of riders.

We set out before dawn, a twisting procession of horses and wagons that wended its way out of camp on the broad road known as the Vy. Nikolai had obtained a plain blue *kefta* for me, but it was tucked away in the luggage. Until he had more of his own men in place to guard me, I was just another soldier in the prince’s retinue.

As the sun crested the horizon, I felt a small flutter of hope. The idea of trying to take the Darkling’s place, of attempting to reassemble the Grisha and command the Second Army, still felt impossibly daunting. But at least I was doing something instead of just fleeing from the Darkling or waiting for him to

snatch me up. I had two of Morozova's amplifiers, and I was headed to a place where I might find answers that would lead me to the third. Mal was unhappy, but watching the morning light break over the treetops, I felt sure I could bring him around.

My mood didn't survive the journey through Kribirsk. We'd passed through the ramshackle port town after the crash on the lake, but I'd been too shaken and distracted to really take note of the way the place had changed. This time, it was unavoidable.

Though Kribirsk had never had much beauty to recommend it, its sidewalks had teemed with travelers and merchants, King's men and dockworkers. Its bustling streets had been lined with busy stores ready to outfit expeditions into the Fold, along with bars and brothels that catered to the soldiers at the encampment. But these streets were quiet and nearly empty. Most of the inns and shops had been boarded up.

The real revelation came when we reached the church. I remembered it as a tidy building capped by bright blue domes. Now the whitewashed walls were covered in writing, row after row of names written in red paint that had dried to the color of blood. The steps were littered with heaps of withered flowers, small painted icons, the melted stubs of prayer candles. I saw bottles of *kvas*, piles of candy, the abandoned body of a child's doll. Gifts for the dead.

I scanned the names:

Stepan Ruschkin, 57
Anya Sirenka, 13
Mikah Lasky, 45
Rebeka Lasky, 44
Petyr Ozerov, 22
Marina Koska, 19
Valentin Yomki, 72
Sasha Penkin, 8 months

They went on and on. My fingers tightened on the reins as a cold fist closed over my heart. Memories came back to me unbidden: a mother running with a child in her arms, a man stumbling as the darkness caught him, his mouth open

in a scream, an old woman, confused and frightened, swallowed by the panicked crowd. I'd seen it all. I'd made it possible.

These were the people of Novokribirsk, the city that had once stood directly across from Kribirsk on the other side of the Fold. A sister city full of relatives, friends, business partners. People who had worked the docks and manned the skiffs, some who must have survived multiple crossings. They'd lived on the edge of a horror, thinking they were safe in their own homes, walking the streets of their little port town. And now they were all gone because I'd failed to stop the Darkling.

Mal brought his horse up beside mine.

"Alina," he said softly. "Come away."

I shook my head. I wanted to remember. *Tasha Stol, Andrei Bazin, Shura Rychenko.* As many as I could. They'd been murdered by the Darkling. Did they haunt his sleep the way they haunted mine?

"We have to stop him, Mal," I said hoarsely. "We have to find a way."

I don't know what I hoped he would say, but he remained silent. I wasn't sure Mal wanted to make me any more promises.

Eventually, he rode on, but I forced myself to read every single name, and only then did I turn to go, guiding my horse back into the deserted street.

A bit of life seemed to return to Kribirsk as we moved farther away from the Fold. A few shops were open, and there were still merchants hawking their wares on the stretch of the Vy known as Peddlers' Way. Rickety tables lined the road, their surfaces covered in brightly colored cloth and spread with a jumble of merchandise: boots and prayer shawls, wooden toys, shoddy knives in hand-tooled sheaths. Many of the tables were littered with what looked like bits of rock and chicken bones.

"*Provin'ye osti!*" the peddlers shouted. "*Autchen'ye osti!*" Real bone. Genuine bone.

As I leaned over my horse's head to get a better look, an old man called out, "Alina!"

I looked up in surprise. Did he know me?

Nikolai was suddenly beside me. He nudged his horse close to mine and snatched my reins, giving them a hard yank to draw me away from the table.

"*Net, spasibo,*" he said to the old man.

“Alina!” the peddler cried. “*Autchen’ye* Alina!”

“Wait,” I said, twisting in my saddle, trying to get a better look at the old man’s face. He was tidying the display on his table. Without the possibility of a sale, he seemed to have lost all interest in us.

“*Wait*,” I insisted. “He knew me.”

“No he didn’t.”

“He knew my name,” I said, angrily grabbing the reins back from him.

“He was trying to sell you relics. Finger bones. Genuine Sankta Alina.”

I froze, a deep chill stealing over me. My oblivious horse kept steadily on.

“Genuine Alina,” I repeated numbly.

Nikolai shifted uneasily. “There are rumors that you died on the Fold. People have been selling off parts of you all over Ravka and West Ravka for months. You’re quite the good luck charm.”

“Those are supposed to be *my fingers*?”

“Knuckles, toes, fragments of rib.”

I felt sick. I looked around, hoping to spot Mal, needing to see something familiar.

“Of course,” Nikolai continued, “if half of those were really your toes, you’d have about a hundred feet. But superstition is a powerful thing.”

“So is faith,” said a voice behind me, and when I turned, I was surprised to see Tolya there, mounted on a huge black warhorse, his broad face solemn.

It was all too much. The optimism I’d felt only an hour ago had vanished. It suddenly seemed as if the sky were pressing down on me, closing in like a trap. I kicked my horse into a canter. I’d always been a clumsy rider, but I held on tight and did not stop until Kribirsk was far behind me and I no longer heard the rattling of bones.

* * *

THAT NIGHT WE stayed at an inn in the little village of Vernost, where we met up with a heavily armed group of soldiers from the First Army. I soon learned that many of them were from the Twenty-Second, the regiment Nikolai had served with and eventually helped lead in the northern campaign. Apparently, the prince wanted to be surrounded by friends when he entered Os Alta. I couldn’t blame him.

He seemed to relax in their presence and, once again, I noticed his demeanor change. He'd transitioned effortlessly from the role of glib adventurer to arrogant prince, and now he became a beloved commander, a soldier who laughed easily with his companions and knew each commoner's name.

The soldiers had a lavish coach in tow. It was lacquered in pale Ravkan blue and emblazoned with the King's double eagle on one side. Nikolai had ordered a golden sunburst added to the other, and it was drawn by a matched team of six white horses. As the glittering contraption rumbled into the inn's courtyard, I had to roll my eyes, remembering the excesses of the Grand Palace. Maybe bad taste was inherited.

I had hoped to eat dinner alone with Mal in my room, but Nikolai had insisted that we all dine together in the inn's common room. So instead of relaxing by the fire in peace, we were jammed elbow to elbow at a noisy table packed with officers. Mal hadn't said a word throughout the entire meal, but Nikolai talked enough for all three of us.

As he dug into a dish of braised oxtail, he ran through a seemingly endless list of places he intended to stop on the way to Os Alta. Just listening to him wore me out.

"I didn't realize 'winning the people' meant meeting every single one of them," I grumbled. "Aren't we in a hurry?"

"Ravka needs to know its Sun Summoner has returned."

"And its wayward prince?"

"Him too. Gossip will do more than royal pronouncements. And that reminds me," he said, lowering his voice. "From here on out, you need to behave as if someone is watching every minute." He gestured between me and Mal with his fork. "What you do in private is your own affair. Just be discreet."

I nearly choked on my wine. "What?" I sputtered.

"It's one thing for you to be linked with a royal prince, quite another for people to think you're tumbling a peasant."

"I'm not—it's nobody's business!" I whispered furiously. I darted a glance at Mal. His teeth were clenched, and he was gripping his knife a little too tightly.

"Power is alliance," said Nikolai. "It's everyone's business." He took another sip of wine as I glared at him in disbelief. "And you should be wearing your own colors."

I shook my head, thrown by the change of subject. “Now you’re choosing my clothes?” I was wearing the blue *kefta*, but clearly Nikolai wasn’t satisfied.

“If you intend to lead the Second Army and take the Darkling’s place, then you need to look the part.”

“Summoners wear blue,” I said irritably.

“Don’t underestimate the power of the grand gesture, Alina. The people like spectacle. The Darkling understood that.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Might I suggest gold?” Nikolai went on. “Very regal, very appropriate—”

“Very tacky?”

“Gold and black would be best. Perfect symbolism and—”

“No black,” Mal said. He pushed back from the table and, without another word, disappeared into the crowded room.

I set down my fork. “I can’t tell if you’re deliberately making trouble or if you’re just an ass.”

The prince took another bite of his dinner. “He doesn’t like black?”

“It’s the color of the man who tried to kill him and regularly takes me hostage. My sworn enemy?”

“All the more reason to claim that color as your own.”

I craned my neck to see where Mal had gone. Through the doorway, I watched him take a seat by himself at the bar.

“No,” I said. “No black.”

“As you like,” Nikolai replied. “But choose something for yourself and your guards.”

I sighed. “Do I really need guards?”

Nikolai leaned back in his chair and studied me, his face suddenly serious. “Do you know how I got the name Sturmhond?” he asked.

“I thought it was some kind of joke, a play on Sobachka.”

“No,” he said. “It’s a name I earned. The first enemy ship I ever boarded was a Fjerdan trader out of Djerholm. When I told the captain to lay down his sword, he laughed in my face and told me to run home to my mother. He said Fjerdan men make bread from the bones of skinny Ravkan boys.”

“So you killed him?”

“No. I told him foolish old captains weren’t fit meat for Ravkan men. Then I

cut off his fingers and fed them to my dog while he watched."

"You … what?"

The room was packed with rowdy soldiers singing, shouting, telling stories, but it all fell away as I stared at Nikolai in stunned silence. It was as if I was watching him transform again, as if the charming mask had shifted to reveal a very dangerous man.

"You heard me. My enemies understood brutality. And so did my crew. After it was over, I drank with my men and divvied up the spoils. Then I went back to my cabin, vomited up the very fine dinner my steward had prepared, and cried myself to sleep. But that was the day I became a real privateer, and that was the day Sturmhond was born."

"So much for 'puppy,'" I said, feeling a bit nauseated myself.

"I was a boy trying to lead an undisciplined crew of thieves and rogues against enemies who were older, wiser, and tougher. I needed them to fear me. All of them. And if they hadn't, more people would have died."

I pushed my plate away. "Just whose fingers are you telling me to cut off?"

"I'm telling you that if you want to be a leader, it's time you started thinking and acting like one."

"I've heard this before, you know, from the Darkling and his supporters. Be brutal. Be cruel. More lives will be saved in the long run."

"Do you think I'm like the Darkling?"

I studied him—the golden hair, the sharp uniform, those too-clever hazel eyes.

"No," I said slowly. "I don't think you are." I rose to go join Mal. "But I've been wrong before."

* * *

THE JOURNEY TO OS ALTA was less a march than a slow, excruciating parade. We stopped at every town along the Vy, at farms, schools, churches, and dairies. We greeted local dignitaries and walked the wards of hospitals. We dined with war veterans and applauded girls' choirs.

It was hard not to notice that the villages were mostly populated by the very young and the very old. Every able body had been drafted to serve in the King's Army and fight in Ravka's endless wars. The cemeteries were as big as the

towns.

Nikolai handed out gold coins and sacks of sugar. He accepted handshakes from merchants and kisses on the cheek from wrinkled matrons who called him Sobachka, and charmed anyone who came within two feet of him. He never seemed to tire, never seemed to flag. No matter how many miles we'd ridden or people we'd met, he was ready to meet another.

He always seemed to know what people wanted from him, when to be the laughing boy, the golden prince, the weary soldier. I supposed it was the training that came with being born a royal and raised at court, but it was still unnerving to watch.

He hadn't been kidding about spectacle. He always tried to time our arrivals at dawn or dusk, or he'd stop our procession in the deep shadows of a church or town square—all the better to show off the Sun Summoner.

When he caught me rolling my eyes, he just winked and said, "Everyone thinks you're dead, lovely. It's important to make a good showing."

So I held up my end of the bargain and acted my part. I smiled graciously and called the light to shine over rooftops and steeples and bathe every awestruck face in warmth. People wept. Mothers brought me their babies to kiss, and old men bowed over my hand, their cheeks damp with tears. I felt like a complete fraud, and I said as much to Nikolai.

"What do you mean?" he asked, genuinely puzzled. "The people love you."

"You mean they love your prize goat," I grumbled as we rode out of one town.

"Have you actually won any prizes?"

"This isn't funny," I whispered angrily. "You've seen what the Darkling can do. These people will be sending their sons and daughters off to fight *nichevo'ya*, and I won't be able to save them. You're feeding them a lie."

"We're giving them hope. That's better than nothing."

"Spoken like a man who's never had nothing," I said, and wheeled my horse away.

* * *

RAVKA IN SUMMER was at its most lovely, its fields thick with gold and green, the air balmy and sweet with the scent of warm hay. Despite Nikolai's

protests, I insisted on forgoing the comforts of the coach. My bottom was sore, and my thighs complained loudly when I eased from the saddle every night, but sitting my own horse meant fresh air and the chance to seek out Mal on each day's ride. He didn't talk much, but he seemed to be thawing a bit.

Nikolai had circulated the story of how the Darkling had tried to execute Mal on the Fold. It had earned Mal instant trust among the soldiers, even a small measure of celebrity. Occasionally, he scouted with the trackers in the unit, and he was trying to teach Tolya how to hunt, though the big Grisha wasn't much for stalking silently through the woods.

On the road out of Sala, we were passing through a stand of white elms when Mal cleared his throat and said, "I was thinking.…"

I sat up straight and gave him my full attention. It was the first time he'd initiated a conversation since we'd left Kribirsk.

He shifted in his saddle, not meeting my eye. "I was thinking of who we could get to round out the guard."

I frowned. "The guard?"

He cleared his throat. "For you. A few of Nikolai's men seem all right, and I think Tolya and Tamar should be considered. They're Shu, but they're Grisha, so it shouldn't be a problem. And there's … well, me."

I didn't think I'd ever actually seen Mal blush.

I grinned. "Are you saying you want to be the captain of my personal guard?"

Mal glanced at me, his lips quirking in a smile. "Do I get to wear a fancy hat?"

"The fanciest," I said. "And possibly a cape."

"Will there be plumes?"

"Oh, yes. Several."

"Then I'm in."

I wanted to leave it at that, but I couldn't seem to help myself. "I thought … I thought you might want to go back to your unit, to be a tracker again."

Mal studied the knot in his reins. "I can't go back. Hopefully, Nikolai can keep me from being hanged—"

"Hopefully?" I squeaked.

"I deserted my post, Alina. Not even the King can make me a tracker again."

Mal's voice was steady, untroubled.

He adapts, I thought. But I knew some part of him would always grieve for the life he'd been meant to have, the life he would have had without me.

He nodded up ahead to where Nikolai's back was barely visible in the column of riders. "And there's no way I'm leaving you alone with Prince Perfect."

"So you don't trust me to resist his charms?"

"I don't even trust myself. I've never seen anyone work a crowd the way he does. I'm pretty sure the rocks and trees are getting ready to swear fealty to him."

I laughed and leaned back, felt the sun warming my skin through the dappled shade of the tree boughs overhead. I touched my fingers to the sea whip's fetter, safely hidden by my sleeve. For now, I wanted to keep the second amplifier a secret. Nikolai's Grisha had been sworn to silence, and I could only hope they'd hold their tongues.

My thoughts strayed to the firebird. Some part of me still couldn't quite believe it was real. Would it look the way it had in the pages of the red book, its feathers wrought in white and gold? Or would its wings be tipped with fire? And what kind of monster would nock an arrow and bring it down?

I had refused to take the stag's life, and countless people had died because of it—the citizens of Novokribirsk, the Grisha and soldiers I'd abandoned on the Darkling's skiff. I thought of those high church walls covered in the names of the dead.

Morozova's stag. Rusalye. The firebird. Legends come to life before my eyes, just to die in front of me. I remembered the sea whip's heaving sides, the thready whistle of its last breaths. It had been on the brink of death, and still I'd hesitated.

I don't want to be a killer. But mercy might not be a gift the Sun Summoner could afford. I gave myself a shake. First we had to find the firebird. Until then, all our hopes rested on the shoulders of one untrustworthy prince.

* * *

THE NEXT DAY, the first pilgrims appeared. They looked like any other townspeople, waiting by the road to see the royal procession roll past, but they

wore armbands and carried banners emblazoned with a rising sun. Dirty from long days of travel, they hefted satchels and sacks stuffed with their few belongings, and when they caught sight of me in my blue *kefta*, the stag's collar around my neck, they swarmed toward my horse, murmuring *Sankta, Sankta*, and trying to grab my sleeve or my hem. Sometimes they fell to their knees, and I had to be careful or risk my horse trampling one of them.

I thought I'd grown used to all the attention, even being pawed at by strangers, but this felt different. I didn't like being called "Saint," and there was something hungry in their faces that set my nerves on edge.

As we pushed deeper into Ravka's interior, the crowds grew. They came from every direction, from cities, towns, and ports. They clustered in village squares and by the side of the Vy, men and women, old and young, some on foot, some astride donkeys or crowded into haycarts. Wherever we went, they cried out to me.

Sometimes I was Sankta Alina, sometimes Alina the Just or the Bright or the Merciful. Daughter of Keramzin, they shouted, Daughter of Ravka. Daughter of the Fold. Rebe Dva Stolba, they called me, Daughter of Two Mills, after the valley that was home to the nameless settlement of my birth. I had the vaguest memory of the ruins the valley was named after, two rocky spindles by the side of a dusty road. The Apparat had been busy breaking open my past, sifting through the rubble to build the story of a Saint.

The pilgrims' expectations terrified me. As far as they were concerned, I'd come to liberate Ravka from its enemies, from the Shadow Fold, from the Darkling, from poverty, from hunger, from sore feet and mosquitos and anything else that might trouble them. They begged for me to bless them, to cure them, but I could only summon light, wave, let them touch my hand. It was all part of Nikolai's show.

The pilgrims had come not just to see me but to follow me. They attached themselves to the royal processional, and their ragged band swelled with every passing day. They trailed us from town to town, camping in fallow fields, holding dawn vigils to pray for my safety and the salvation of Ravka. They were close to outnumbering Nikolai's soldiers.

"This is the Apparat's doing," I complained to Tamar one night at dinner.

We were lodged at a roadhouse for the evening. Through the windows I

could see the lights of the pilgrims' cookfires, hear them singing peasant songs.

"These people should be home, working their fields and caring for their children, not following some false Saint."

Tamar pushed a piece of overcooked potato around on her plate and said, "My mother told me that Grisha power is a divine gift."

"And you believed her?"

"I don't have a better explanation."

I set my fork down. "Tamar, we don't have a divine gift. Grisha power is just something you're born with, like having big feet or a good singing voice."

"That's what the Shu believe. That it's something physical, buried in your heart or your spleen, something that can be isolated and dissected." She glanced out the window to the pilgrims' camp. "I don't think those people would agree."

"Please don't tell me you think I'm a Saint."

"It doesn't matter what you are. It matters what you can do."

"Tamar—"

"Those people think you can save Ravka," she said. "Obviously you do, too, or you wouldn't be going to Os Alta."

"I'm going to Os Alta to rebuild the Second Army."

"And find the third amplifier?"

I nearly dropped my fork. "Keep your voice down," I sputtered.

"We saw the *Istorii Sankt'ya*."

So Sturmhond hadn't kept the book a secret. "Who else knows?" I asked, trying to regain my composure.

"We're not going to tell anyone, Alina. We know what's at risk." Tamar's glass had left a damp circle on the table. She traced it with her finger and said, "You know, some people believe that all the first Saints were Grisha."

I frowned. "Which people?"

Tamar shrugged. "Enough that their leaders were excommunicated. Some were even burned at the stake."

"I've never heard that."

"It was a long time ago. I don't understand why that idea makes people so angry. Even if the Saints were Grisha, that doesn't make what they did any less miraculous."

I squirmed in my chair. "I don't want to be a Saint, Tamar. I'm not trying to

save the world. I just want to find a way to defeat the Darkling."

"Rebuild the Second Army. Defeat the Darkling. Destroy the Fold. Free Ravka. Call it what you like, but that all sounds suspiciously like saving the world."

Well, when she put it that way, it did seem a little ambitious. I took a sip of wine. It was sour stuff compared with the vintages aboard the *Volkvolny*.

"Mal is going to ask you and Tolya to be members of my personal guard."

Tamar's face broke into a beautiful grin. "Really?"

"You're practically doing the job now, anyway. But if you're going to be guarding me morning and night, you need to promise me something."

"Anything," she said, beaming.

"No more talk of Saints."

CHAPTER
11

AS THE CROWDS of pilgrims grew, they became harder to control, and soon I was forced to ride in the coach. Some days Mal accompanied me, but usually he chose to ride outside, guarding the vehicle with Tolya and Tamar. As eager as I was for his company, I knew it was for the best. Being stuck in the lacquered little jewel box always seemed to put him in a bad mood.

Nikolai only joined me on our way into or out of every village, so that we would be seen arriving or departing together. He talked constantly. He was always thinking of some new thing to build—a contraption for paving roads, a new irrigation system, a boat that could row itself. He sketched on any piece of paper he could find, and each day he seemed to have a new way to improve the next version of the *Hummingbird*.

As nervous as it made me, he was also eager to talk about the third amplifier and the Darkling. He didn't recognize the stone arch in the illustration either, and no matter how long we squinted at the page, Sankt Ilya wasn't giving up his secrets. But that didn't stop Nikolai from speculating endlessly on possible places to start hunting the firebird, or questioning me about the Darkling's new power.

"We're about to go to war together," he said. "In case you've forgotten, the Darkling's not particularly fond of me. I'd like us to have every advantage we can get."

There was so little for me to tell. I barely understood what the Darkling was doing myself.

"Grisha can only use and alter what already exists. True creation is a

different kind of power. Baghra called it ‘the making at the heart of the world.’”

“And you think that’s what the Darkling is after?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. We all have limits, and when we push them, we tire. But in the long term, using our power makes us stronger. It’s different when the Darkling calls the *nichevo’ya*. I think it costs him.” I described the strain that had shown on the Darkling’s face, his fatigue. “The power isn’t feeding him. It’s feeding *on* him.”

“Well, that explains it,” Nikolai said, his fingers beating a tattoo against his thigh, his mind already churning with possibilities.

“Explains what?”

“That we’re still alive, that my father is still sitting the throne. If the Darkling could just raise a shadow army, he’d have marched on us already. This is good,” he said decisively. “It buys us time.”

The question was how much. I thought back to the desire I’d felt looking up at the stars aboard the *Volkvolny*. Hunger for power had corrupted the Darkling. For all I knew, it might well have corrupted Morozova, too. Bringing the amplifiers together might unleash misery of a kind the world had never seen.

I rubbed my arms, trying to shake the chill that had dropped over me. I couldn’t speak these doubts to Nikolai, and Mal was already reluctant enough about the course we’d chosen.

“You know what we’re up against,” I said. “Time may not be enough.”

“Os Alta is heavily fortified. It’s close to the base at Poliznaya, and most important, it’s far from both the northern and southern borders.”

“Does that help us?”

“The Darkling’s range is limited. When we disabled his ship, he wasn’t able to send the *nichevo’ya* to pursue us. That means he’ll have to enter Ravka with his monsters. The mountains to the east are impassable, and he can’t cross the Fold without you, so he’ll have to come at us from Fjerda or Shu Han. Either way, we’ll have plenty of warning.”

“And the King and Queen will stay?”

“If my father left the capital, it would be as good as handing the country over to the Darkling now. Besides, I don’t know that he’s strong enough to travel.”

I thought of Genya’s red *kefta*. “He hasn’t recovered?”

“They’ve kept the worst of it from the gossips, but no, he hasn’t, and I doubt

he will.” He crossed his arms and cocked his head to the side. “Your friend is stunning. For a poisoner.”

“She isn’t my friend,” I said, though the words sounded childish to my ears and felt like a betrayal. I blamed Genya for a lot of things, but not for what she’d done to the King. Nikolai seemed to have spies everywhere. I wondered if he knew what kind of a man his father really was. “And I doubt she used poison.”

“She did something to him. None of his doctors can find a cure, and my mother won’t let a Corporalki Healer anywhere near him.” After a moment, Nikolai said, “It was a clever move, really.”

My brows shot up. “Trying to kill your father?”

“The Darkling could have murdered my father easily enough, but he would have risked outright rebellion from the peasants and the First Army. With the King alive and kept in isolation, no one knew quite what was happening. The Apparat was there, playing the trusted adviser, issuing commands. Vasily was off someplace buying up horses and whores.” He paused, looked out the window, ran his finger along its gilded edge. “I was at sea. I didn’t hear the news until weeks after it was all over.”

I waited, unsure if I should speak. His eyes were trained on the passing scenery, but his expression was distant.

“When word of the massacre in Novokribirsk and the Darkling’s disappearance got out, all hell broke loose. A group of royal ministers and the palace guard forced their way into the Grand Palace and demanded to see the King. Do you know what they found? My mother cowering in her parlor, clutching that snuffly little dog. And the King of Ravka, Alexander the Third, alone in his bedchamber, barely breathing, lying in his own filth. I let that happen.”

“You couldn’t have known what the Darkling was planning, Nikolai. No one did.”

He didn’t seem to hear me. “The Grisha and *oprichniki* who held the palace on the Darkling’s orders were caught in the lower town, trying to escape. They were executed.”

I tried to restrain a shudder. “What about the Apparat?” The priest had colluded with the Darkling and might be working with him still. But he’d tried to approach me before the coup, and I’d always thought he might be playing a

deeper game.

“Escaped. No one knows how.” His voice was hard. “But he’ll answer for it when the time comes.”

Again I glimpsed the ruthless edge that lurked beneath the polished demeanor. Was that the real Nikolai Lantsov? Or just another disguise?

“You let Genya go,” I said.

“She was a pawn. You were the prize. I had to stay focused.” Then he grinned, his dark mood vanishing as if it had never been. “Besides,” he said with a wink, “she was too pretty for the sharks.”

* * *

RIDING IN THE COACH left me restless, frustrated with the pace Nikolai was setting, and eager to get to the Little Palace. Still, it gave him a chance to help prepare me for our arrival in Os Alta. Nikolai had a considerable stake in my success as the leader of the Second Army, and he always seemed to have some new bit of wisdom he wanted to impart. It was overwhelming, but I didn’t feel I could afford to disregard his advice, and I started to feel like I was back at the Little Palace library, cramming my head full of Grisha theory.

The less you say, the more weight your words will carry.

Don’t argue. Never deign to deny. Meet insults with laughter.

“You didn’t laugh at the Fjerdan captain,” I observed.

“That wasn’t an insult. It was a challenge,” he said. “Know the difference.”

Weakness is a guise. Wear it when they need to know you’re human, but never when you feel it.

Don’t wish for bricks when you can build from stone. Use whatever or whoever is in front of you.

Being a leader means someone is always watching you.

Get them to follow the little orders, and they’ll follow the big ones.

It’s okay to flout expectations, but never disappoint them.

“How am I supposed to remember all of this?” I asked in exasperation.

“You don’t think too much about it, you just do it.”

“Easy for you to say. You’ve been groomed for this since the day you were born.”

“I was groomed for lawn tennis and champagne parties,” Nikolai said. “The

rest came with practice."

"I don't have time for practice!"

"You'll do fine," he said. "Just calm down."

I let out a squawk of frustration. I wanted to throttle him so badly my fingers itched.

"Oh, and the easiest way to make someone furious is to tell her to calm down."

I didn't know whether to laugh or throw my shoe at him.

Outside the coach, Nikolai's behavior was getting more and more unnerving. He knew better than to renew his marriage proposal, but it was clear that he wanted people to think there was something between us. With every stop, he grew more bold, standing too close, kissing my hand, pushing my hair back over my ear when it was caught by a breeze.

In Tashta, Nikolai waved to the massive crowd of villagers and pilgrims that had formed by a statue of the town's founder. As he was helping me back into the coach, he slipped his arm around my waist.

"Please don't punch me," he whispered. Then he yanked me hard against his chest and pressed his lips to mine.

The crowd exploded into wild cheers, their voices crashing over us in an exultant roar. Before I could even react, Nikolai shoved me into the shadowy interior of the coach and slipped in after. He slammed the door behind him, but I could still hear the townspeople cheering outside. Mixed in with the cries of "Nikolai!" and "Sankta Alina!" was a new chant: *Sol Koroleva*, they shouted. Sun Queen.

I could just see Mal through the coach's window. He was on horseback, working the edge of the crowd, making sure they stayed out of the road. It was clear from his stormy expression that he'd seen everything.

I turned on Nikolai and kicked him hard in the shin. He yelped, but that wasn't nearly satisfying enough. I kicked him again.

"Feel better?" he asked.

"Next time you try something like that, I won't kick you," I said angrily. "I'll cut you in half."

He brushed a speck of lint from his trousers. "Not sure that would be wise. I'm afraid the people rather frown on regicide."

“You’re not king yet, *Sobachka*,” I said sharply. “So don’t tempt me.”

“I don’t see why you’re upset. The crowd loved it.”

“*I* didn’t love it.”

He raised a brow. “You didn’t hate it.”

I kicked him again. This time his hand snaked out like a flash and captured my ankle. If it had been winter, I would have been wearing boots, but I was in summer slippers and his fingers closed over my bare leg. My cheeks blazed red.

“Promise not to kick me again, and I’ll promise not to kiss you again,” he said.

“I only kicked you because you kissed me!”

I tried to pull my leg back, but he kept a hard grip.

“Promise,” he said.

“All right,” I bit out. “I promise.”

“Then we have a deal.”

He dropped my foot, and I drew it back beneath my *kefta*, hoping he couldn’t see my idiotic blush.

“Great,” I said. “Now get out.”

“It’s my coach.”

“The deal was only for kicking. It did not prohibit slapping, punching, biting, or *cutting you in half*.”

He grinned. “Afraid Oretsev will wonder what we’ve gotten up to?”

That was exactly what I was worried about. “I’m concerned that if I’m forced to spend another minute with you, I may vomit on my *kefta*.”

“It’s an act, Alina. The stronger our alliance, the better it will be for both of us. I’m sorry if it puts a burr in Mal’s sock, but it’s a necessity.”

“That kiss wasn’t a necessity.”

“I was improvising,” he said. “I got carried away.”

“You *never* improvise,” I said. “Everything you do is calculated. You change personalities the way other people change hats. And you know what? It’s creepy. Aren’t you ever just yourself?”

“I’m a prince, Alina. I can’t afford to be myself.”

I blew out an annoyed breath.

He was silent for a moment and then said, “I … you really think I’m creepy?”

It was the first time he'd sounded less than sure of himself. Despite what he'd done, I actually felt a little sorry for him.

"Occasionally," I admitted.

He scrubbed a hand over the back of his neck, looking distinctly uncomfortable. Then he sighed and shrugged. "I'm a younger son, most likely a bastard, and I've been away from court for almost seven years. I'm going to do everything I can to strengthen my chances for the throne, and if that means courting an entire nation or making moon eyes at you, then I'll do it."

I goggled at him. I hadn't really heard anything after the word "bastard." Genya had hinted that there were rumors about Nikolai's parentage, but I was shocked that he would acknowledge them.

He laughed. "You're never going to survive at court if you don't learn to hide what you're thinking a bit better. You look like you just sat in a bowl of cold porridge. Close your mouth."

I shut my mouth with a snap and tried to school my features into a pleasant expression. That just made Nikolai laugh harder. "Now you look like you've had too much wine."

I gave up and slouched back against the seat. "How can you joke about something like that?"

"I've heard the whispers since I was a child. It's not something I want repeated outside of this coach—and I'll deny it if you do—but I couldn't care less whether or not I have Lantsov blood. In fact, given all the royal inbreeding, being a bastard is probably a point in my favor."

I shook my head. He was completely baffling. It was hard to know what to take seriously when it came to Nikolai.

"Why is the crown so important to you?" I asked. "Why go through all of this?"

"Is it so hard to believe I might actually care what happens to this country?"

"Honestly? Yes."

He studied the toes of his polished boots. I could never figure out how he kept them so shiny.

"I guess I like fixing things," he said. "I always have."

It wasn't much of an answer, but somehow it rang true.

"You truly think your brother will step aside?"

“I hope so. He knows the First Army will follow me, and I don’t think he has the stomach for civil war. Besides, Vasily inherited our father’s aversion to hard work. Once he realizes what it really takes to run a country, I doubt he’ll be able to run from the capital fast enough.”

“And if he doesn’t give up so easily?”

“It’s simply a question of finding the right incentive. Pauper or prince, every man can be bought.”

More wisdom from the mouth of Nikolai Lantsov. I glanced out the coach’s window. I could just see Mal sitting tall in his saddle as he kept pace with the coach.

“Not every man,” I murmured.

Nikolai followed my gaze. “Yes, Alina, even your stalwart champion has his price.” He turned back to me, his hazel eyes thoughtful. “And I suspect I’m looking at it right now.”

I shifted uneasily in my seat. “You’re so sure of everything,” I said sourly. “Maybe I’ll decide *I* want the throne and smother you in your sleep.”

Nikolai just grinned. “Finally,” he said, “you’re thinking like a politician.”

* * *

EVENTUALLY, NIKOLAI RELENTED and vacated the coach, but it was hours before we stopped for the night. I didn’t have to seek Mal out. When the coach door opened, he was there, offering his hand to help me down. The square was crowded with pilgrims and other travelers, all craning their necks to get a better look at the Sun Summoner, but I wasn’t sure when I’d have another chance to talk to him.

“Are you angry?” I whispered as he led me across the cobblestones. I could see Nikolai on the other end of the square, already chatting with a group of local dignitaries.

“With you? No. But Nikolai and I are going to have words when he isn’t surrounded by an armed guard.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I kicked him.”

Mal laughed. “You did?”

“Twice. Does that help?”

“Actually, yes.”

“I’ll stomp on his foot tonight at dinner.” That fell well outside the kicking prohibition.

“So, no heart flutters or swooning, even in the arms of a royal prince?”

He was teasing, but I heard the uncertainty beneath his words.

“I seem to be immune,” I replied. “And luckily, I know what a *real* kiss should feel like.”

I left him standing in the middle of the square. I could get used to making Mal blush.

* * *

THE NIGHT BEFORE we were to enter Os Alta, we stayed at the dacha of a minor nobleman who lived just a few miles from the city walls. It reminded me a bit of Keramzin—the grand iron gates, the long, straight path to the graceful house with its two wide wings of pale brick. Count Minkoff was apparently known for breeding dwarf fruit trees, and the hallways of the dacha were lined with clever little topiaries that filled the rooms with the sweet scent of peaches and plums.

I was provided with an elegant bedchamber on the second floor. Tamar took the adjoining room, and Tolya and Mal were boarded across the hall. A large box waited for me on my bed, and inside, I found the *kefta* I had finally broken down and requested the previous week. Nikolai had sent orders to the Little Palace, and I recognized the work of Grisha Fabrikators in the dark blue silk shot through with golden thread. I expected it to be heavy in my hands, but Materialki craft had rendered the fabric nearly weightless. When I slipped it over my head, it glimmered and shifted like light glimpsed through water. The clasps were small golden suns. It was beautiful and a bit showy. Nikolai would approve.

The lady of the house had sent a maid to do my hair. She sat me down at the dressing table, clucking and fussing over my tangles as she pinned my tresses into a loose knot. She had a far gentler hand than Genya, but the results weren’t nearly so spectacular. I shoved the thought from my mind. I didn’t like thinking of Genya, of what might have happened to her after we left the whaler, or of how lonely the Little Palace would feel without her.

I thanked the maid and, before I left my room, snapped up the black velvet pouch that had come in the box with my *kefta*. I slipped it into my pocket,

checked to make sure the fetter was hidden by my sleeve, then headed downstairs.

Talk over dinner centered around the latest plays, the possible whereabouts of the Darkling, and happenings in Os Alta. The city had been swamped with refugees. Newcomers were being turned away at the gate, and there were rumors of food riots in the lower town. It seemed impossibly far away from this sparkling place.

The Count and his wife, a plump lady with graying curls and alarmingly displayed cleavage, set a lavish table. We ate cold soup from jeweled cups shaped like pumpkins, roasted lamb slathered with currant jelly, mushrooms baked in cream, and a dish I only picked at that I later learned was brandied cuckoo. Each plate and glass was edged in silver and bore the Minkoff crest. But most impressive was the centerpiece that ran the length of the table: a living miniature forest rendered in elaborate detail, complete with groves of tiny pines, a climbing trumpet vine with blossoms no bigger than a fingernail, and a little hut that hid the salt cellar.

I sat between Nikolai and Colonel Raevsky, listening as the noble guests laughed and chattered and raised toast after toast to the young prince's return and the Sun Summoner's health. I'd asked Mal to join us, but he'd refused, choosing instead to patrol the grounds with Tamar and Tolya. Hard as I tried to keep my mind on the conversation, I kept glancing at the terrace, hoping to catch sight of him.

Nikolai must have noticed, because he whispered, "You don't have to pay attention, but you do have to look like you're paying attention."

I did my best, though I didn't have much to say. Even dressed in a glittering *kefta* and seated beside a prince, I was still a peasant from a no-name town. I didn't belong with these people, and I didn't really want to. Still, I gave a silent prayer of thanks that Ana Kuya had taught her orphans how to sit at table and which fork to use to eat snails.

After dinner, we were herded into a parlor where the Count and Countess sang a duet accompanied by their daughter on the harp. Dessert was laid on the side table: honey mousse, a walnut and melon compote, and a tower of pastries covered in clouds of spun sugar that wasn't meant to be eaten so much as ogled. There was more wine, more gossip. I was asked to summon light, and I cast a

warm glow over the coffered ceiling to enthusiastic applause. When some of the guests sat down to play cards, I pleaded a headache and quietly made my escape.

Nikolai caught me at the doors to the terrace. “You should stay,” he said. “This is good practice for the monotony of court.”

“Saints need their rest.”

“Are you planning to sleep under a rosebush?” he asked, glancing down toward the garden.

“I’ve been a good little dancing bear, Nikolai. I’ve done all my tricks, and now it’s time for me to say goodnight.”

Nikolai sighed. “Maybe I just wish I could go with you. The Countess kept squeezing my knee under the table at dinner, and I hate playing cards.”

“I thought you were the consummate politician.”

“I told you I have trouble keeping still.”

“Then you’ll just have to ask the Countess to dance,” I said with a grin, and slipped out into the night air.

As I descended the terrace steps, I looked back over my shoulder. Nikolai still hovered in the doorway. He wore full military dress, a pale blue sash across his chest. The light from the parlor glinted off his medals and gilded the edges of his golden hair. He was playing the role of the polished prince tonight. But standing there, he just looked like a lonely boy who didn’t want to return to a party by himself.

I turned and took the curving staircase down to the sunken garden.

It didn’t take me long to find Mal. He was leaning against the trunk of a large oak, scanning the manicured grounds.

“Anyone lurking in the dark?” I asked.

“Just me.”

I settled beside him against the trunk. “You should have joined us at dinner.”

Mal snorted. “No thank you. From what I could see, you looked positively miserable, and Nikolai didn’t look much happier. Besides,” he added with a glance at my *kefta*, “whatever would I have worn?”

“Do you hate it?”

“It’s lovely. A perfect addition to your trousseau.” Before I could even roll my eyes, he snagged hold of my hand. “I didn’t mean that,” he said. “You look beautiful. I’ve been wanting to say so since I first saw you tonight.”

I flushed. “Thanks. Using my power every day helps.”

“You were beautiful back in Cofton with *jurda* pollen in your brows.”

I tugged self-consciously at a strand of my hair. “This place reminds me of Keramzin,” I said.

“A little. It’s a lot fussier. What exactly is the point of teeny tiny fruit?”

“It’s for people with teeny tiny hands. Makes them feel better about themselves.”

He laughed, a real laugh. I reached into my pocket and fished around inside the black velvet pouch.

“I have something for you,” I said.

“What is it?”

I held out my closed fist.

“Guess,” I said. It was a game we’d played as children.

“Obviously, it’s a sweater.”

I shook my head.

“A show pony?”

“Nope.”

He reached out and took my hand, turning it over and gently unfolding my fingers.

I waited for his reaction.

His mouth tugged up at one corner as he plucked the golden sunburst from my hand. The rough brush of his fingers against my palm sent a shiver up my back.

“For the captain of your personal guard?” he asked.

I cleared my throat nervously. “I … I didn’t want uniforms. I didn’t want anything that looked like the Darkling’s *oprichniki*.”

For a long moment, we stood in silence as Mal looked down at the sunburst. Then he handed it back to me. My heart plummeted, but I tried to hide my disappointment.

“Put it on me?” he asked.

I let my breath out in a relieved rush. I took the pin between my fingers and pressed it through the folds on the left side of his shirt. It took me a couple of tries to get it hooked. When I finished and made to step back, he took my hand and pressed it over the golden sun, over his heart.

“Is that all?” he said.

We were standing close together now, alone in the warm dark of the garden. It was the first moment we’d had to ourselves in weeks.

“All?” I repeated. My voice came out as little more than a breath.

“I believe I was promised a cape and a fancy hat.”

“I’ll make it up to you,” I said.

“Are you flirting?”

“I’m bartering.”

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll take my first payment now.”

His tone was light, but when his lips met mine, there was nothing playful in his kiss. He tasted of heat and newly ripe pears from the Duke’s garden. I sensed hunger in the hard slant of his mouth, an unfamiliar edge to his need that sent restless sparks burning through me.

I came up on my toes, circling my arms around his neck, feeling the length of my body melt into his. He had a soldier’s strength, and I felt it in the hard bands of his arms, the pressure of his fingers as his fist bunched in the silk at the small of my back and he drew me against him. There was something fierce and almost desperate in the way he held me, as if he could not have me close enough.

My head was spinning. My thoughts had gone slow and liquid, but somewhere I heard footsteps. In the next moment, Tamar came charging up the path.

“We have company,” she said.

Mal broke away from me and unslung his rifle in a single swift movement. “Who is it?”

“There’s a group of people at the gate demanding entry. They want to see the Sun Summoner.”

“Pilgrims?” I asked, trying to get my kiss-addled brain to function properly.

Tamar shook her head. “They claim to be Grisha.”

“Here?”

Mal placed a hand on my arm. “Alina, wait inside, at least until we see what this is about.”

I hesitated. Part of me bridled at being told to run off and hide my head, but I didn’t want to be stupid either. A shout rose from somewhere near the gates.

“No,” I said, pulling from Mal’s grasp. “If they really are Grisha, you may

need me."

Neither Tamar nor Mal looked pleased, but they took up positions on either side of me and we hurried down the gravel path.

A crowd had gathered at the dacha's iron gates. Tolya was easy to spot, towering above everyone else. Nikolai was in front, surrounded by soldiers with their weapons drawn, as well as armed footmen from the Count's household. A small group of people were gathered on the other side of the bars, but I couldn't see more than that. Someone gave the gate an angry rattle, and I heard a clamor of raised voices.

"Get me in there," I said. Tamar cast Mal a worried glance. I lifted my chin. If they were going to be my guards, they would have to follow my orders. "*Now.* I need to see what's happening before things get out of hand."

Tamar signaled to Tolya, and the giant stepped in front of us, easily shouldering his way through the crowd to the gates. I'd always been small. Packed between Mal and the twins, with antsy soldiers jostling us from every side, it suddenly felt very hard to breathe. I pushed down my panic, peering past bodies and backs to where I could see Nikolai arguing with someone at the gate.

"If we wanted to talk to the King's lackey, we'd be at the doors to the Grand Palace," said an impatient voice. "We came for the Sun Summoner."

"Show some respect, bloodletter," barked a soldier I didn't recognize. "You're addressing a Prince of Ravka and an officer of the First Army."

This was not going well. I edged closer to the front of the crowd but halted when I saw the Corporalnik standing beyond the iron bars. "Fedyor?"

His long face broke into a grin, and he bowed deeply. "Alina Starkov," he said. "I could only hope the rumors were true."

I studied Fedyor warily. He was surrounded by a group of Grisha in dust-covered *kefta*, mostly Corporalki red, some in Etherealki blue, and a smattering of Materialki purple.

"You know him?" Nikolai asked.

"Yes," I said. "He saved my life." Fedyor had once put himself between me and a swarm of Fjerdan assassins.

He bowed again. "It was my great honor."

Nikolai didn't look impressed. "Can he be trusted?"

"He's a deserter," said the soldier beside Nikolai.

There was grumbling on both sides of the gate.

Nikolai pointed to Tolya. “Move everyone back and make sure that none of those footmen get it in their heads to start shooting. I suspect they lack for excitement out here amid the fruit trees.” He turned back to the gate. “Fedyor, is it? Give us a moment.” He pulled me a short distance from the crowd and said quietly, “Well? Can he be trusted?”

“I don’t know.” The last time I’d seen Fedyor had been at a party at the Grand Palace, just hours before I’d learned the Darkling’s plans and fled in the back of a wagon. I racked my brain, trying to recall what he’d told me then. “I think he was stationed at the southern border. He was a high-ranking Heartrender, but not one of the Darkling’s favorites.”

“Nevsky is right,” he said, nodding toward the angry soldier. “Grisha or not, their first loyalty should have been to the King. They left their posts. Technically, they’re deserters.”

“That doesn’t make them traitors.”

“The real question is whether they’re spies.”

“So what do we do with them?”

“We could arrest them, have them questioned.”

I toyed with my sleeve, thinking.

“Talk to me,” Nikolai said.

“Don’t we want the Grisha to come back?” I asked. “If we arrest everyone who returns, I won’t have much of an army to lead.”

“Remember,” he said, “you’ll be eating with them, working with them, sleeping under the same roof.”

“And they could all be working for the Darkling.” I looked over my shoulder at Fedyor waiting patiently at the gate. “What do you think?”

“I don’t think these Grisha are any more or less trustworthy than the ones waiting at the Little Palace.”

“That’s not encouraging.”

“Once we’re behind the palace walls, all communication will be closely monitored. It’s hard to see how the Darkling can use his spies if he can’t reach them.”

I resisted the urge to touch the scars forming on my shoulder. I took a breath.

“All right,” I said. “Open the gates. I’ll speak to Fedyor and only him. The

rest can camp outside the dacha tonight and join us on the way into Os Alta tomorrow."

"You're sure?"

"I doubt I'll be sure of anything ever again, but my army needs soldiers."

"Very good," Nikolai said with a short nod. "Just be careful who you trust."

I cast a pointed glance at him. "I will."

CHAPTER
12

FEDYOR AND I talked late into the night, though we were never left alone. Mal or Tolya or Tamar was always there, keeping watch.

Fedyor had been serving near Sikursk on the southeastern border. When word of the destruction of Novokribirsk reached the outpost, the King's soldiers had turned on the Grisha, pulling them from their beds in the middle of the night and mounting sham trials to determine their loyalty. Fedyor had helped to lead an escape.

"We could have killed them all," he said. "Instead, we took our wounded and fled."

Some Grisha hadn't been so forgiving. There had been massacres at Chernast and Ulensk when the soldiers there had tried to attack members of the Second Army. Meanwhile, Mal and I had been aboard the *Verrhader*, sailing west, safe from the chaos we'd helped to unleash.

"A few weeks ago," he said, "the stories started circulating that you'd returned to Ravka. You can expect more Grisha to seek you out."

"How many?"

"There's no way of knowing."

Like Nikolai, Fedyor believed some Grisha had gone into hiding, waiting for order to be restored. But he suspected that most of them had sought out the Darkling.

"He's strength," said Fedyor. "He's safety. That's what they understand."

Or maybe they just think they've chosen the winning side, I thought bleakly. But I knew it was more than that. I'd felt the pull of the Darkling's power.

Wasn’t that why the pilgrims flocked to a false Saint? Why the First Army still marched for an incompetent king? Sometimes, it was just easier to follow.

When Fedyor finished his tale, I asked that he be brought dinner and advised him that he should be ready to travel to Os Alta at dawn.

“I don’t know what kind of reception we can expect,” I warned him.

“We’ll be ready, *moi soverenyi*,” he said, and bowed.

I started at the title. In my mind, it still belonged to the Darkling.

“Fedyor…” I began as I walked him to the door. Then I hesitated. I couldn’t believe what I was about to say, but apparently Nikolai was getting through to me—for better or worse. “I realize you’ve been traveling, but tidy up a bit before tomorrow. It’s important that we make a good impression.”

He didn’t even blink—just bowed again and replied, “*Da, soverenyi*,” before disappearing into the night.

Great, I thought. *One order down, a few thousand more to go.*

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING, I dressed in my elaborate *kefta* and descended the dacha’s steps with Mal and the twins. The gold sunbursts glittered from their chests, but they still wore peasant roughspun. Nikolai might not like it, but I wanted to erase the lines that had been drawn between the Grisha and the rest of Ravka’s people.

Though we’d been warned that Os Alta was teeming with refugees and pilgrims, for once Nikolai didn’t insist that I ride in the coach. He wanted me to be seen entering the city. But that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to put on a show. My guards and I were all seated on beautiful white horses, and men from his regiment flanked us on both sides, each bearing the Ravkan double eagle and flags emblazoned with golden suns.

“Subtle, as always,” I sighed.

“Understatement is overrated,” he replied as he mounted a dappled gray. “Now, shall we visit my quaint childhood home?”

It was a warm morning, and the banners of our processional hung limp in the still air as we wended our way slowly along the Vy toward the capital. Ordinarily, the royal family would have spent the hot months at their summer palace in the lake district. But Os Alta was more easily defended, and they’d

chosen to hunker down behind its famous double walls.

My thoughts wandered as we rode. I hadn't gotten much sleep and, despite my nerves, the warmth of the morning combined with the steady sway of the horse and the low hum of insects made my chin droop. But when we crested the hill at the outskirts of the town, I came quickly awake.

In the distance, I saw Os Alta, the Dream City, its spires white and jagged against the cloudless sky. But between us and the capital, arrayed in perfect military formation, stood row after row of armed men. Hundreds of soldiers of the First Army, maybe a thousand—infantry, cavalry, officers, and grunts. Sunlight glittered off the hilts of their swords, and their backs bristled with rifles.

A man rode out before them. He wore an officer's coat covered with medals and sat atop one of the biggest horses I'd ever seen. It could have carried two Tolyas.

Nikolai watched the rider galloping back and forth across the lines and sighed. "Ah," he said. "It seems my brother has come to greet us."

We rode slowly down the slope, until we came to a halt before the masses of assembled men. Despite the white horses and glittering banners, our processional of wayward Grisha and ragged pilgrims no longer seemed quite so grand. Nikolai nudged his horse forward, and his brother cantered up to meet him.

I'd seen Vasily Lantsov a few times at Os Alta. He was handsome enough, though he'd had the bad luck to inherit his father's weak chin, and his eyes were so heavy-lidded that he always looked very bored or slightly drunk. But now he seemed to have roused himself from his perpetual stupor. He sat straight in his saddle, radiating arrogance and nobility. Next to him, Nikolai looked impossibly young.

I felt a prickle of fear. Nikolai always seemed so in control of every situation. It was easy to forget that he was just a few years older than Mal and I were, a boy captain who hoped to become a boy king.

It had been seven years since Nikolai had been at court, and I didn't think he'd seen Vasily in all that time. But there were no tears, no shouted greetings. The two princes simply dismounted and clasped each other in a brief embrace. Vasily surveyed our retinue, pausing meaningfully on me.

"So this is the girl you claim is the Sun Summoner?"

Nikolai raised his brows. His brother couldn't have given him a better

opening. “It’s a claim easy enough to prove.” He nodded to me.

Understatement is overrated. I raised my hands and summoned a blazing wave of light that crashed over the assembled soldiers in a cascade of billowing heat. They threw up their hands, and several stepped back as the horses shied and whinnied. I let the light fade. Vasily sniffed.

“You’ve been busy, little brother.”

“You have no idea, Vasya,” replied Nikolai pleasantly. Vasily’s mouth puckered at Nikolai’s use of the diminutive. He looked almost prim. “I’m surprised to find you in Os Alta,” Nikolai continued. “I thought you’d be in Caryeva for the races.”

“I was,” said Vasily. “My blue roan had an excellent showing. But when I heard you were returning home, I wanted to be here to greet you.”

“Kind of you to go to all this trouble.”

“The return of a royal prince is no small thing,” Vasily said. “Even a younger son.”

His emphasis was clear, and the fear inside me grew. Maybe Nikolai had underestimated Vasily’s interest in retaining his place in the succession. I didn’t want to imagine what his other mistakes or miscalculations might mean for us.

But Nikolai just smiled. I remembered his advice: *Meet insults with laughter*.

“We younger sons learn to appreciate what we can get,” he said. Then he called to a soldier standing at attention down the line. “Sergeant Pechkin, I remember you from the Halmhend campaign. Leg must have healed well if you’re able to stand there like a slab of stone.”

The sergeant’s face registered surprise. “*Da, moi tsarevich,*” he said respectfully.

“‘Sir’ will do, sergeant. I’m an officer when I wear this uniform, not a prince.” Vasily’s lips twitched again. Like many noble sons, he had taken an honorary commission and done his military service in the comfort of the officers’ tents, well away from enemy lines. But Nikolai had served in the infantry. He’d earned his medals and rank.

“Yes, sir,” said the sergeant. “Only bothers me when it rains.”

“Then I imagine the Fjerdans pray daily for storms. You put quite a few of them out of their misery, if I recall.”

“I seem to remember you doing the same, sir,” said the soldier with a grin.

I almost laughed. In a single exchange, Nikolai had seized control of the field from his brother. Tonight, when the soldiers gathered in the taverns of Os Alta or played cards in their barracks, this was what they would be talking about: the prince who remembered an ordinary soldier's name, the prince who had fought side by side with them without concern for wealth or pedigree.

"Brother," Nikolai said to Vasily. "Let's get to the palace so we can dispense with our greetings. I have a case of Kerch whiskey that needs drinking, and I'd like to get your advice on a foal I spotted in Ketterdam. They tell me Dagrenner is his sire, but I have my doubts."

Vasily tried to disguise his interest, but it was as if he couldn't resist. "Dagrenner? Did they have papers?"

"Come have a look."

Though his face was still wary, Vasily spoke a few words to one of the commanding officers and leapt into his saddle with practiced ease. The brothers took their places at the head of the column, and our procession was moving once again.

"Neatly done," Mal murmured to me as we passed between the rows of soldiers. "Nikolai's no fool."

"I hope not," I said. "For both our sakes."

As we drew closer to the capital, I saw what Count Minkoff's guests had been talking about. A city of tents had sprung up around the walls, and a long line of people waited at the gates. Several of them were arguing with the guards, no doubt petitioning for entry. Armed soldiers kept watch from the old battlements—a good precaution for a country at war, and a deadly reminder to the people below to keep things orderly.

Of course, the city gates sprang open for the princes of Ravka, and the procession continued through the crowd without pause.

Many of the tents and wagons were marked with crudely drawn suns, and as we rode through the makeshift camp, I heard the now-familiar cries of "Sankta Alina."

I felt foolish doing it, but forced myself to lift my hand and wave, determined to at least make an effort. The pilgrims cheered and waved back, many running to keep pace with us. But some of the other refugees stood silent by the side of the road, arms crossed, expressions skeptical and even blatantly hostile.

What do they see? I wondered. *Another privileged Grisha going to her safe, luxurious palace on the hill while they cook on open fires and sleep in the shadow of a city that refuses them sanctuary? Or something worse? A liar? A fraud? A girl who dares to style herself as a living Saint?*

I was grateful when we passed into the protection of the city walls.

Once inside, the procession slowed to a crawl. The lower town was full to bursting, the sidewalks crammed with people who spilled onto the street and halted traffic. The windows of the shops were plastered with signs declaring which goods were available, and long lines stretched out of every doorway. The stink of urine and garbage lay over everything. I wanted to bury my nose in my sleeve, but I had to settle for breathing through my mouth.

The crowds cheered and gawked here, but they were decidedly more subdued than those outside the gates.

"No pilgrims," I observed.

"They're not allowed within the city walls," said Tamar. "The King has had the Apparat declared an apostate and his followers banned from Os Alta."

The Apparat had conspired with the Darkling against the throne. Even if they'd since severed ties, there was no reason for the King to trust the priest and his cult. *Or you, for that matter,* I reminded myself. *You're just the one dumb enough to stroll into the Grand Palace and hope for clemency.*

We crossed the wide canal and left the noise and tumult of the lower town behind. I noticed that the bridge's gatehouse had been heavily fortified, but when we reached the far bank, it seemed that nothing in the upper town had changed. The broad boulevards were spotless and serene, the stately homes carefully maintained. We passed a park where fashionably turned out men and women strolled the manicured paths or took the air in open carriages. Children played at *babki*, watched over by their nannies, and a boy in a straw hat rode by on a pony with ribbons in its braided mane, the reins held by a uniformed servant.

They all turned to look as we passed, lifting their hats, whispering behind their hands, bowing and curtsying when they caught sight of Vasily and Nikolai. Were they really as calm and free of worry as they seemed? It was hard to fathom that they could be oblivious to the danger threatening Ravka or the turmoil on the other side of the bridge, but it was even harder for me to believe they trusted their King to keep them safe.

Sooner than I would have liked, we reached the golden gates of the Grand Palace. The sound of them clanging shut behind us sent a splinter of panic through me. The last time I'd passed through those gates, I'd been stowed away between pieces of scenery in a horse cart, fleeing from the Darkling, alone and on the run.

What if it's a trap? I thought suddenly. What if there was no pardon? What if Nikolai never intended for me to lead the Second Army? What if they clamped Mal and me in irons and tossed us into some dank cell?

Stop it, I chastised myself. *You're not some scared little girl anymore, shaking in her army-issue boots. You're a Grisha, the Sun Summoner. They need you. And you could bring this whole palace down around them if you wanted to.* I straightened my spine and tried to steady my heart.

When we reached the double eagle fountain, Tolya helped me from my horse. I squinted up at the Grand Palace, its gleaming white terraces crammed with layer after layer of gold ornament and statuary. It was just as ugly and intimidating as I remembered.

Vasily handed the reins of his mount to a waiting servant and headed up the marble steps without a backward glance.

Nikolai squared his shoulders. "Keep quiet and try to look penitent," he muttered to us. Then he bounded up the staircase to join his brother.

Mal's face was pale. I wiped my clammy hands on my *kefta*, and we followed the princes, leaving the rest of our party behind.

Inside, the halls of the palace were silent as we passed from room to glittering room. Our footfalls echoed on the polished parquet, and my anxiety grew with every step. At the doors to the throne room, I saw Nikolai take a deep breath. His uniform was immaculate, his handsome face cut in the lines of a fairy tale prince. I suddenly missed Sturmhond's lumpy nose and muddy green eyes.

The doors were thrown open and the footman declared, "*Tsesarevich Vasily Lantsov and Grand Duke Nikolai Lantsov.*"

Nikolai had told us that we wouldn't be announced but that we should follow behind him and Vasily. With hesitating steps, we complied, keeping a respectful distance from the princes.

A long, pale blue carpet stretched the length of the room. At the end of it, a group of elegantly dressed courtiers and advisers milled around a raised dais.

Above them all sat the King and Queen of Ravka, on matching golden thrones.

No priest, I noted as we drew closer. The Apparat had always seemed to be lurking somewhere behind the King, but now he was conspicuously absent. He did not seem to have been replaced with another spiritual adviser.

The King was far frailer and weaker than when I'd last seen him. His narrow chest looked like it had caved in on itself, and his drooping mustache was shot through with gray. But the greatest change had been wrought in the Queen. Without Genya there to tailor her face, she seemed to have aged twenty years in just a few months. Her skin had lost its creamy firmness. Deep furrows were beginning to form around her nose and mouth, and her too-bright irises had faded to a more natural but less arresting blue. Any pity I might have felt for her was eclipsed by my memory of the way she'd treated Genya. Maybe if she'd shown her servant a little less contempt, Genya wouldn't have felt compelled to throw her lot in with the Darkling. So many things might have been different.

When we reached the base of the dais, Nikolai bowed deeply. "*Moi tsar*," he said. "*Moya tsaritsa.*"

For a long, anxious moment, the King and Queen gazed down at their son. Then some fragile thing seemed to snap in the Queen. She sprang from her throne and bounded down the steps in a flurry of silk and pearls.

"Nikolai!" she cried as she clutched her son to her.

"*Madraya*," he said with a smile, hugging her back.

There were murmurs from the watching courtiers and a smattering of applause. Tears overflowed the Queen's eyes. It was the first real emotion I'd ever seen her display.

The King got slowly to his feet, helped by a footman who scurried to his side and guided him down the steps of the dais. He really wasn't well. I was beginning to see that the succession might be an issue sooner than I'd thought.

"Come, Nikolai," said the King, holding his arm out to his son. "Come."

Nikolai offered his elbow to his father while his mother clung to his other arm and, without ever acknowledging us, they made their way out of the throne room. Vasily followed. His face was impassive, but I didn't miss the telltale purse of his lips.

Mal and I stood there, unsure of what to do next. It was all very nice that the royal family had disappeared for a private reunion, but where did that leave us?

We hadn’t been dismissed, but we hadn’t been told to stay. The King’s advisers studied us with blatant curiosity, while the courtiers tittered and whispered. I resisted the urge to fidget and kept what I hoped was a haughty tilt to my head.

The minutes crawled by. I was hungry and tired and fairly sure one of my feet had fallen asleep, but still we stood waiting. At one point I thought I heard shouting coming from the hall. Maybe they were arguing about how long to leave us standing there.

Finally, after what must have been the better part of an hour, the royal family returned. The King was beaming. The Queen’s face had gone pale. Vasily looked livid. But the most notable change was in Nikolai. He seemed more at ease and he’d regained the swagger I recognized from my time aboard the *Volkvolny*.

They know, I realized. *He’s told them that he’s Sturmhond.*

The King and Queen reseated themselves on their thrones. Vasily went to stand behind the King, while Nikolai took his place behind the Queen. She reached up, seeking his hand, and he laid it on her shoulder. *That’s what a mother looks like with her child.* I was too old to be pining for parents I’d never known, but I was still touched by the gesture.

My sentimental thoughts were driven from my head when the King said, “You’re very young to lead the Second Army.”

He hadn’t even addressed me. I bowed my head in acknowledgment. “Yes, *moi tsar*.”

“I am tempted to put you to death immediately, but my son says that will only make you a martyr.”

I stiffened. *The Apparat would love that,* I thought as fear coursed through me. *One more cheerful illustration for the red book: Sankta Alina on the Gallows.*

“He thinks you can be trusted,” the King quavered. “I’m not so sure. Your escape from the Darkling seems a very unlikely story, but I cannot deny that Ravka does have need of your services.”

He made it sound like I was a groundskeeper or a county clerk. *Penitent,* I reminded myself, and bit back a sarcastic reply.

“It would be my greatest honor to serve the Ravkan King,” I said.

Either the King loved flattery or Nikolai had done a remarkable job of

pleading my case, because the King grunted and said, “Very well. At least temporarily, you will serve as the commander of the Grisha.”

Could it possibly be that easy? “I … thank you, *moi tsar*,” I stammered in baffled gratitude.

“But know this,” he said, wagging a finger at me. “If I find any evidence that you are fomenting action against me or that you have had any contact with the apostate, I will have you hanged without plea or trial.” His voice rose to a querulous wail. “The people say you are a Saint, but I think you are just another ragged refugee. Do you understand?”

Another ragged refugee and your best chance of keeping that shiny throne, I thought with a surprising surge of anger, but I swallowed my pride and bowed as deeply as I could manage. Was this how the Darkling had felt? Being forced to bend and scrape before a dissolute fool?

The King gave a vague wave of his blue-veined hand. We were being dismissed. I glanced at Mal.

Nikolai cleared his throat. “Father,” he said, “there’s the matter of the tracker.”

“Hmm?” said the King, glancing up as if he’d been nodding off. “The…? Ah, yes.” He trained his rheumy stare on Mal and said in a bored tone, “You have deserted your post and directly disobeyed the orders of a commanding officer. That is a hanging offense.”

I drew in a sharp breath. Beside me, Mal went very still. An ugly thought leapt into my head: If Nikolai wanted to get rid of Mal, this was certainly an easy way to do it.

An excited murmur rose from the crowd around the dais. What had I walked us into? I opened my mouth, but before I could say a word, Nikolai spoke.

“*Moi tsar*,” he said humbly, “forgive me, but the tracker did aid the Sun Summoner in evading what would have been certain capture by an enemy of the Crown.”

“*If* she was ever really in any danger.”

“I saw him take up arms against the Darkling myself. He is a trusted friend, and I believe he acted in Ravka’s best interest.” The King’s lower lip jutted out, but Nikolai pressed on. “I would feel better knowing that he is at the Little Palace.”

The King frowned. *Probably already thinking of lunch and a nap,* I thought.

"What do you have to say for yourself, boy?" he asked.

"Only that I did what I thought was right," Mal replied evenly.

"My son seems to feel you had good reason."

"I imagine every man thinks his reasons are good," Mal said. "It was still desertion."

Nikolai raised his eyes heavenward, and I had the urge to give Mal a good shake. Couldn't he be a bit less flinty and forthright for once?

The King's frown deepened. We waited.

"Very well," he said at last. "What's one more viper in the nest? You will be dishonorably discharged."

"Dishonorably?" I blurted.

Mal just bowed and said, "Thank you, *moi tsar*."

The King lifted his hand in a lazy wave. "Go," he said petulantly.

I was tempted to stay and make an argument of it, but Nikolai was glaring a warning at me, and Mal had already turned to leave. I had to scurry to catch up with him as he marched down the blue-carpeted aisle.

As soon as we left the throne room and the doors closed behind us, I said, "We'll talk to Nikolai. We'll get him to petition the King."

Mal didn't even break his stride. "There's no point," he said. "I knew it would be this way."

He said that, but I saw in the slump of his shoulders that some part of him had still hoped. I wanted to grab hold of his arm, make him stop, tell him I was sorry, that somehow we'd find a way to make things right. Instead, I hurried along beside him, struggling to keep up, keenly aware of the footmen watching us from every doorway.

We retraced our steps through the gleaming hallways of the palace and down the marble staircase. Fedyor and his Grisha were waiting by their horses. They'd cleaned up as best they could, but their brightly colored *kefta* still seemed a bit bedraggled. Tamar and Tolya stood slightly apart from them, the golden sunbursts I'd given them sparkling on their roughspun tunics. I took a deep breath. Nikolai had done what he could. Now it was my turn.

CHAPTER 13

THE WINDING WHITE gravel path led us through the palace grounds, past the rolling lawns and follies, and the high walls of the hedge maze. Tolya, ordinarily so still and silent, squirmed in his saddle, his mouth set in a sullen line.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

I thought he might not answer, but then he said, "It smells like weakness here. Like people getting soft."

I shot a glance at the giant warrior. "Everyone is soft compared to you, Tolya."

Tamar could usually be counted upon to laugh off her brother's moods, but she surprised me by saying, "He's right. This place feels like it's dying."

They weren't helping to settle my nerves. Our audience in the throne room had left me jittery, and I was still a little taken aback by the anger I'd felt toward the King, though Saints knew he deserved it. He was a filthy old lech who liked to corner servant girls, to say nothing of the fact that he was a rotten leader and had threatened to execute both me and Mal in the space of a few minutes. Even thinking about it, I felt another jab of bitter resentment.

My heart beat faster as we entered the wooded tunnel. The trees pressed in on us and, above, the branches wove together in a canopy of green. The last time I'd seen them, they'd been bare.

We emerged into bright sunshine. Below us lay the Little Palace.

I missed it, I realized. I'd missed the shine of its golden domes, those strange walls carved with every manner of beast, real and imagined. I'd missed the blue lake gleaming like a slice of sky, the tiny island not quite at its center, the white

flecks of the Summoners' pavilions on its shore. It was a place like no other. I was surprised to discover how much it felt like home.

But not everything was as it had been. First Army soldiers were stationed around the grounds, rifles on their backs. I doubted they'd do much good against a force of determined Heartrenders, Squallers, and Inferni, but the message was clear: The Grisha were not to be trusted.

A group of servants dressed in gray waited on the steps to take our horses.

"Ready?" Mal whispered as he helped me dismount.

"I wish people would stop asking me that. Don't I look ready?"

"You look like you did when I slipped a tadpole into your soup and you accidentally swallowed it."

I bit back a laugh, feeling some of my worry ease away. "Thanks for the reminder," I said. "I don't think I ever paid you back for that."

I paused to smooth the folds of my *kefta,* taking my time in the hope that my legs would stop trembling. Then I climbed the steps, the others trailing behind me. The servants flung the doors open wide, and we stepped inside. We passed through the cool dark of the entry chamber and into the Hall of the Golden Dome.

The room was a giant hexagon with the proportions of a cathedral. Its carved walls were inlaid with mother-of-pearl and topped by a massive golden dome that seemed to float above us at an impossible height. There were four tables arranged in a square at the center of the room, and that was where the Grisha waited. Despite their diminished numbers, they still kept to their Orders, sitting or standing in tightly clustered groups of red, purple, and blue.

"They do love their pretty colors," grumbled Tolya.

"Don't give me any ideas," I whispered. "Maybe I'll decide my personal guard should wear bright yellow pantaloons."

For the first time, I saw an expression very much like fear cross his face.

We walked forward, and most of the Grisha rose. It was a young group, and with a twinge of unease, I realized that many of the older and more experienced Grisha had chosen to defect to the Darkling. Or maybe they'd just been wise enough to run.

I had anticipated that not many Corporalki would remain. They'd been the highest-ranking Grisha, the most valued fighters, and closest to the Darkling.

There were still several familiar faces. Sergei was one of the few Heartrenders who had decided to stay. Marie and Nadia stood with the Etherealki. I was surprised to see David slouching in his seat at the Materialki table. I knew he'd had qualms about the Darkling, but that hadn't stopped him from sealing the stag's collar around my neck. Maybe that was why he wouldn't look at me. Or maybe he was just eager to get back to his workshop.

The Darkling's ebony chair had been removed. His table sat vacant.

Sergei was the first to step forward. "Alina Starkov," he said tightly. "I'm pleased to welcome you back to the Little Palace." I noted that he didn't bow.

Tension swelled and pulsed in the room like a living thing. Part of me longed to shatter it. It would be easy. I could smile, laugh, embrace Marie and Nadia. Though I'd never quite belonged here, I'd made a decent show of it. It would be a relief to pretend that I was one of them again. But I remembered Nikolai's warnings and restrained myself. *Weakness is a guise.*

"Thank you, Sergei," I said, deliberately informal. "I'm glad to be here."

"There have been rumors of your return," he said. "But just as many of your death."

"As you can see, I'm alive and as well as can be expected after weeks of travel on the Vy."

"It's said you arrived in the company of the King's second son," said Sergei.

There it was. The first challenge.

"That's right," I said pleasantly. "He aided in my battle with the Darkling."

A stir went through the room.

"On the Fold?" Sergei asked in some confusion.

"On the True Sea," I corrected. A murmur rose from the crowd. I held up my hand and, to my relief, they fell silent. *Get them to follow the little orders, and they'll follow the big ones.* "I have plenty of stories to tell and information to impart," I said. "But that can wait. I've returned to Os Alta with a purpose."

"People are talking of a wedding," said Sergei.

Well, Nikolai would be thrilled.

"I didn't come back here to be a bride," I said. "I've returned for a single reason." That wasn't entirely true, but I wasn't about to discuss the third amplifier in a room packed with Grisha of dubious loyalty. I took a breath. This was it. "I've returned to lead the Second Army."

Everyone began talking at once. There were a few cheers, some angry shouts. I saw Sergei exchange a glance with Marie. When the room quieted he said, “We expected as much.”

“The King has agreed that I will hold command.” *Temporarily*, I thought, but did not say.

Another wave of shouts and chatter broke out.

Sergei cleared his throat, “Alina, you are the Sun Summoner, and we’re grateful for your safe return, but you aren’t qualified to run a military campaign.”

“Qualified or not, I have the King’s blessing.”

“Then we will petition the King. The Corporalki are the highest-ranking Grisha and should lead the Second Army.”

“According to you, bloodletter.”

As soon as I heard that silky voice, I knew who it belonged to, but my heart still lurched when I caught sight of her raven’s wing hair. Zoya stepped through the crowd of Etherealki, her lithe form swathed in blue summer silk that made her eyes glow like gems—disgustingly long-lashed gems.

It took everything in me not to turn around and watch Mal’s reaction. Zoya was the Grisha who had done all she could to make my life miserable at the Little Palace. She’d sneered at me, gossiped about me, and even broken two of my ribs. But she was also the girl who had caught Mal’s interest so long ago in Kribirsk. I wasn’t sure what had happened between them, but I doubted it was just lively conversation.

“I speak for the Etherealki,” said Zoya. “And we will follow the Sun Summoner.”

I struggled not to show my surprise. She was the last person I’d expected to support me. What game might she be playing?

“Not all of us,” Marie piped up weakly. I knew I shouldn’t be surprised, but it still hurt.

Zoya gave a disdainful laugh. “Yes, we know you support Sergei in all his endeavors, Marie. But this isn’t a late-night tryst by the *banya*. We’re talking about the future of the Grisha and all of Ravka.”

Snickers greeted Zoya’s pronouncement, and Marie turned bright red.

“That’s enough, Zoya,” snapped Sergei.

An Etherealnik I didn't recognize stepped forward. He had dark skin and a faint scar high on his left cheek. He wore the embroidery of an Inferni.

"Marie is right," he said. "You don't speak for all of us, Zoya. I'd prefer to see an Etherealnik at the head of the Second Army, but it shouldn't be her." He pointed an accusatory finger at me. "She wasn't even raised here."

"That's right!" called out a Corporalnik. "She's been a Grisha less than a year!"

"Grisha are born, not made," growled Tolya.

Of course, I thought with an internal sigh. *He would choose now to come out of his shell.*

"And who are you?" asked Sergei, his natural arrogance showing through.

Tolya's hand went to his curved sword. "I am Tolya Yul-Baatar. I was raised far from this corpse of a palace, and I'd be happy to prove that I can stop your heart."

"You're Grisha?" Sergei asked incredulously.

"As much as you are," replied Tamar, her gold eyes flashing.

"And what about you?" Sergei asked Mal.

"I'm just a soldier," Mal replied, moving to stand beside me. "Her soldier."

"As are we all," added Fedyor. "We returned to Os Alta to serve the Sun Summoner, not some posturing boy."

Another Corporalnik got to his feet. "You're just one more coward who fled when the Darkling fell. You have no right to come here and insult us."

"And what about her?" cried another Squaller. "How do we know she isn't working with the Darkling? She helped him destroy Novokribirsk."

"And she shared his bed!" shouted another.

Never deign to deny, said Nikolai's voice in my head.

"Just what is your relationship with Nikolai Lantsov?" demanded a Fabrikator.

"What was your relationship with the Darkling?" came a shrill voice.

"Does it matter?" I asked coolly, but I could feel my control slipping.

"Of course it does," said Sergei. "How can we be sure of your loyalty?"

"You have no right to question her!" shouted one of the Summoners.

"Why?" retorted a Healer. "Because she's a living Saint?"

"Put her in a chapel where she belongs!" someone yelled. "Get her and her

rabble out of the Little Palace."

Tolya reached for his sword. Tamar and Sergei both raised their hands. I saw Marie draw her flint and felt the swirl of Summoner winds lift the edges of my *kefta.* I thought I'd been ready to face them, but I wasn't prepared for the flood of rage that coursed through me. The wound in my shoulder throbbed, and something inside me broke free.

I looked at Sergei's sneering face, and my power rose up with clear and vicious purpose. I raised my arm. If they needed a lesson, I would give it to them. They could argue over the pieces of Sergei's body. My hand arced through the air, slicing toward him. The light was a blade honed sharp by my fury.

At the last second, some sliver of sanity pierced the buzzing haze of my anger. *No,* I thought in terror as I realized what I was about to do. My panicked mind reeled. I swerved and threw the Cut high.

A resounding *crack* shook the room. The Grisha screamed and backed away, crowding against the walls.

Daylight poured in through a jagged fissure above us. I'd split the golden dome open like a giant egg.

A deep silence followed as every Grisha turned to me in terrified disbelief. I swallowed, astonished by what I'd done, horrified by what I'd almost done. I thought of Nikolai's advice and hardened my heart. They mustn't see my fear.

"You think the Darkling is powerful?" I asked, startled by the icy clarity of my voice. "You have no idea what he is capable of. Only I have seen what he can do. Only I have faced him and lived to tell about it."

I sounded like a stranger to my own ears, but I felt the echo of my power vibrating through me, and I pushed on. I turned slowly, meeting each stunned gaze.

"I don't care if you think I'm a Saint or a fool or the Darkling's whore. If you want to remain at the Little Palace, you will follow me. And if you don't like it, you will be gone by tonight, or I will have you in chains. I am a soldier. I am the Sun Summoner. And I'm the only chance you have."

I strode across the room and threw open the doors to the Darkling's chambers, giving silent thanks that they weren't locked.

I walked blindly down the hall, unsure of where I was going, but eager to get far from the domed hall before anyone saw that I was shaking.

By luck, I found my way to the war room. Mal entered behind me, and before he shut the door, I saw Tolya and Tamar taking up their posts. Fedyor and the others must have remained behind. Hopefully, they'd make their own peace with the rest of the Grisha. Or maybe they'd all just kill each other.

I paced back and forth in front of the ancient map of Ravka that ran the length of the far wall.

Mal cleared his throat. "I thought that went well."

A hysterical hiccup of laughter escaped my lips.

"Unless you intended to bring the whole ceiling down on our heads," he said. "Then I guess it was just a partial success."

I nibbled my thumb and continued pacing. "I had to get their attention."

"So you meant to do that?"

I almost killed someone. I wanted to kill someone. It was the dome or Sergei, and Sergei would have been a lot tougher to patch up.

"Not exactly," I admitted.

Suddenly, all the energy went out of me. I collapsed into a chair by the long table and rested my head in my hands. "They're all going to leave," I moaned.

"Maybe," Mal said, "but I doubt it."

I buried my face in my arms. "Who am I kidding? I can't do this. This is like some kind of bad joke."

"I didn't hear anyone laughing," Mal said. "For someone who has no idea what she's doing, I'd say you're managing pretty well."

I peered up at him. He was leaning against the table, arms crossed, the ghost of a smile playing over his lips.

"Mal, I put a *hole in the ceiling*."

"A very dramatic hole."

I let out a huff somewhere between a laugh and a sob. "What are we going to do when it rains?"

"What we always do," he said. "Keep dry."

A knock came at the door, and Tamar poked her head in. "One of the servants wants to know if you'll be sleeping in the Darkling's chambers."

I knew I would have to. I just wasn't looking forward to it. I rubbed my hands over my face and heaved myself out of the chair. Less than an hour at the Little Palace, and I was already exhausted. "Let's go take a look."

The Darkling's quarters were just down the hall from the war room. A charcoal-clad servant led us into a large and rather formal common room furnished with a long table and a few uncomfortable-looking chairs. Each wall was set with a pair of double doors.

"These lead to a passage that will take you out of the Little Palace, *moi sovereny*i," the servant said, gesturing to the right. She pointed to the doors on the left and said, "Those lead to the guards' quarters."

The doors directly across from us needed no explanation. They stretched from floor to ceiling, and their ebony wood was carved with the Darkling's symbol, the sun in eclipse.

I didn't feel quite ready to face that, so I ambled over to the guards' quarters and peeked inside. Their common room was considerably cozier. It had a round table for playing cards, and several overstuffed chairs were set around a small tile oven for keeping warm in the winter. Through another door, I glimpsed rows of bunk beds.

"I guess the Darkling had more guards," said Tamar.

"Lots more," I replied.

"We could bring on some others."

"I thought about it," said Mal. "But I don't know that it's necessary, and I'm not sure who we can trust."

I had to agree. I'd put a certain amount of faith in Tolya and Tamar, but the only person I really felt sure of was Mal.

"Maybe we should consider drawing from the pilgrims," suggested Tamar. "Some of them are former military. There must be a few good fighters among them, and they'd certainly lay down their lives for you."

"Not a chance," I replied. "The King would hear one whispered 'Sankta Alina' and have my neck in a noose. Besides, I'm not sure I want to put my life in the hands of someone who thinks I can rise from the dead."

"We'll make do," said Mal.

I nodded. "All right. And … can someone see about having the roof fixed?"

Matching grins broke out on Tolya's and Tamar's faces. "Can't we leave it that way for just a few days?"

"No," I laughed. "I don't want the whole thing caving in on us. Talk to the Fabrikators. They should know what to do." I ran my thumb over the raised

ridge of flesh that ran the length of my palm. “But don’t let them make it too perfect,” I added. Scars made good reminders.

I returned to the main common room and addressed the servant hovering in the doorway. “We’ll eat here tonight,” I said. “Will you see about trays?”

The servant raised her brows, then bowed and scurried off. I winced. I was supposed to issue commands, not ask questions.

I left Mal and the twins discussing a schedule for the watch, and crossed to the ebony doors. The handles were two thin slivers of crescent moon made of what looked like bone. When I took hold of them and pulled, there was no creak or scrape of hinges. The doors slid open without a sound.

A servant had lit the lamps in the Darkling’s chamber. I surveyed the room and let out a long breath. What had I been expecting? A dungeon? A pit? That the Darkling slept suspended from the branches of a tree?

The chamber was hexagonal, its dark wood walls carved into the illusion of a forest crowded with slender trees. Above the huge canopied bed, the domed ceiling was wrought in smooth black obsidian and spangled with chips of mother-of-pearl laid out in constellations. It was an unusual room and certainly luxurious, but it was still just a bedroom.

The shelves were empty of books. The desk and dressing table were bare. All his possessions must have been taken away, probably burned or smashed to bits. I supposed I should have been glad the King hadn’t torn the entire Little Palace down.

I walked to the side of the bed and smoothed my hand over the cool fabric of the pillow. It was good to know that some part of him was still human, that he laid his head down to rest at night like everyone else. But could I really sleep in his bed, beneath his roof?

With a start, I realized that the room smelled like him. I had never even noticed that he had a scent. I shut my eyes and breathed deeply. What was it? The crisp edge of a winter wind. Bare branches. The smell of absence, the smell of night.

The wound at my shoulder prickled, and I opened my eyes. The doors to the chamber were shut. I hadn’t heard them close.

“Alina.”

I whirled. The Darkling was standing on the other side of the bed.

I clapped my hands over my mouth to stop my scream.

This isn't real, I told myself. *It's just another hallucination. Just like on the Fold.*

"My Alina," he said softly. His face was beautiful, unscarred. Perfect.

I will not scream, because this isn't real, and when they come running, there will be nothing to see.

He walked slowly around the bed. His footsteps made no sound.

I closed my eyes, pressed my palms against them, counted to three. But when I opened them again, he was standing right before me. *I will not scream.*

I took a step backward, felt the press of the wall behind me. A choked sound squeaked free of my throat.

I will not scream.

He reached out. *He can't touch me,* I told myself. *His hand will just pass through me like a ghost. It's not real.*

"You cannot run from me," he whispered.

His fingers brushed my cheek. Solid. Real. I *felt* them.

Terror shot through me. I threw up my hands, and light blazed over the room in a brilliant wave that shimmered with heat. The Darkling vanished.

Footsteps clattered in the room outside. The doors were thrown open. Mal and the twins charged in, weapons in hand.

"What happened?" Tamar asked, scanning the empty room.

"Nothing," I said, forcing the word past my lips, hoping my voice sounded normal. I buried my hands in the folds of my *kefta* to hide their trembling. "Why?"

"We saw the light and—"

"Just a bit gloomy in here," I said. "All the black."

They stared at me for a long moment. Then Tamar looked around. "It is pretty grim. You may want to think about redecorating."

"Definitely on my list."

The twins took another glance around the room and then headed out the door, Tolya already grumbling to his sister about dinner. Mal stood in the doorway, waiting.

"You're shaking," he said.

I knew he wouldn't ask me to explain this time. He shouldn't have had to. I

should have offered him the truth without having to be asked. But what could I say? That I was seeing things? That I was mad? That we would never be safe, no matter how far we ran? That I was as broken as the Golden Dome, but something far worse than daylight had crept inside of me?

I stayed silent.

Mal gave a single shake of his head, then simply walked away.

I stood alone in the center of the Darkling's empty rooms.

Call to him, I thought desperately. *Tell him something. Tell him everything.*

Mal was just a few feet away, on the other side of that wall. I could say his name, bring him back, and tell it all—what had happened on the Fold, what I'd almost done to Sergei, what I'd seen just moments before. I opened my mouth, but the same words came to me again and again.

I will not scream. I will not scream. I will not scream.

CHAPTER 14

I WOKE THE NEXT DAY to the sound of angry voices. For a moment, I had no idea where I was. The darkness was near perfect, broken only by a thin crack of light from beneath the door.

Then reality returned. I sat up and fumbled for the lamp on the bedside wall. I turned up the flame and surveyed the dark silk bed hangings, the slate floor, the carved ebony walls. I really was going to have to make some changes. This room was just too depressing to wake up in. It was strange to think that I was actually in the Darkling's chambers, that I'd spent the night in his bed. That I'd seen him standing in this very room.

Enough of that. I threw off the covers and swung my legs over the side of the bed. I didn't know whether the visions were a product of my imagination or some real attempt by the Darkling to manipulate me, but there had to be a rational explanation for them. Maybe the *nichevo'ya* bite had infected me with something. If that was the case, then I'd just have to find a way to cure it. Or maybe the effects would wear off with time.

The argument outside my door grew louder. I thought I recognized Sergei's voice and Tolya's angry rumble. I threw on the embroidered dressing gown that had been left for me at the foot of the bed, checked to make sure the fetter on my wrist was hidden, and hurried out to the common room.

I almost ran right into the twins. Tolya and Tamar were standing shoulder to shoulder, blocking a group of angry Grisha from entering my chamber. Tolya's arms were crossed, and Tamar was shaking her head as Sergei and Fedyor loudly made their case. I was distressed to see Zoya beside them, accompanied by the

dark-skinned Inferni who had challenged me the previous day. Everyone seemed to be talking at once.

"What's going on?" I asked.

As soon as Sergei saw me, he strode forward, clutching a piece of paper in his hand. Tamar moved to block him, but I waved her off.

"It's all right," I said. "What's the problem?" But I thought I already knew. I recognized my own writing and the remnants of the gold sunburst seal that Nikolai had provided for me on the paper Sergei was now shaking in my face.

"This is unacceptable," Sergei huffed.

I'd sent out word the previous night that I would be convening a war council. Each Grisha Order was to elect two representatives to attend. I was pleased to see they'd chosen Fedyor as well as Sergei, though some of my good will wore off when the older Grisha chimed in.

"He's right," said Fedyor. "The Corporalki are the Grisha's first line of defense. We're the most experienced in military affairs and should be more fairly represented."

"We're just as valuable to the war effort," declared Zoya, her color high. Even in a snit, she looked gorgeous. I'd suspected she would be chosen to represent the Etherealki, but I certainly wasn't happy about it. "If there are going to be three Corporalki on the council," she said, "then there should be three Summoners, too."

Everyone started shouting again. I noted that the Materialki hadn't shown up to complain. As the lowest Grisha Order, they were probably just glad to be included, or possibly they were too caught up in their work to be bothered.

I still wasn't quite awake. I wanted my breakfast, not an argument. But I knew this had to be addressed. I intended to do things differently—and they might as well know just how differently or this effort would fall apart before it even began.

I held up my hand and they quieted instantly. Clearly, I had that trick down. Maybe they were afraid I was going to ruin another ceiling. "There will be two Grisha from each Order," I said. "No more, no less."

"But—" began Sergei.

"The Darkling has changed. If we have any hope of beating him, we need to change, too. Two Grisha from each Order," I repeated. "And the Orders will no

longer sit separately. You'll sit together, eat together, and fight together."

At least I'd gotten them to shut up. They just stood there, gaping.

"And the Fabrikators start combat training this week," I finished.

I took in their horrified expressions. They looked like I'd told them we'd all be marching into battle naked. The Materialki weren't considered warriors, so no one had ever bothered to teach them to fight. It felt like a missed opportunity to me. *Use whatever or whoever is in front of you.*

"I can see you're all thrilled," I said with a small sigh.

Desperate for a glass of tea, I walked to the table where a breakfast tray had been laid with covered dishes. I lifted one of the lids: rye and herring. This morning was not getting off to a good start.

"But … but it's *always* been this way," sputtered Sergei.

"You can't just overturn hundreds of years of tradition," protested the Inferni.

"Are we really going to argue about this, too?" I asked irritably. "We're at war with an ancient power beyond reckoning, and you want to squabble over who sits next to you at lunch?"

"That's not the point," said Zoya. "There's an order to things, a way of doing them that—"

They all started gabbling again—about tradition, about the way things were done, about the need for structure and people knowing their places.

I set the cover back down on the dish with a loud *clang*.

"This is the way we're doing it," I said, rapidly losing patience. "No more Corporalki snobbery. No more Etherealki cliques. And no more herring."

Zoya opened her mouth but then thought better of it and shut it again.

"Now go," I barked. "I want to eat my breakfast in peace."

For a moment, they just stood there. Then Tamar and Tolya stepped forward, and to my continuing amazement, the Grisha did as they were told. Zoya looked peeved, and Sergei's face was stormy, but they all shuffled meekly out of the room.

Seconds after they left, Nikolai appeared in the doorway, and I realized he'd been eavesdropping in the hall.

"Nicely done," he said. "Today shall be forever remembered as the date of the Great Herring Decree." He stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

“Not the smoothest delivery, though.”

“I don’t have your gift for ‘amused and aloof,’” I said, sitting down at the table and tearing eagerly into a roll. “But ‘grouchy’ seems to be working for me.”

A servant rushed forward to bring me a cup of tea from the samovar. It was blissfully hot, and I loaded it with sugar. Nikolai took a chair and sat without being asked.

“You’re really not going to eat these?” he said, already piling herring onto his plate.

“Revolting,” I said succinctly.

Nikolai took a big bite. “You don’t survive at sea if you can’t stomach fish.”

“Don’t play the poor sailor with me. I ate on your ship, remember? Sturmhond’s chef was hardly serving up salt cod and hardtack.”

He gave a mournful sigh. “I wish I could have brought Burgos with me. The court kitchens seem to feel that a meal isn’t complete if it isn’t swimming in butter.”

“Only a prince would complain about too much butter.”

“Hmm,” he said thoughtfully, patting his flat stomach. “Maybe a royal gut would lend me more authority.”

I laughed and then nearly jumped as the door opened and Mal entered. He stopped when he saw Nikolai.

“I didn’t realize you’d be dining at the Little Palace, *moi tsarevich*.” He bowed stiffly to Nikolai and then to me.

“You don’t have to do that,” I said.

“Yes he does.”

“You heard Prince Perfect,” Mal said, and joined us at the table.

Nikolai grinned. “I’ve had a lot of nicknames, but that one is easily the most accurate.”

“I didn’t know you were awake,” I said to Mal.

“I’ve been up for hours, roaming around, looking for something to do.”

“Excellent,” said Nikolai. “I’ve come to issue an invitation.”

“Is it to a ball?” asked Mal, snagging the remaining bit of roll from my plate. “I do so hope it’s to a ball.”

“While I’m sure you dance a magnificent waltz, no. Boar have been spotted

in the woods near Balakirev. There's a hunt leaving tomorrow, and I'd like you to go."

"Short on friends, your highness?"

"And long on enemies," replied Nikolai. "But I won't be there. My parents aren't quite ready to let me out of their sight. I've spoken to one of the generals, and he's agreed to have you as his guest."

Mal leaned back and crossed his arms. "I see. So I go gallivanting off to the woods for a few days, and you stay here," he said with a meaningful glance at me.

I shifted in my chair. I didn't like the implication, but I did have to admit it seemed like an obvious ploy. Too obvious for Nikolai, really.

"You know, for two people with a love eternal, you're awfully insecure," Nikolai said. "Some of the highest-ranking members of the First Army will be in the hunting party, and so will my brother. He's an avid hunter, and I've seen for myself that you're the best tracker in Ravka."

"I thought I was supposed to be guarding Alina," Mal said. "Not running around with a bunch of pampered royals."

"Tolya and Tamar can manage while you're away. And this is a chance for you to make yourself useful."

Great, I thought as I watched Mal's eyes narrow. *Just perfect.*

"And what are you doing to be *useful*, your highness?"

"I'm a prince," said Nikolai. "Being useful isn't part of the job description. But," he added, "when I'm not lazing about being handsome, I'll be trying to better equip the First Army and gather intelligence on the Darkling's location. Word has it he's entered the Sikurzoi."

Mal and I both perked up at that. The Sikurzoi were the mountains that ran along much of the border between Ravka and the Shu Han.

"You think he's in the south?" I asked.

Nikolai popped another piece of herring into his mouth. "It's possible," he said. "I would have thought he'd be more likely to ally with the Fjerdans. The northern border is far more vulnerable. But the Sikurzoi are a good place to hide. If the reports are true, we need to move to forge an alliance with the Shu as fast as possible so that we can march on him from two fronts."

"You want to take the war to him?" I said, surprised.

“Better than waiting for him to be strong enough to bring it to us.”

“I like it,” Mal said with grudging admiration. “It’s not something the Darkling would expect.”

I was reminded that, while Mal and Nikolai had their differences, Mal and Sturmhond had been on the way to becoming friends.

Nikolai took a sip of tea and said, “There’s also disturbing news coming out of the First Army. It seems a number of soldiers have found religion and deserted.”

I frowned. “You don’t mean—”

Nikolai nodded. “They’re taking refuge in the monasteries, joining the Apparat’s cult of the Sun Saint. The priest is claiming you’ve been taken prisoner by the corrupt monarchy.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I said.

“Actually, it’s completely plausible, and it makes for a very satisfying story. Needless to say, my father is not pleased. He flew into quite a rage last night, and he’s doubled the price on the Apparat’s head.”

I groaned. “This is bad.”

“It is,” Nikolai admitted. “You can see why it might be wise for the captain of your personal guard to start forging alliances within the Grand Palace.” He turned his keen gaze on Mal. “And that, Oretsev, is how you can be of use. As I recall, you rather charmed my crew, so perhaps you could pick up your bow and play the diplomat instead of the jealous lover.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Good boy,” said Nikolai.

Oh, for Saints’ sake. He just couldn’t leave well enough alone, could he?

“Watch yourself, Nikolai,” Mal said softly. “Princes bleed just like other men.”

Nikolai plucked an invisible piece of dust from his sleeve. “Yes,” he said. “They just do it in better clothes.”

“Mal—”

Mal stood, his chair scraping the floor. “I need some air.”

He strode out the door, all pretense of bowing and titles forgotten.

I threw down my napkin. “Why do you do that?” I asked Nikolai angrily. “Why do you provoke him that way?”

“Did I?” Nikolai said, reaching for another roll. I thought about sticking a fork through his hand.

“Don’t keep pushing him, Nikolai. Lose Mal, and you’ll lose me, too.”

“He needs to learn what the rules are here. If he can’t, then he becomes a liability. The stakes are too high for half measures.”

I shivered and rubbed my hands over my arms. “I hate it when you talk like that. You sound just like the Darkling.”

“If you ever have trouble telling us apart, look for the person who isn’t torturing you or trying to kill Mal. That will be me.”

“Are you so sure you wouldn’t?” I shot back. “If it got you closer to what you want, to the throne and your big chance to save Ravka, are you sure you wouldn’t walk me up the gallows steps yourself?”

I expected another of Nikolai’s flip replies, but he looked like I’d punched him in the gut. He started to speak, stopped, then shook his head.

“Saints,” he said, his tone somewhere between bewilderment and disgust. “I really don’t know.”

I slumped back in my chair. His admission should have made me furious, but instead I felt the anger drain out of me. Maybe it was his honesty. Or maybe it was because I’d begun to worry what I might be capable of myself.

We sat there in silence for a long minute. He rubbed his hand over the back of his neck and slowly got to his feet. At the doorway, he paused.

“I’m ambitious, Alina. I’m driven. But I hope … I hope I still know the difference between right and wrong.” He hesitated. “I offered you freedom, and I meant it. If tomorrow you decided to run back to Novyi Zem with Mal, I’d put you on a ship and let the sea take you.” He held my gaze, his hazel eyes steady. “But I’d be sorry to see you go.”

He vanished into the hall, his footsteps echoing over the stone floors.

I sat there for a while, picking at my breakfast, mulling over Nikolai’s parting words. Then I gave myself a little shake. I didn’t have time to dissect his motives. In just a few hours, the war council would meet to talk strategy and how best to raise a defense against the Darkling. I had plenty to do to prepare, but first I had a visit to pay.

* * *

AS I FASTENED the sun-shaped buttons of my gold and blue *kefta*, I gave a rueful shake of my head. Baghra would waste no time mocking my new pretensions. I combed my hair, then slipped out of the Little Palace through the Darkling's entrance and crossed the grounds to the lake.

The servant I'd spoken to said that Baghra had taken ill shortly after the winter fete and that, since then, she'd stopped accepting students. Of course, I knew the truth. The night of the party, Baghra had revealed the Darkling's plans and helped me flee the Little Palace. Then she'd sought to buy me time by concealing my absence. The thought of his rage when he'd discovered her deception sat like a stone in my stomach.

When I'd tried to press the jittery maid for details, she'd bobbed a clumsy curtsy and gone scurrying from the room. Still, Baghra was alive, and she was here. The Darkling could destroy an entire town, but it seemed even he drew the line at murdering his own mother.

The path to Baghra's hut was overgrown with brambles, the summer wood tangled and pungent with the smell of leaves and damp earth. I hastened my steps, surprised at how eager I was to see her. She'd been a hard teacher and an unpleasant woman on her best days, but she'd tried to help me when no one else had, and I knew she was my best chance of solving the riddle of Morozova's third amplifier.

I climbed the three steps at the front of the hut and knocked. No one answered. I knocked again and then pushed the door open, wincing at the familiar blast of heat. Baghra always seemed to be cold, and entering her hut was like being stuffed into a cookstove.

The dark little room was just as I remembered it: sparsely furnished with only the barest necessities, a fire roaring in the tile oven, and Baghra huddled by it in her faded *kefta*. I was surprised to see that she wasn't alone. A servant sat beside her, a young boy dressed in gray. He got to his feet as I entered, peering at me through the gloom.

"No visitors," he said.

"By whose command?"

At the sound of my voice, Baghra looked up sharply.

She smacked her stick on the ground. "Leave, boy," she commanded.

"But—"

“Go!” she snarled.

Just as pleasant as ever, I thought warily.

The boy scurried across the room and out of the hut without another word.

The door had barely shut when Baghra said, “I wondered when you’d make your way back here, little Saint.”

Trust Baghra to call me the one name I didn’t want to hear.

I was already sweating and had no desire to step closer to the fire, but I did it anyway, and crossed the room to sit in the chair the servant had vacated.

She turned toward the flames as I approached, showing me her back. She was in rare form today. I ignored the insult.

I sat silent for a moment, unsure of where to begin. “I was told you’d taken ill after I left.”

“Hmph.”

I didn’t want to know, but I made myself ask. “What did he do to you?”

She gave a dry laugh. “Less than he might have. More than he should.”

“Baghra—”

“You were meant to go to Novyi Zem. You were meant to disappear.”

“I tried.”

“No, you went hunting,” she sneered with a smack of her stick on the ground. “And what did you find? A pretty necklace to wear for the rest of your life? Come closer,” she said. “I want to know what I bought for my trouble.”

Obligingly, I leaned in. When she turned to me, I gasped.

Baghra had aged a lifetime since I’d seen her last. Her black hair was sparse and graying. Her sharp features had blurred. The taut slash of her mouth looked sunken and soft.

But that was not why I recoiled. Baghra’s eyes were gone. Where they should have been were two black pits, shadows writhing in their fathomless depths.

“Baghra,” I choked out. I reached for her hand, but she flinched away from my touch.

“Spare me your pity, girl.”

“What … what did he do to you?” My voice was little more than a whisper.

She gave another harsh laugh. “He left me in the dark.”

Her voice was strong, but sitting by the fire, I realized it was the only part of

her that had remained unchanged. She'd been lean and hard, with the knife-sharp posture of an acrobat. Now, there was a slight tremor in her ancient hands, and her formerly wiry body just looked gaunt and frail.

"Show me," she said, reaching out. I held still and let her run her hands over my face. The gnarled fingers moved like two white spiders, passing over my tears without interest, crawling down my jaw to the base of my throat, where they came to rest on the collar.

"Ah," she breathed, her fingertips tracing the rough pieces of antler at my neck, her voice soft, almost wistful. "I would have liked to see his stag."

I wanted to turn my head, to look away from the teeming black pools of her eyes. Instead, I pushed up my sleeve and grasped one of her hands. She tried to pull away, but I tightened my grip and laid her fingers over the fetter at my wrist. She went still.

"No," she said. "It cannot be."

She felt along the ridges of the sea whip's scales.

"*Rusalye*," she whispered. "What have you done, girl?"

Her words gave me hope. "You know about the other amplifiers."

I winced as her fingers dug into my wrist. "Is it true?" she asked abruptly. "What they say he can do, that he can give life to shadow?"

"Yes," I admitted.

Her hunched shoulders sagged even further. Then she cast my arm away as if it were something filthy. "Get out."

"Baghra, I need your help."

"I said, *get out*."

"Please. I need to know where to find the firebird."

Her sunken mouth trembled slightly. "I betrayed my son once, little Saint. What makes you think I would do it again?"

"You wanted to stop him," I said hesitantly. "You—"

Baghra pounded the floor with her stick. "I wanted to keep him from becoming a monster! But it's too late for that, isn't it? Thanks to you, he is farther from human than he's ever been. He's long past any redemption."

"Maybe," I admitted. "But Ravka isn't beyond saving."

"What do I care what happens to this wretched country? Is the world so very fine that you think it worth saving?"

“Yes,” I said. “And I know you do too.”

“You couldn’t make a meat pie from what you know, girl.”

“Fine!” I said, my desperation overwhelming my guilt. “I’m an idiot. I’m a fool. I’m hopeless. That’s why I need your help.”

“You cannot be helped. Your only hope was to run.”

“Tell me what you know about Morozova,” I begged. “Help me find the third amplifier.”

“I couldn’t begin to guess where to find the firebird, and I wouldn’t tell you if I could. All I want now is a warm room and to be left alone to die.”

“I could take away this room,” I said angrily. “Your fire, your obedient servant. You might feel more like talking then.”

The second the words were out of my mouth, I wanted to take them back. A sick wave of shame washed over me. Had I really just threatened a blind old woman?

Baghra laughed that rattling, vicious chuckle. “You’re taking to power well, I see. As it grows, it will hunger for more. Like calls to like, girl.”

Her words sent a spike of fear through me.

“I didn’t mean it,” I said weakly.

“You cannot violate the rules of this world without a price. Those amplifiers were never meant to be. No Grisha should have such power. Already you are changing. Seek the third, use it, and you will lose yourself completely, piece by piece. You want my help? You want to know what to do? Forget the firebird. Forget Morozova and his madness.”

I shook my head. “I can’t do that. I won’t.”

She turned back to the fire. “Then do what you like, girl. I’m done with this life, and I’m done with you.”

What had I expected? That she would greet me as a daughter? Welcome me as a friend? She’d lost her son’s love and sacrificed her sight, and in the end, I’d failed her. I wanted to dig in my heels and demand her help. I wanted to threaten her, cajole her, fall to my knees and beg forgiveness for everything she’d lost and every mistake I’d made. Instead, I did what she’d wanted me to do all along. I turned and ran.

I nearly lost my footing on the stairs as I stumbled from the hut, but the servant boy was waiting at the bottom of the steps. He reached out to steady me

before I could fall.

I took grateful gulps of fresh air, feeling the sweat cool on my skin.

“Is it true?” he asked. “Are you really the Sun Summoner?”

I glanced at his hopeful face and felt the ache of tears in my throat. I nodded and tried to smile.

“My mother says you’re a Saint.”

What other fairy tales does she believe? I thought bitterly.

Before I could embarrass myself by breaking down in tears on his scrawny shoulder, I pushed past him and hurried down the narrow path.

When I reached the lakeshore, I made my way to one of the white stone Summoners’ pavilions. They weren’t really buildings, just domed shells where young Summoners could practice using their gifts without fear of blowing the roof off the school or setting fire to the Little Palace. I sat down in the shade of the pavilion’s steps and buried my head in my hands, willing my tears away, trying to catch my breath. I’d been so sure that Baghra would know something about the firebird and so positive that she’d be willing to help. I hadn’t realized just how much hope I’d invested in her until it was gone.

I smoothed the glittering folds of my *kefta* over my lap and had to choke back a sob. I’d thought Baghra would laugh at me, mock the little Saint all dressed up in her finery. Why had I ever believed the Darkling might show his mother mercy?

And why had I acted that way? How could I have threatened to take away her few comforts? The ugliness of it made me feel ill. I could blame my desperation, but it didn’t ease my shame. Or change the reality that some part of me wanted to march back to her hut and make good on those threats, haul her out into the sunlight and wrest answers from her sour, sunken mouth. What was wrong with me?

I took my copy of the *Istorii Sankt’ya* out of my pocket and ran my hands over the worn red leather cover. I’d looked at it so many times that it fell right open to the illustration of Sankt Ilya, though now the pages were waterlogged from the crash of the *Hummingbird.*

A Grisha Saint? Or another greedy fool who couldn’t resist the temptation of power? A greedy fool like me. *Forget Morozova and his madness.* I ran my finger along the curve of the arch. It might be meaningless. It might be some

reference to Ilya's past that had nothing to do with amplifiers, or just an artist's flourish. Even if we were right and it was some kind of signpost, it could be anywhere. Nikolai had traveled most of Ravka, and he'd never seen it. For all we knew, it had fallen into rubble hundreds of years ago.

A bell rang at the school across the lake, and a gaggle of Grisha children rushed from its doors, shouting, laughing, eager to be out in the summer sunshine. The school had continued to run, despite the disasters of the last months. But if the Darkling was coming, I'd have to evacuate it. I didn't want children in the path of the *nichevo'ya*.

The ox feels the yoke, but does the bird feel the weight of its wings?

Had Baghra ever really spoken those words to me? Or had I only heard them in a dream?

I stood up and brushed the dust from my *kefta*. I wasn't sure what had shaken me more, Baghra's refusal to help or how broken she seemed. She wasn't just an old woman. She was a woman without hope, and I'd helped to take it from her.

CHAPTER

15

DESPITE ITS NAME, I loved the war room. The cartographer in me couldn't resist the old maps wrought in animal hide and embellished in whimsical detail: the gilded lighthouse at Os Kervo, the mountain temples of the Shu, the mermaids that swam at the edges of the seas.

I looked around the table at the faces of the Grisha, some familiar, some new. Any one of them could be a spy for the Darkling, the King, the Apparat. Any one of them could be looking for the chance to get me out of the way and assume power.

Tolya and Tamar stood outside, just a shout away in case of trouble, but it was Mal's presence that gave me comfort. He sat at my right in his roughspun clothes, the sunburst pinned above his heart. I hated to think of him leaving so soon for the hunt, but I had to admit a distraction might be a good thing. Mal had taken pride in being a soldier and, though he tried to hide it, I knew the King's ruling weighed heavily on him. That he'd guessed I was keeping something from him didn't help either.

Sergei sat to Mal's right, his arms crossed sullenly over his chest. He wasn't happy to be sitting next to an *otkazat'sya* guard, and he was even less pleased that I'd insisted on seating a Fabrikator directly to my left, in what was considered a position of honor. She was a Suli girl named Paja whom I'd never met before. She had dark hair and nearly black eyes, and the red embroidery at the cuffs of her purple *kefta* indicated that she was one of the Alkemi, Fabrikators who specialized in chemicals like blasting powders and poisons.

David sat further down the table, his cuffs emblazoned in gray. He worked in

glass, steel, wood, stone—anything solid. David was a Durast, and I knew he was the best of them because the Darkling had chosen him to forge my collar. Then there was Fedyor, and Zoya beside him, gorgeous as always in Etherealki blue.

Across from Zoya sat Pavel, the dark-skinned Inferni who'd spoken so angrily against me the previous day. He had narrow features and a chipped tooth that whistled slightly when he talked.

The first part of the meeting was spent discussing the numbers of Grisha at the various outposts around Ravka and those who might be in hiding. Zoya suggested sending messengers to spread the news of my return and offer full and free pardon to those who swore their allegiance to the Sun Summoner. We spent close to an hour debating the terms and wording of the pardon. I knew I would have to take it to Nikolai for the King's approval, and I wanted to step carefully. Finally, we agreed on "loyalty to the Ravkan throne and the Second Army." No one seemed happy with it, so I was pretty sure we'd gotten it right.

It was Fedyor who raised the issue of the Apparat. "It's troubling that he's evaded capture this long."

"Has he tried to contact you?" Pavel asked me.

"No," I said. I saw the skepticism in his face.

"He's been spotted in Kerskii and Ryevost," said Fedyor. "He shows up out of nowhere to preach, then disappears before the King's soldiers can close in."

"We should think about an assassination," said Sergei. "He's growing too powerful, and he could still be colluding with the Darkling."

"We'd have to find him first," observed Paja.

Zoya gave a graceful wave of her hand. "What would be the point? He seems bent on spreading word of the Sun Summoner and claiming she's a Saint. It's about time the people had some appreciation for the Grisha."

"Not the Grisha," said Pavel, jutting his chin truculently in my direction. "Her."

Zoya lifted one elegant shoulder. "It's better than them reviling us all as witches and traitors."

"Let the King do the dirty work," said Fedyor. "Let him find the Apparat and execute him *and* let him suffer the people's wrath."

I couldn't believe we were calmly debating a man's murder. And I wasn't

sure I wanted the Apparat dead. The priest had plenty to answer for, but I wasn't convinced he was still working with the Darkling. Besides, he'd given me the *Istorii Sankt'ya*, and that meant he was a possible source of information. If he was captured, I could only hope the King would keep him alive long enough for questioning.

"Do you think he believes it?" asked Zoya, studying me. "That you're a Saint risen and back from the dead?"

"I'm not sure it makes a difference."

"It would help to know just how crazy he is."

"I'd rather fight a traitor than a zealot," Mal said quietly. It was the first time he'd spoken. "I may have some old contacts in the First Army who will still talk to me. There are rumors of soldiers defecting to join him, and if that's the case, they must know where he is."

I stole a glance at Zoya. She was gazing at Mal with those impossibly blue eyes. It seemed like she'd spent half the meeting batting her lashes at him. Or maybe I was imagining things. She was a powerful Squaller and, potentially, a powerful ally. But she'd also been one of the Darkling's favorites, and that certainly made her difficult to trust.

I almost laughed out loud. Who was I kidding? I hated even sitting in the same room with her. *She* looked like a Saint. Delicate bones, glossy black hair, perfect skin. All she needed was a halo. Mal paid her no attention, but a twisting feeling in my gut made me think he was ignoring her a little too deliberately. I knew I had more important things to worry about than Zoya. I had an army to run and enemies on every side, but I couldn't seem to stop myself.

I took a breath and tried to focus. The hardest part of the meeting was still to come. As much as I just wanted to curl up somewhere quiet and dark, there were things that needed to be addressed.

I looked around the table and said, "You need to know what we're up against."

The room fell silent. It was as if a bell had rung, as if everything that had come before was mere playacting, and now the real meeting had begun.

Piece by piece, I laid out what I knew about the *nichevo'ya*, their strength and size, their near invulnerability to bullet and blade, and most important, the fact that they did not fear sunlight.

“But you escaped,” Paja said tentatively, “so they must be mortal.”

“My power can destroy them. It’s the one thing they don’t seem able to recover from. But it isn’t easy. It requires the Cut, and I’m not sure how many I can handle at once.” I didn’t mention the second amplifier. Even with it, I knew I couldn’t withstand the onslaught of a fully formed shadow army, and the fetter was a secret I intended to keep, at least for now. “We only escaped because Prince Nikolai got us outside the Darkling’s range,” I continued. “They seem to need to be close to their master.”

“How close?” asked Pavel.

I looked to Mal.

“Hard to say,” he replied. “A mile. Maybe two.”

“So there’s *some* limit to his power,” Fedyor said, with no small amount of relief.

“Absolutely.” I was glad to be able to relate something that wasn’t completely dire. “He’ll have to enter Ravka with his army to get to us. That means we’ll have warning and that he’ll be vulnerable. He can’t summon them the way he summons darkness. The effort seems to cost him.”

“Because it’s not Grisha power,” David said. “It’s *merzost*.”

In Ravkan, the word for magic and abomination was the same. Basic Grisha theory stated that matter couldn’t just be created from nothing. But that was a tenet of the Small Science. *Merzost* was different, a corruption of the making at the heart of the world.

David fiddled with a loose thread at his sleeve. “That energy, that substance has to come from somewhere. It must be coming from him.”

“But how is he doing it?” asked Zoya. “Has there ever been a Grisha with this kind of power?”

“The real question is how to fight them,” said Fedyor.

Talk turned to defense of the Little Palace and the possible advantages of confronting the Darkling in the field. But I was watching David. When Zoya had asked about other Grisha, he’d looked directly at me for the first time since I’d arrived at the Little Palace. Well, not at *me* exactly, but at my collar. He’d gone right back to staring at the table, but if possible, he seemed even more uncomfortable than before. I wondered what he might know about Morozova. And I wanted an answer to Zoya’s question, too. I didn’t know if I had the

training or the nerve to attempt such a thing, but was there a way to summon soldiers of light to fight the Darkling's shadow army? Was that the power the three amplifiers might give me?

I meant to try to talk to David alone after the meeting, but as soon as we adjourned, he shot out the door. Any thoughts I had of cornering him in the Materialki workshops that afternoon were squelched by the piles of paper waiting for me in my chambers. I spent hours preparing the Grisha pardon and signing countless documents guaranteeing funds and provisions for the outposts the Second Army hoped to reestablish on Ravka's borders. Sergei had tried to manage some of the Darkling's duties, but much of the work had simply gone unattended.

Everything seemed to be written in the most confusing way possible. I had to read and reread what should have been simple requests. By the time I'd made a small dent in the pile, I was late for dinner—my first meal in the domed hall. I would have preferred to take a tray in my room, but it was important that I assert my presence at the Little Palace. I also wanted to make sure my commands were being followed, and that the Grisha were actually mixing the Orders.

I sat at the Darkling's table. In an effort to get to know some of the unfamiliar Grisha and to avoid giving them any excuse to form a new elite, I'd decided that different people would dine with me every night. It was a nice idea, but I had none of Mal's easy way or Nikolai's charm. The conversation was stilted and pockmarked with awkward moments of silence.

The other tables didn't seem to be faring much better. The Grisha sat side by side in a jumble of red, purple, and blue, barely speaking. The clink of silverware echoed off the cracked dome—the Fabrikators had not yet begun their repairs.

I didn't know whether to laugh or scream. It was as if I'd asked them to take supper next to a volcra. At least Sergei and Marie seemed content, even if Nadia looked like she wanted to disappear into the butter dish as they cuddled and cooed beside her. I was happy for them, I supposed. And maybe a little jealous, too.

I made a silent count—forty Grisha, maybe fifty, most of them barely out of school. *Some army*, I thought with a sigh. My glorious reign was off to a miserable start.

* * *

MAL HAD AGREED to join the hunting party, and I rose early the next morning to see him off. I was beginning to realize that we would have less privacy at the Little Palace than we'd had on the road. Between Tolya and Tamar and the constantly hovering servants, I'd started to think we might never get a moment alone.

I had lain awake the previous night in the Darkling's bed, remembering the way Mal had kissed me at the dacha, wondering if I might hear his knock at my door. I'd even debated crossing the common room and tapping at the guards' quarters, but I wasn't sure who was on duty, and the thought of Tolya or Tamar answering made me prickly with embarrassment. In the end, the fatigue of the day must have made the decision for me, because the next thing I knew, it was morning.

By the time I reached the double eagle fountain, the path to the palace gates was swarming with people and horses: Vasily and his aristocrat friends in their elaborate riding regalia, First Army officers in their sharp uniforms, and behind them, a legion of servants in white and gold.

I found Mal checking his saddle near a group of royal trackers. He was easy to pick out in his peasant roughspun. He had a gleaming new bow on his back and a quiver of arrows fletched in the pale blue and gold of the Ravkan king. The formal Ravkan hunt forbade the use of firearms, but I noticed that several of the servants had rifles on their backs, just in case the animals proved to be too much for their noble masters.

"Quite a show," I said, coming up beside him. "Just how many people does it take to bring down a few boar?"

Mal snorted. "This is nothing. Another group of servants left before dawn to set up the camp. Saints forbid a prince of Ravka should be kept waiting on a hot cup of tea."

A horn blew and the riders began to fall into place in a clatter of hooves and clanking stirrups. Mal shook his head and gave a firm tug on the cinch. "Those boar had better be deaf," he grumbled.

I glanced around at the glittering uniforms and high-polished boots. "Maybe I should have outfitted you in something a little more … shiny."

"There's a reason peacocks aren't birds of prey," he said with a grin. It was

an easy, open smile, the first I'd seen in a long time.

He's happy to be going, I realized. *He's grumbling about it, but he's glad.* I tried not to take it personally.

"And you're like a big brown hawk?" I asked.

"Exactly."

"Or an overlarge pigeon?"

"Let's stick with hawk."

The others were mounting up, turning their horses to join the rest of the party as they headed down the gravel path.

"Let's go, Oretsev," called a tracker with sandy hair.

I felt suddenly awkward, keenly aware of the people surrounding us, of their inquisitive stares. I had probably breached some kind of protocol by even coming to say goodbye.

"Well," I said, patting his horse's flank, "have fun. Try not to shoot anyone."

"Got it. Wait, *don't* shoot anyone?"

I smiled, but it felt a bit forced.

We stood there a moment longer, the silence stretching out between us. I wanted to fling my arms around him, bury my face in his neck, and make him promise to be safe. But I didn't.

A rueful smile touched his lips. He bowed.

"*Moi soverenyi,*" he said. My heart twisted in my chest.

He climbed into the saddle and kicked his horse forward, disappearing in the sea of riders flowing toward the golden gates.

I made the walk back to the Little Palace in low spirits.

It was early, but the day was already growing warm. Tamar was waiting for me when I emerged from the wooded tunnel.

"He'll be back soon enough," she said. "No need to look so glum."

"I know," I replied, feeling foolish. I managed a laugh as we crossed the lawn down to the stables. "At Keramzin, I had a doll I made out of an old sock that I used to talk to whenever he was away hunting. Maybe that would make me feel better."

"You were an odd little girl."

"You have no idea. What did you and Tolya play with?"

"The skulls of our enemies."

I saw the glint in her eye, and we both burst out laughing.

Down at the training rooms, Tamar and I met briefly with Botkin, the instructor tasked with preparing Grisha for physical combat. The old mercenary was instantly enchanted with Tamar, and they yammered away at each other in Shu for nearly ten minutes before I managed to raise the issue of training the Fabrikators.

“Botkin can teach anyone to fight,” he said in his thick accent. The dim light gave the ropy scar at his throat a pearly sheen. “Taught little girl to fight, no?”

“Yes,” I agreed, wincing at the memory of Botkin’s grueling drills and the beatings I’d taken at his hands.

“But little girl is not so little anymore,” he said taking in the gold of my *kefta.* “You come back to train with Botkin. I hit big girl same as little girl.”

“That’s very egalitarian of you,” I said, and hurried Tamar out of the stables before Botkin decided to show me just how fair-minded he could be.

I went straight from the stables to another war council meeting, then I just had time to tidy my hair and brush off my *kefta* before heading back to the Grand Palace to join Nikolai as the King’s advisers briefed him on Os Alta’s defenses.

I felt a bit like we were children who had intruded on the adults. The advisers made it clear that they felt we were wasting their time. But Nikolai seemed unfazed. He asked careful questions about armaments, the number of troops stationed around the city walls, the warning system that was in place in case of attack. Soon the advisers had lost their condescending air and were conversing with him in earnest, asking about the weaponry he’d brought with him from across the Fold and how it might be best deployed.

He had me give a short description of the *nichevo’ya* to help make the case for arming the Grisha with new weapons as well. The advisers were still deeply suspicious of the Second Army, but on the walk back to the Little Palace, Nikolai seemed unconcerned.

“They’ll come around in time,” he said. “That’s why you need to be there, to reassure them and to help them understand that the Darkling isn’t like other enemies.”

“You think they don’t know that?” I asked incredulously.

“They don’t want to know it. If they can maintain the belief that the Darkling

can be bargained with or brought to heel, then they don't have to face the reality of the situation."

"I can't say I blame them," I said gloomily. It was all well and good to talk about troops and walls and warnings, but I doubted it would make much difference against the Darkling's shadow soldiers.

When we emerged from the tunnel, Nikolai said, "Walk with me down to the lake?"

I hesitated.

"I promise not to drop to one knee and start composing ballads to your beauty. I just want to show you something."

My cheeks went red, and Nikolai grinned.

"You should see if the Corporalki can do something about that blush," he said, and strolled off around the side of the Little Palace to the lake.

I was tempted to follow just for the pleasure of pushing him in. Although … *could* the Corporalki fix my blushing? I shook the ridiculous thought from my head. The day I asked a Corporalnik to tend to my blushes was the day I'd be laughed out of the Little Palace.

Nikolai had stopped on the gravel path, halfway down to the lake, and I joined him there. He pointed to a strip of beach on the far shore, a short distance from the school. "I want to construct a pier there," he said.

"Why?"

"So I can rebuild the *Hummingbird*."

"You really can't keep still, can you? Don't you have enough on your plate?"

He squinted out at the glittering surface of the lake. "Alina, I'm hoping we can find a way to defeat the Darkling. But if we can't, we need a way to get you out."

I stared at him. "What about the rest of the Grisha?"

"There's nothing I can do for them."

I couldn't quite believe what he was suggesting. "I'm not going to run."

"I had a feeling you'd say that," he said with a sigh.

"And you?" I said angrily. "Are you just going to fly away and leave the rest of us to face the Darkling?"

"Come now," he said. "You know I've always wanted a hero's funeral." He looked back at the lake. "I'm happy to go down fighting, but I don't want my

parents left to the Darkling's mercy. Will you give me two Squallers to train?"

"They're not gifts, Nikolai," I said, thinking of the way the Darkling had made a present of Genya to the Queen. "But I'll ask for volunteers. Just don't tell them what it's for. I don't want the others to get discouraged." Or start vying for places aboard the craft. "And one more thing," I said. "I want you to make room for Baghra. She shouldn't have to face the Darkling again. She's been through enough."

"Of course," he said, then added, "I still believe we can win, Alina."

I'm glad someone does, I thought dismally, and turned to go inside.

CHAPTER

16

DAVID HAD MANAGED to slip away again after the last council meeting, and it was late the following evening before I had a free moment to corner him in the Fabrikator workrooms. I found him hunched over a pile of blueprints, his fingers stained with ink.

I settled myself on a stool beside him and cleared my throat. He looked up, blinking owlishly. He was so pale I could see the blue tracery of veins through his skin, and someone had given him a very bad haircut.

Probably did it himself, I thought with an inward shake of my head. It was hard to believe that this was the boy Genya had fallen so hard for.

His eyes flicked to the collar at my neck. He began to fidget with the items on his worktable, moving them around and arranging them in careful lines: a compass, graphite pencils, pens and pots of ink in different colors, pieces of clear and mirrored glass, a hard-boiled egg that I assumed was his dinner, and page after page of drawings and plans that I couldn't begin to make sense of.

"What are you working on?" I asked.

He blinked again. "Dishes."

"Ah."

"Reflective bowls," he said. "Based on a parabola."

"How … interesting?" I managed.

He scratched his nose, leaving a giant blue smudge along the ridge. "It might be a way to magnify your power."

"Like the mirrors in my gloves?" I'd asked that the Durasts remake them. With the power of two amplifiers, I probably didn't need them. But the mirrors

allowed me to focus and pinpoint light, and there was something comforting in the control they gave me.

"Sort of," said David. "If I get it right, it will be a much bigger way to use the Cut."

"And if you get it wrong?"

"Either nothing will happen, or whoever's operating it will be blown to bits."

"Sounds promising."

"I thought so too," he said without a hint of humor, and bent back to his work.

"*David*," I said. He looked up, startled, as if he'd completely forgotten I was there. "I need to ask you something."

His gaze darted to the collar again, then back to his worktable.

"What can you tell me about Ilya Morozova?"

David twitched, glancing around the nearly empty room. Most of the Fabrikators were still at dinner. He was clearly nervous, maybe even frightened.

He looked at the table, picked up his compass, put it down.

Finally, he whispered, "They called him the Bonesmith."

A quiver passed through me. I thought of the fingers and vertebrae lying on the peddlers' tables in Kribirsk. "Why?" I asked. "Because of the amplifiers he discovered?"

David looked up, surprised. "He didn't find them. He *made* them."

I didn't want to believe what I was hearing. "*Merzost*?"

He nodded. So that was why David had looked at Morozova's collar when Zoya asked if any Grisha had ever had such power. Morozova had been playing with the same forces as the Darkling. Magic. Abomination.

"How?" I asked.

"No one knows," David said, glancing over his shoulder again. "After the Black Heretic was killed in the accident that created the Fold, his son came out of hiding to take control of the Second Army. He had all of Morozova's journals destroyed."

His *son*? Again, I was faced with the knowledge of how few people knew the Darkling's secret. The Black Heretic had never died—there had only ever been one Darkling, a single powerful Grisha who had ruled the Second Army for generations, hiding his true identity. As far as I knew, he'd never had a son. And

there was no way he would destroy something as valuable as Morozova's journals. Aboard the whaler, he'd said not all the books prohibited the combination of amplifiers. Maybe he'd been referring to Morozova's own writings.

"Why was his son in hiding?" I asked, curious as to how the Darkling had managed to frame such a deception.

This time David frowned as if the answer were obvious. "A Darkling and his heir never live at the Little Palace at the same time. The risk of assassination is too great."

"I see," I said. Plausible enough, and after hundreds of years, I doubted anyone would question such a story. The Grisha did love their traditions, and Genya couldn't have been the first Tailor the Darkling had kept in his employ. "Why would he have had the journals destroyed?"

"They documented Morozova's experiments with amplifiers. The Black Heretic was trying to re-create those experiments when something went wrong."

The hair rose on my arms. "And the result was the Fold."

David nodded. "His son had all of Morozova's journals and papers burned. He said they were too dangerous, too much of a temptation to any Grisha. That's why I didn't say anything at the meeting. I shouldn't even know they ever existed."

"So how do you?"

David looked around the almost empty workshop again. "Morozova was a Fabrikator, maybe the first, certainly the most powerful. He did things that no one's ever dreamed of before or since." He gave a sheepish shrug. "To us, he's kind of a hero."

"Do you know anything else about the amplifiers he created?"

David shook his head. "There were rumors of others, but the stag was the only one I'd ever heard of."

It was possible David had never even seen the *Istorii Sankt'ya*. The Apparat had claimed that the book was once given to all Grisha children when they arrived at the Little Palace. But that was long ago. The Grisha put their faith in the Small Science, and I'd never known them to bother with religion. *Superstition*, the Darkling had called the red book. *Peasant propaganda.* Clearly David hadn't made the connection between Sankt Ilya and Ilya Morozova. Or he

had something to hide.

"David," I said, "why are you here? You fashioned the collar. You must have known what he intended."

He swallowed. "I knew he would be able to control you, that the collar would allow him to use your power. But I never thought, I never believed … all those people…" He struggled to find the words. Finally, he held out his ink-stained hands and said, almost pleadingly. "I make things. I don't destroy them."

I wanted to believe that he had underestimated the Darkling's ruthlessness. I'd certainly made the same mistake. But he might be lying or he might just be weak. *Which is worse?* asked a harsh voice in my head. *If he can change sides once, he can do it again.* Was it Nikolai's voice? The Darkling's? Or was it just the part of me that had learned to trust no one?

"Good luck with the dishes," I said as I rose to leave.

David hunched over his papers. "I don't believe in luck."

Too bad, I thought. *We're going to need some.*

* * *

I WENT STRAIGHT from the Fabrikator workrooms to the library and spent most of the night there. It was an exercise in frustration. The Grisha histories I searched had only the most basic information on Ilya Morozova, despite the fact that he was considered the greatest Fabrikator who ever lived. He had invented Grisha steel, a method of making unbreakable glass, and a compound for liquid fire so dangerous that he destroyed the formula just twelve hours after he created it. But any mentions of amplifiers or the Bonesmith had been expunged.

That didn't stop me from returning the next evening to bury myself in religious texts and any reference I could find to Sankt Ilya. Like most Saints' tales, the story of his martyrdom was depressingly brutal: One day, a plow had overturned in the fields behind his home. Hearing the screams, Ilya ran to help, only to find a man weeping over his dead son, the boy's body torn open by the blades, the ground soaked through with his blood. Ilya had brought the boy back to life—and the villagers had thanked him for it by clapping him in irons and tossing him into a river to sink beneath the weight of his chains.

The details were hopelessly muddy. Sometimes Ilya was a farmer, sometimes a mason or a woodworker. He had two daughters or one son or no children at all.

A hundred different villages claimed to be the site of his martyrdom. Then, there was the small problem of the miracle he'd performed. I had no problem believing that Sankt Ilya might be a Corporalnik Healer, but Ilya Morozova was supposed to be a Fabrikator. What if they weren't the same person at all?

At night, the glass-domed room was lit by oil lamps, and the hush was so deep that I could hear myself breathe. Alone in the gloom, surrounded by books, it was hard not to feel overwhelmed. But the library seemed like my best hope, so I kept at it. Tolya found me there one evening, curled up in my favorite chair, struggling to make sense out of a text in ancient Ravkan.

"You shouldn't come here at night without one of us," he said grumpily.

I yawned and stretched. I was probably more in danger of a shelf falling on me than anything else, but I was too tired to argue. "Won't happen again," I said.

"What is that?" Tolya asked, lowering himself down to get a closer view of the book in my lap. He was so huge that it was a bit like having a bear join me for a study session.

"I'm not sure. I saw the name Ilya in the index, so I picked it up, but I can't make sense of it."

"It's a list of titles."

"You can read it?" I asked in surprise.

"We were raised in the church," he said, skimming the page.

I looked at him. Lots of children were raised in religious homes, but that didn't mean they could read liturgical Ravkan. "What does it say?"

He ran a finger down the words beneath Ilya's name. His huge hands were covered in scars. Beneath his roughspun sleeve, I could see the edge of a tattoo peeking out.

"Not much," he said. "Saint Ilya the Beloved, Saint Ilya the Treasured. There are a few towns listed, though, places where he's said to have performed miracles.

I sat up straighter. "That might be a place to start."

"You should explore the chapel. I think there are some books in the vestry."

I had walked past the royal chapel plenty of times, but I'd never been inside. I'd always thought of it as the Apparat's domain, and even with him gone, I wasn't sure I wanted to visit. "What's it like?"

Tolya lifted his huge shoulders. "Like any chapel."

“Tolya,” I asked, suddenly curious, “did you ever even consider joining the Second Army?”

He looked offended. “I wasn’t born to serve the Darkling.” I wanted to ask what he *had* been born for, but he tapped the page and said, “I can translate this for you, if you like.” He grinned. “Or maybe I’ll just make Tamar do it.”

“All right,” I said. “Thanks.”

He bent his head. It was just a bow, but he was still kneeling beside me, and there was something about his pose that sent a shiver up my spine.

I felt as if he were waiting for something. Tentatively, I reached out and laid a hand on his shoulder. As soon as my fingers came to rest, he let out a breath. It was almost a sigh.

We stayed there for a moment, silent in the halo of lamplight. Then he rose and bowed again.

“I’ll be just outside the door,” he said, and slipped away into the dark.

* * *

MAL RETURNED FROM the hunt the next morning, and I was eager to tell him everything—what I’d learned from David, the plans for the new *Hummingbird*, my strange encounter with Tolya.

“He’s an odd one,” Mal agreed. “But it still couldn’t hurt to check out the chapel.”

We decided to walk over together, and on the way, I pressed him to tell me about the hunt.

“We spent more time every day playing cards and drinking *kvas* than doing anything else. And some duke got so drunk he passed out in the river. He almost drowned. His servants hauled him out by his boots, but he kept wading back in, slurring something about the best way to catch trout.”

“Was it terrible?” I asked, laughing.

“It was fine.” He kicked a pebble down the path with his boot. “There’s a lot of curiosity about you.”

“Why do I doubt I’m going to like any of this?”

“One of the royal trackers is sure your powers are fake.”

“And just how would I manage that?”

“I believe there’s an elaborate system of mirrors, pulleys, and possibly

hypnotism involved. I got a little lost."

I started to giggle.

"It wasn't all funny, Alina. When they were in their cups, some of the nobles made it clear they think all of the Grisha should be rounded up and executed."

"Saints," I breathed.

"They're scared."

"That's no excuse," I said, feeling my anger rise. "We're Ravkans, too. It's like they forget everything the Second Army has done for them."

Mal raised his hands. "I didn't say I agreed with them."

I sighed and swatted at an innocent tree branch. "I know."

"Anyway, I think I made a bit of progress."

"How did you manage that?"

"Well, they liked that you served in the First Army, and that you saved their prince's life."

"After he risked his own life rescuing us?"

"I may have taken some liberties with the details."

"Oh, Nikolai will love that. Is there more?"

"I told them you hate herring."

"Why?"

"And that you love plum cake. And that Ana Kuya took a switch to you when you ruined your spring slippers jumping in puddles."

I winced. "Why would you tell them all that?"

"I wanted to make you human," he said. "All they see when they look at you is the Sun Summoner. They see a threat, another powerful Grisha like the Darkling. I want them to see a daughter or a sister or a friend. I want them to see Alina."

I felt a lump rise in my throat. "Do you practice being wonderful?"

"Daily," he said with a grin. Then he winked. "But I prefer 'useful.'"

The chapel was the only remaining building of a monastery that had once stood atop Os Alta, and it was said to be where the first Kings of Ravka had been crowned. Compared to the other structures on the palace grounds, it was a humble building, with whitewashed walls and a single bright blue dome.

It was empty and looked like it could use a good cleaning. The pews were covered in dust, and there were pigeons roosting in the eaves. As we walked up

the aisle, Mal took my hand, and my heart gave a funny little leap.

We didn't waste much time in the vestry. The few books on its shelves were a disappointment, just a bunch of old hymnals with crumbling, yellowed pages. The only thing of real interest in the chapel was the massive triptych behind the altar. A riot of color, its three huge panels showed thirteen saints with benevolent faces. I recognized some of them from the *Istorii Sankt'ya*: Lizabeta with her bloody roses, Petyr with his still-burning arrows. And there was Sankt Ilya with his collar and fetters and broken chains.

"No animals," Mal observed.

"From what I've seen, he's never pictured with the amplifiers, just with the chains. Except in the *Istorii Sankt'ya*." I just didn't know why.

Most of the triptych was in fairly good condition, but Ilya's panel had sustained bad water damage. The Saints' faces were barely visible under the mold, and the damp smell of mildew was nearly overpowering. I pressed my nose to my sleeve.

"There must be a leak somewhere," said Mal. "This place is a mess."

My eyes traced the shape of Ilya's face beneath the grime. Another dead end. I didn't like to admit it, but I'd gotten my hopes up. Again, I sensed that pull, that emptiness at my wrist. Where was the firebird?

"We can stand here all day," Mal said, "but he's not going to start talking."

I knew he was teasing, but I felt a prickle of anger, though I wasn't sure if it was at him or myself.

We turned to go back down the aisle and I stopped short. The Darkling was waiting in the gloom by the entrance, seated in a shadowy pew.

"What is it?" Mal asked, following my gaze.

I waited, perfectly still. *See him,* I begged silently. *Please see him.*

"Alina? Is something wrong?"

I dug my fingers into my palm. "No," I said. "Do you think we should check the vestry again?"

"It didn't seem very promising."

I made myself smile and walk. "You're probably right. Wishful thinking."

As we passed by the Darkling, he turned his head to watch us. He pressed a finger to his lips, then bent his head in a mocking imitation of prayer.

I felt better when we were out in the fresh air, away from the moldy smell of

the chapel, but my mind was racing. It had happened again.

The Darkling's face had been unscarred. Mal hadn't seen him. That must mean it wasn't real, just some kind of vision.

But he'd touched me that night in his rooms. I'd felt his fingers on my cheek. What kind of hallucination could do that?

I shivered as we passed into the woods. Was this some manifestation of the Darkling's new powers? I was terrified by the prospect that he might have somehow found a way into my thoughts, but the other possibility was far worse.

You cannot violate the rules of this world without a price. I pressed my arm to my side, feeling the sea whip's scales chafe against my skin. *Forget Morozova and his madness.* Maybe this had nothing to do with the Darkling at all. Maybe I was just losing my mind.

"Mal," I began, not certain what I intended to say, "the third amp—"

He put a finger to his lips, and the gesture was so like the Darkling's that I nearly stumbled, but in the next second, I heard rustling and Vasily emerged from the trees.

I wasn't used to seeing the prince anywhere except the Grand Palace, and for a moment, I just stood there. Then I recovered from my surprise and bowed.

Vasily acknowledged me with a nod, ignoring Mal completely.

"*Moi tsarevich*," I said in greeting.

"Alina Starkov," the prince replied with a smile. "I hope you will grant me a moment of your time."

"Of course," I replied.

"I'll be right down the path," Mal said, shooting Vasily a suspicious glare.

The prince watched him go. "The deserter hasn't quite learned his place, has he?"

I bit down on my anger. "What can I do for you, *moi tsarevich*?"

"Please," he said, "I would prefer you call me Vasily, at least when we are in private."

I blinked. I'd never been alone with the prince before, and I didn't want to be now.

"How are you settling in at the Little Palace?" he asked.

"Very well, thank you, *moi tsarevich*."

"Vasily."

“I don’t know that it’s appropriate to speak to you so informally,” I said primly.

“You call my brother by his given name.”

“I met him under … unique circumstances.”

“I know he can be very charming,” Vasily said. “But you should know that he’s also very deceptive, and very clever.”

That’s certainly true, I thought, but all I said was, “He has an unusual mind.”

Vasily chortled. “What a diplomat you’ve become! You’ve a most refreshing way about you. Given time, I have no doubt that, despite your humble antecedents, you will learn to conduct yourself with the restraint and elegance of a noblewoman.”

“You mean I’ll learn to shut up?”

Vasily gave a disapproving sniff. I needed to get out of this conversation before I really offended him. Vasily might seem a fool, but he was still a prince.

“Indeed no,” he said with a stilted laugh. “You have a delightful candor.”

“Thank you,” I mumbled. “If you’ll excuse me, your highness—”

Vasily stepped into my path. “I don’t know what arrangement you’ve made with my brother, but you must realize that he’s a second son. Whatever his ambitions, that’s all he ever will be. Only I can make you Queen.”

There it was. I heaved an internal sigh. “Only a king can make a queen,” I reminded him.

Vasily waved this talk away. “My father won’t live much longer. I as good as rule Ravka now.”

Is that what you call it? I thought with a surge of irritation. I doubted Vasily would even be in Os Alta if Nikolai didn’t present a threat to his crown, but this time I held my tongue.

“You’ve risen high for a Keramzin orphan,” he went on, “but you might rise higher still.”

“I can assure you, *moi tsarevich*,” I said with complete honesty, “I have no such ambitions.”

“Then what do you want, Sun Summoner?”

“Right now? I’d like to go have my lunch.”

His lower lip jutted out sulkily, and for a moment, he looked just like his father. Then he smiled.

“You’re a smart girl,” he said, “and I think you’ll prove a useful one. I look forward to deepening our acquaintance.”

“I would like nothing better,” I lied.

He took my hand and pressed his moist mouth to my knuckles. “Until then, Alina Starkov.”

I stifled a gag. As he strode off, I wiped my hand surreptitiously on my *kefta.*

Mal was waiting for me at the edge of the woods.

“What was that about?” he asked, his face worried.

“Oh, you know,” I replied. “Another prince, another proposal.”

“You can’t be serious,” Mal said with a disbelieving laugh. “He doesn’t waste any time.”

“Power is alliance,” I intoned, imitating Nikolai.

“Should I offer my felicitations?” Mal asked, but there was no edge to his voice, only amusement. Apparently the heir to the throne of Ravka wasn’t quite as threatening as an overconfident privateer.

“Do you think the Darkling had to deal with unwanted advances from wet-lipped royals?” I asked glumly.

Mal snickered.

“What’s so funny?”

“I just pictured the Darkling being cornered by a sweaty duchess trying to have her way with him.”

I snorted and then I started to laugh outright. Nikolai and Vasily were so different, it was hard to believe they shared any blood at all. Unbidden, I remembered Nikolai’s kiss, the rough feel of his mouth on mine as he’d held me to him. I shook my head.

They may be different, I reminded myself as we headed into the palace, *but they both want to use you just the same.*

CHAPTER 17

SUMMER DEEPENED, bringing waves of balmy heat to Os Alta. The only relief to be found was in the lake, or in the cold pools of the *banya* that lay in the dark shade of a birchwood grove beside the Little Palace. Whatever hostility the Ravkan court felt toward the Grisha, it didn't stop them from beckoning Squallers and Tidemakers to the Grand Palace to summon breezes and fashion massive blocks of ice to cool the stuffy rooms. It was hardly a worthy use of Grisha talent, but I was eager to keep the King and Queen happy, and I'd already deprived them of several much-valued Fabrikators, who were hard at work on David's mysterious mirrored dishes.

Every morning, I met with my Grisha council—sometimes for a few minutes, sometimes for hours—to discuss intelligence reports, troop movements, and what we were hearing from the northern and southern borders.

Nikolai still hoped to take the fight to the Darkling before he'd assembled the full strength of his shadow army, but so far Ravka's network of spies and informants had been unable to discover his location. It was looking more and more likely that we'd have to make our stand in Os Alta. Our only advantage was that the Darkling couldn't simply send the *nichevo'ya* against us. He had to stay close to his creatures, and that meant he would have to march to the capital with them. The big question was whether he would enter Ravka from Fjerda or from the Shu Han.

Standing in the war room before the Grisha council, Nikolai gestured to one of the massive maps along the wall. "We took back most of this territory in the last campaign," he said, pointing to Ravka's northern border with Fjerda. "It's

dense forest, almost impossible to cross when the rivers aren't frozen, and all the access roads have been blockaded."

"Are there Grisha stationed there?" asked Zoya.

"No," Nikolai said. "But there are lots of scouts based out of Ulensk. If he comes that way, we'll have plenty of warning."

"And he would have to deal with the Petrazoi," said Paja. "Whether he goes over or around them, it will buy us more time." She'd come into her own over the last few weeks. Though David remained silent and fidgety, she actually seemed glad to have time away from the workrooms.

"I'm more concerned with the permafrost," Nikolai said, running his hand along the stretch of border that ran above Tsibeya. "It's heavily fortified. But that's a lot of territory to cover."

I nodded. Mal and I had once walked those wild lands together, and I remembered how vast they'd felt. I caught myself looking around the room, seeking him out, even though I knew he'd gone on another hunt, this time with a group of Kerch marksmen and Ravkan diplomats.

"And if he comes from the south?" asked Zoya.

Nikolai signaled Fedyor, who rose and began to walk the Grisha through the weak points of the southern border. Because he'd been stationed at Sikursk, the Corporalnik knew the area well.

"It's almost impossible to patrol all the mountain passes coming out of the Sikurzoi," he observed grimly. "Shu raiding parties having been taking advantage of that fact for years. It would be easy enough for the Darkling to slip through."

"Then it's a straight march to Os Alta," said Sergei.

"Past the military base at Poliznaya," Nikolai noted. "That could work to our advantage. Either way, when he marches, we'll be ready."

"Ready?" Pavel snorted. "For an army of indestructible monsters?"

"They're not indestructible," Nikolai said, nodding to me. "And the Darkling isn't either. I know. I shot him."

Zoya's eyes widened. "You *shot* him?"

"Yes," he said. "Unfortunately, I didn't do a very good job of it, but I'm sure I'll improve with practice." He surveyed the Grisha, looking into each worried face before he spoke again. "The Darkling is powerful, but so are we. He's never

faced the might of the First and Second Armies working in tandem, or the kinds of weapons I intend to supply. We face him. We flank him. We see which bullet gets lucky."

While the Darkling's shadow horde was focused on the Little Palace, he would be vulnerable. Small, heavily armed units of Grisha and soldiers would be stationed at two-mile intervals around the capital. Once the fighting began, they would close on the Darkling and unleash all the firepower that Nikolai could muster.

In a way, it was what the Darkling had always feared. Again, I remembered how he'd described the new weaponry being created beyond Ravka's borders, and what he'd said to me, so long ago, beneath the caved-in roof of an old barn: *The age of Grisha power is coming to an end.*

Paja cleared her throat. "Do we know what happens to the shadow soldiers when we kill the Darkling?"

I wanted to hug her. I didn't know what might happen to the *nichevo'ya* if we managed to put the Darkling down. They might vanish to nothing, or they might go into a mad frenzy or worse, but she'd said it: *When we kill the Darkling.* Tentative, frightened, but it still sounded suspiciously like hope.

* * *

WE FOCUSED THE MAJORITY of our efforts on Os Alta's defense. The city had an ancient system of warning bells to alert the palace when an enemy was in sight. With his father's permission, Nikolai had installed heavy guns like those on the *Hummingbird* above the city and palace walls. Despite Grisha grumbling, I'd had several placed on the roof of the Little Palace. They might not stop the *nichevo'ya*, but they would slow them.

Tentatively, the other Grisha had begun to open up to the value of the Fabrikators. With help from the Inferni, the Materialki were trying to create *grenatki* that might produce a powerful enough flash of light to stall or stun the shadow soldiers. The problem was doing it without using blasting powders that would level everyone and everything around them. I sometimes worried that they might blow up the entire Little Palace and do the Darkling's work for him. More than once, I saw Grisha in the dining hall with burnt cuffs or singed brows. I encouraged them to try the more dangerous work by the lakeside with

Tidemakers on hand in case of emergency.

Nikolai was intrigued enough by the project that he insisted on getting involved in the design. The Fabrikators tried to ignore him, then pretended to indulge him, but they quickly learned that Nikolai was more than a bored prince who liked to dabble. Not only did he understand David's ideas, he'd worked long enough with the rogue Grisha that he slipped easily into the language of the Small Science. Soon, they seemed to forget his rank and his *otkazat'sya* status, and he could often be found hunched over a table in the Materialki workshops.

I was most disturbed by the experiments taking place behind the red-lacquered doors of the Corporalki anatomy rooms, where they were collaborating with the Fabrikators to try to fuse Grisha steel with human bone. The idea was to make it possible for a soldier to withstand *nichevo'ya* attack. But the process was painful and imperfect, and often, the metal was simply rejected by the subject's body. The Healers did what they could, but the ragged screams of First Army volunteers could sometimes be heard echoing through the halls of the Little Palace.

Afternoons were taken up by endless meetings at the Grand Palace. The Sun Summoner's power was a valuable bartering chip in Ravka's attempts to forge alliances with other countries, and I was frequently asked to put in appearances at diplomatic gatherings to demonstrate my power and prove that I was, in fact, alive. The Queen hosted teas and dinners where I was paraded out to perform. Nikolai often dropped by to dole out compliments, flirt shamelessly, and hover protectively by my chair like a doting suitor.

But nothing was as tedious as the "strategy sessions" with the King's advisers and commanders. The King rarely attended. He preferred to spend his days hobbling after serving maids and sleeping in the sun like an old tomcat. In his absence, his counselors talked in endless circles. They argued that we should make peace with the Darkling or that we should go to war with the Darkling. They argued for allying with the Shu, then for partnering with Fjerda. They argued every line of every budget, from quantities of ammunition to what the troops ate for breakfast. And yet it was rare that anything got done or decided.

When Vasily learned that Nikolai and I were attending the meetings, he put aside years of ignoring his duties as the Lantsov heir and insisted on being there as well. To my surprise, Nikolai welcomed him enthusiastically.

“What a relief,” he said. “Please tell me you can make sense of these.” He shoved a towering stack of ledgers across the table.

“What is this?” Vasily asked.

“A proposal for repairs to an aqueduct outside of Chernitsyn.”

“All this for an aqueduct?”

“Don’t worry,” said Nikolai. “I’ll have the rest delivered to your room.”

“There’s more? Can’t one of the ministers—”

“You saw what happened when our father let others take over the business of ruling Ravka. We must remain vigilant.”

Warily, Vasily lifted the topmost paper from the pile as if he were picking up a soiled rag. It took everything in me not to burst out laughing.

“Vasily thinks he can lead as our father did,” Nikolai confided to me later that afternoon, “throwing banquets, giving the occasional speech. I’m going to make sure he knows just what it means to rule without the Darkling or the Apparat there to take the reins.”

It seemed like a good enough plan, but before long, I was cursing both princes beneath my breath. Vasily’s presence ensured that meetings ran twice as long. He postured and preened, weighed in on every issue, held forth at length on patriotism, strategy, and the finer points of diplomacy.

“I’ve never met a man who can say so much without saying anything at all,” I fumed as Nikolai walked me back to the Little Palace after a particularly wretched session. “There’s got to be something you can do.”

“Like what?”

“Get one of his prize ponies to kick him in the head.”

“I’m sure they’re frequently tempted,” Nikolai said. “Vasily’s lazy and vain, and he likes to take shortcuts, but there’s no easy way to govern a country. Trust me, he’ll tire of it all soon enough.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But I’ll probably die of boredom before he does.”

Nikolai laughed. “Next time, bring a flask. Every time he changes his mind, take a sip.”

I groaned. “I’d be passed out on the floor before the hour was up.”

* * *

WITH NIKOLAI’S HELP, I’d brought in armaments experts from Poliznaya

to help familiarize the Grisha with modern weaponry and give them training in firearms. Though the sessions had started out tensely, they seemed to be going more smoothly now, and we hoped that a few friendships might be forming between the First and Second Armies. The units of Grisha and soldiers who had been assembled to hunt down the Darkling when he approached Os Alta made the fastest progress. They returned from training missions full of private jokes and new camaraderie. They even took to calling each other *nolniki*, zeroes, because they were no longer strictly First or Second Army.

I'd been worried about how Botkin might respond to all the changes. But the man seemed to have a gift for killing, no matter the method, and he delighted in any excuse to spend time talking weaponry with Tolya and Tamar.

Because the Shu had a bad habit of taking a scalpel to their Grisha, few survived to make it into the ranks of the Second Army. Botkin loved being able to speak in his native tongue, but he also loved the twins' ferocity. They didn't rely only on their Corporalki abilities the way Grisha raised at the Little Palace tended to. Instead, Heartrending was just one more weapon in their impressive arsenal.

"Dangerous boy. Dangerous girl," Botkin commented, watching the twins spar with a group of Corporalki one morning while a clutch of nervous Summoners waited their turn. Marie and Sergei were there, Nadia trailing behind them as always.

"She'f worf than he if," complained Sergei. Tamar had split his lip open, and he was having trouble talking. "I feel forry for her hufband."

"Will not marry," said Botkin as Tamar threw a hapless Inferni to the ground.

"Why not?" I asked, surprised.

"Not her. Not brother either," said the mercenary. "They are like Botkin. Born for battle. Made for war."

Three Corporalki hurled themselves at Tolya. In moments, they were all moaning on the floor. I thought of what Tolya had said in the library, that he wasn't born to serve the Darkling. Like so many Shu, he'd taken the path of the soldier for hire, traveling the world as a mercenary and a privateer. But he'd ended up at the Little Palace anyway. How long would he and his sister stay?

"I like her," said Nadia, looking wistfully at Tamar. "She's fearless."

Botkin laughed. "*Fearless* is other word for *stupid*."

“I wouldn’t fay that to her fafe,” grumbled Sergei as Marie dabbed his lip with a damp cloth.

I found myself starting to smile and turned aside. I hadn’t forgotten the way the three of them had welcomed me to the Little Palace. They hadn’t been the ones to call me a whore or try to throw me out, but they certainly hadn’t spoken up to defend me, and the idea of pretending friendship was just a little too much. Besides, I didn’t quite know how to behave around them. We’d never been truly close, and now our difference in status felt like an unbridgeable gap.

Genya wouldn’t care, I thought suddenly. Genya had known me. She’d laughed with me and confided in me, and no shiny *kefta* or title would have kept her from telling me exactly what she thought or slipping her arm through mine to share a bit of gossip. Despite the lies she’d told, I missed her.

As if in answer to my thoughts, I felt a tug on my sleeve, and a tremulous voice said, “*Moi sovereny i?*”

Nadia stood shifting from foot to foot. “I hoped…”

“What is it?”

She turned to a murky corner of the stables and gestured to a young boy in Etherealki blue whom I’d never seen before. A few Grisha had begun to trickle in after we’d sent out the pardon, but this boy looked too young to have served in the field. He approached nervously, fingers twisting in his *kefta*.

“This is Adrik,” Nadia said, placing her arm around him. “My brother.” The resemblance was there, though you had to look for it. “We heard that you plan to evacuate the school.”

“That’s right.” I was sending the students to the one place I knew with dormitories and space enough to house them, a place far from the fighting: Keramzin. Botkin would go with them, too. I hated to lose such a capable soldier, but this way the younger Grisha would still be able to learn from him—and he’d be able to keep an eye on them. Since Baghra wouldn’t see me, I’d sent a servant to her with the same offer. She’d made no reply. Despite my best attempts to ignore her slights, the repeated rejections still stung.

“You’re a student?” I asked Adrik, pushing thoughts of Baghra from my mind. He nodded once, and I noted the determined thrust to his chin.

“Adrik was wondering … *we* were wondering if—”

“I want to stay,” he said fiercely.

My brows shot up. “How old are you?”

“Old enough to fight.”

“He would have graduated this year,” put in Nadia.

I frowned. He was only a couple of years younger than I was, but he was all bony elbows and rumpled hair.

“Go with the others to Keramzin,” I said. “If you still want to, you can join us in a year.” *If we’re still here.*

“I’m good,” he said. “I’m a Squaller, and I’m as strong as Nadia, even without an amplifier.”

“It’s too dangerous—”

“This is my home. I’m not leaving.”

“Adrik!” Nadia chastised.

“It’s okay,” I said. Adrik seemed almost feverish. His hands were balled into fists. I looked at Nadia. “You’re sure you want him to stay?”

“I—” began Adrik.

“I’m talking to your sister. If you fall to the Darkling’s army, she’s the one who will have to mourn you.” Nadia paled slightly at that, but Adrik didn’t flinch. I had to admit he had mettle.

Nadia worried the inside of her lip, glancing from me to Adrik.

“If you’re afraid to disappoint him, think what it will be like to bury him,” I said. I knew I was being harsh, but I wanted them both to understand what they were asking.

She hesitated, then straightened her shoulders. “Let him fight,” she said. “I say he stays. If you send him away, he’ll just be back at the gates a week from now.”

I sighed, then turned my attention back to Adrik, who was already grinning. “Not a word to the other students,” I said. “I don’t want them getting ideas.” I jabbed a finger at Nadia. “And he’s your responsibility.”

“Thank you, *moi soverenyi*,” said Adrik, bowing so low I thought he might tip over.

I was already regretting my decision. “Get him back to classes.”

I watched them walk up the hill toward the lake, then dusted myself off and made my way to one of the smaller training rooms, where I found Mal sparring with Pavel. Mal had been at the Little Palace less and less lately. The invitations

had started arriving the afternoon he returned from Balakirev—hunts, house parties, trout fishing, card games. Every nobleman and officer seemed to want Mal at his next event.

Sometimes he was just gone for an afternoon, sometimes for a few days. It reminded me of being back at Keramzin, when I would watch him ride away and then wait each day at the kitchen window for him to return. But if I was honest with myself, the days when he was gone were almost easier. When he was at the Little Palace, I felt guilty for not being able to spend more time with him, and I hated the way the Grisha ignored him or talked down to him like a servant. As much as I missed him, I encouraged him to go.

It's better this way, I told myself. Before he'd deserted to help me, Mal had been a tracker with a bright future, surrounded by friends and admirers. He didn't belong standing guard in doorways or lurking at the edges of rooms, playing the role of my dutiful shadow as I went from one meeting to the next.

"I could watch him all day," said a voice behind me. I stiffened. Zoya was standing there. Even in the heat, she never seemed to sweat.

"You don't think he stinks of Keramzin?" I asked, remembering the vicious words she had once spoken to me.

"I find the lower classes have a certain rough appeal. You will let me know when you're through with him, won't you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, did I misunderstand? You two seem so … close. But I'm sure you're setting your sights higher these days."

I turned on her. "What are you doing here, Zoya?"

"I came for a training session."

"You know what I mean. What are you doing at the Little Palace?"

"I'm a soldier of the Second Army. This is where I belong."

I folded my arms. It was time Zoya and I had this out. "You don't like me, and you've never missed an opportunity to let me know it. Why follow me now?"

"What choice do I have?"

"I'm sure the Darkling would gladly welcome you back at his side."

"Are you ordering me to leave?" She was striving for her usual haughty tone, but I could tell she was scared. It gave me a guilty little thrill.

“I want to know why you’re so determined to stay.”

“Because I don’t want to live in darkness,” she said. “Because you’re our best chance.”

I shook my head. “Too easy.”

She flushed. “Am I supposed to beg?”

Would she? I found I didn’t mind the idea. “You’re vain. You’re ambitious. You would have done anything for the Darkling’s attention. What changed?”

“What changed?” she choked out. Her lips thinned, and her fists clenched at her sides. “I had an aunt who lived in Novokribirsk. A niece. The Darkling could have told me what he meant to do. If I could have warned them—” Her voice broke, and I was instantly ashamed of the pleasure I’d felt at watching her squirm.

Baghra’s voice echoed in my ears: *You’re taking to power well.… As it grows, it will hunger for more.* And yet, did I believe Zoya? Was the sheen in her eyes real or pretense? She blinked her tears back and glared at me. “I still don’t like you, Starkov. I never will. You’re common and clumsy, and I don’t know why you were born with such power. But you’re the Sun Summoner, and if you can keep Ravka free, then I’ll fight for you.”

I watched her, considering, noting the two bright spots of color that flamed high on her cheeks, the trembling of her lip.

“Well?” she said, and I could see how much it cost her to ask. “Are you sending me away?”

I waited a moment longer. “You can stay,” I said. “For now.”

“Is everything all right?” Mal asked. We hadn’t even noticed that he’d left off sparring.

In an instant, Zoya’s uncertainty was gone. She gave him a dazzling smile. “I hear you’re quite the marvel with a bow and arrow. I thought you might offer me a lesson.”

Mal glanced from Zoya back to me. “Maybe later.”

“I look forward to it,” she said, and swept away in a soft rustle of silk.

“What was that about?” he asked as we began the walk up the hill to the Little Palace.

“I don’t trust her.”

For a long minute he said nothing. “Alina,” Mal began uneasily, “what

happened in Kribirsk—”

I cut him off quickly. I didn’t want to know what he might have done with Zoya back at the Grisha camp. And that was hardly the point. “She was one of the Darkling’s favorites, and she’s always hated me.”

“She was probably jealous of you.”

“She broke two of my ribs.”

“She *what*?”

“It was an accident. Sort of.” I’d never told Mal exactly how bad it had been for me before I’d learned to use my power, the endless, lonely days of failure. “I just can’t be sure where her real allegiance lies.” I rubbed the back of my neck where the muscles had started to bunch. “I can’t be sure of anyone. Not the Grisha. Not the servants. Any of them could be working for the Darkling.”

Mal looked around. For once, nobody seemed to be watching. Impulsively, he seized hold of my hand. “Gritzki’s throwing a fortune-telling party in the upper town two days from now. Come with me.”

“Gritzki?”

“His father is Stepan Gritzki, the pickle king. New money,” Mal said in a very good imitation of a smug noble. “But his family has a palace down by the canal.”

“I can’t,” I said, thinking of the meetings, David’s mirrored dishes, the evacuation of the school. It just felt wrong to go to a party when we could be at war in a matter of days or weeks.

“You can,” said Mal. “Just for an hour or two.”

It was so tempting—to steal a few moments with Mal away from the pressures of the Little Palace.

He must have sensed that I was wavering. “We’ll dress you up as one of the performers,” he said. “No one will even know the Sun Summoner is there.”

A party, late in the evening, after the day’s work was done. I’d miss one night of futile searching through the library. What was the harm in that?

“All right,” I said. “Let’s go.”

His face broke into a grin that left me breathless. I didn’t know if I’d ever get used to the idea that a smile like that might actually be for me.

“Tolya and Tamar won’t like it,” he warned.

“They’re my guards. They follow my orders.”

Mal snapped to attention and swept me an elaborate bow. “*Da, moi soverenyi,*” he pronounced in somber tones. “We live to serve.”

I rolled my eyes, but as I hurried to the Materialki workrooms, I felt lighter than I had in weeks.

CHAPTER 18

THE GRITSKI MANSION was in the canal district, considered the least fashionable part of the upper town because of its proximity to the bridge and the rabble across it. It was a lavish little building, bordered by a war memorial on one side and the gardens of the Convent of Sankta Lizabeta on the other.

Mal had managed to secure a borrowed coach for the evening, and we were tucked inside its narrow confines with a very cranky Tamar. She and Tolya had grumbled long and loudly about the party, but I'd made it clear that I wasn't going to budge. I also swore them to secrecy; I didn't want word of my little excursion beyond the palace gates to reach Nikolai.

We were all dressed in the style of Suli fortune-tellers, in vibrant orange silk cloaks and red lacquered masks carved to resemble jackals. Tolya had remained behind. Even covered head to toe, his size would draw too much attention.

Mal squeezed my hand, and I felt a surge of giddy excitement. My cloak was uncomfortably warm, and my face was already starting to itch beneath the mask, but I didn't care. I felt like we were back at Keramzin, casting off our chores and braving the threat of the switch just to sneak away to our meadow. We would lie in the cool grass and listen to the hum of the insects, watch the clouds break apart overhead. That kind of peace seemed so far away now.

The street leading to the pickle king's mansion was clogged with carriages. We turned onto an alley near the convent so that we'd be better able to mix in with the performers at the servants' entrance.

Tamar carefully shifted her cloak as we descended from the coach. She and Mal were both carrying hidden pistols, and I knew that beneath all the orange

silk, she had her twin axes strapped to each thigh.

“What if someone actually wants his fortune told?” I asked, tightening the laces of my mask and pulling my hood up.

“Just feed him the usual drivel,” said Mal. “Beautiful women, unexpected wealth. Beware of the number eight.”

The servants’ entrance led past a steam-filled kitchen and into the house’s back rooms. But as soon as we stepped inside, a man dressed in what must have been the Gritzki livery seized my arm.

“Just what do you think you’re doing?” he said, giving me a shake. I saw Tamar’s hand go to her hip.

“I—”

“You three should already be circulating.” He shoved us toward the main rooms of the house. “Don’t spend too long with any single guest. And don’t let me catch you drinking!”

I nodded, trying to get my heart to stop hammering, and we hurried into the ballroom. The pickle king had spared no expense. The mansion had been decorated to look like the most decadent Suli camp imaginable. The ceiling was hung with a thousand star-shaped lanterns. Silk-covered wagons were parked around the edges of the room in a glittering caravan, and fake bonfires glowed with dancing colored light. The terrace doors had been thrown open, and the night air hummed with the rhythmic clang of finger cymbals and the wail of violins.

I saw the real Suli fortune-tellers scattered throughout the crowd and realized what an eerie sight we must make in our jackal masks, but the guests didn’t seem to mind. Most of them were already well in their cups, laughing and shouting to one another in boisterous groups, gawking at the acrobats twirling from silk swings overhead. Some sat swaying in their chairs, having their fortunes told over golden urns of coffee. Others ate at the long table that had been set up on the terrace, gorging on stuffed figs and bowls of pomegranate seeds, clapping along with the music.

Mal snuck me a little glass of *kvas*, and we found a bench in a shadowy corner of the terrace while Tamar took up her post a discreet distance away. I rested my head against Mal’s shoulder, happy just to be sitting beside him, listening to the thump and jangle of the music. The air was heavy with the scent

of some night-blooming flower and, beneath that, the tang of lemons. I breathed deeply, feeling some of the exhaustion and fear of the last few weeks ease away. I wriggled my foot from my slipper and let my toes dig into the cool gravel.

Mal adjusted his hood to better hide his face and tipped up his mask, then reached forward and did the same with mine. He leaned in. Our jackal masks bumped snouts.

I started to laugh.

"Next time, different costumes," he grumbled.

"Bigger hats?"

"Maybe we could just wear baskets over our heads."

Two girls came swaying up to us. Tamar was by my side in an instant. We pushed our masks back into place.

"Tell our fortunes!" the taller girl demanded, practically toppling over her friend.

Tamar shook her head, but Mal gestured to one of the little tables laid with blue enamel cups and a golden urn.

The girl squealed and poured out a tiny amount of sludge-like coffee. The Suli told fortunes by reading the dregs at the bottom of the cup. She downed the coffee and grimaced.

I elbowed Mal in the side. *Now what?*

He rose and walked to the table.

"Hmmm," he said, peering into the cup. "Hmmm."

The girl seized his arm. "What is it?"

He waved me over. I gritted my teeth and bent over the cup.

"Is it bad?" the girl moaned.

"Eeet eeees … goooood," said Mal in the most outrageous Suli accent I'd ever heard.

The girl sighed in relief.

"You weeel meet a handsome stranger."

The girls giggled and clapped their hands. I couldn't resist.

"He weeel be very wicked man," I interjected. My accent was even worse than Mal's. If any real Suli overheard me, I'd probably end up with a black eye. "You must run from theees man."

"Oh," the girls sighed in disappointment.

“You must marry ugly man,” I said. “Very fet.” I held my arms out in front of me, indicating a giant belly. “He weeel make you heppy.”

I heard Mal snort beneath his mask.

The girl sniffed. “I don’t like this fortune,” she said. “Let’s go try another one.” As they flounced away, two rather tipsy noblemen took their place.

One had a beaky nose and wobbly jowls. The other threw back his coffee like he was gulping *kvas* and slammed the cup down on the table. “Now,” he slurred, twitching his bristly red mustache. “What’ve I got in store? And make it good.”

Mal pretended to study the cup. “You weeel come into a great fortune.”

“Already have a great fortune. What else?”

“Uh…” Mal hedged. “Your wife weeel bear you three handsome sons.”

His beak-nosed companion burst out laughing. “Then you’ll *know* they aren’t yours!” he bellowed.

I thought the other nobleman would take offense, but instead he just guffawed, his red face turning even redder.

“Have to congratulate the footman!” he roared.

“I hear all the best families have bastards,” chortled his friend.

“We all have dogs, too. But we don’t let them sit at the table!”

I grimaced beneath my mask. I had a sneaking suspicion they were talking about Nikolai.

“Oh dear,” I said, yanking the cup from Mal’s hand. “Oh dear, so sad.”

“What’s that?” said the nobleman, still laughing.

“You weeel go bald,” I said. “Very bald.”

He stopped laughing, and his meaty hand strayed to his already thinning red hair.

“And you,” I said, pointing at his friend. Mal gave my foot a warning nudge, but I ignored him. “You weeel catch the *korpa*.”

“The what?”

“The *korpa*!” I declared in dire tones. “Your private parts weeel shrink to nothink!”

He paled. His throat worked. “But—”

At that moment there was shouting from inside the ballroom and a loud crash as someone upended a table. I saw two men shoving each other.

“I think it’s time to leave,” said Tamar, edging us away from the commotion.

I was about to protest when the fight broke out in earnest. People started pushing and shoving, crowding the doors to the terrace. The music had stopped, and it looked like some of the fortune-tellers had gotten into the scramble too. Over the crowd, I saw one of the silken wagons collapse. Someone came hurtling toward us and crashed into the noblemen. The coffee urn toppled off the table, and the little blue cups followed.

"Let's go," said Mal, reaching for his pistol. "Out the back."

Tamar led the way, axes already in hand. I followed her down the stairs, but as we stepped off the terrace, I heard another horrible crash and a woman screaming. She was pinned beneath the banquet table.

Mal holstered his pistol. "Get her to the carriage," he shouted to Tamar. "I'll catch up."

"Mal—"

"Go! I'll be right behind you." He pushed into the crowd, toward the trapped woman.

Tamar tugged me down the garden stairs and up a path that led back along the side of the mansion, to the street. It was dark away from the glowing lanterns of the party. I let a soft light blossom to guide our steps.

"Don't," said Tamar. "This could be a distraction. You'll give away our location."

I let the light fade, and a second later, I heard a scuffle, a loud *oof*, and then —silence.

"Tamar?"

I looked back toward the party, hoping I would hear Mal's approach.

My heart started to pound. I raised my hands. Forget giving away our location, I wasn't going to just stand around in the dark. Then I heard a gate creak, and strong hands took hold of me. I was yanked through the hedge.

I sent light searing out in a hot flare. I was in a stone courtyard off the main garden, bordered on all sides by yew hedges, and I was not alone.

I smelled him before I saw him—turned earth, incense, mildew. The smell of a grave. I raised my hands as the Apparat stepped out of the shadows. The priest was just as I remembered him, the same wiry black beard and relentless gaze. He still wore the brown robes of his station, but the King's double eagle was gone from his chest, replaced by a sunburst wrought in gold thread.

“Stay where you are,” I warned.

He bowed low. “Alina Starkov, Sol Koroleva. I mean you no harm.”

“Where’s Tamar? If she’s been hurt—”

“Your guards will not be harmed, but I beg you to listen.”

“What do you want? How did you know I would be here?”

“The faithful are everywhere, Sol Koroleva.”

“Don’t call me that!”

“Every day your holy army grows, drawn by the promise of your light. They wait only for you to lead them.”

“My army? I’ve seen the pilgrims camped outside the city walls—poor, weak, hungry, all desperate for the scraps of hope you feed them.”

“There are others. Soldiers.”

“More people who think I’m a Saint because you’ve sold them a lie?”

“It is no lie, Alina Starkov. You are Daughter of Keramzin, Reborn of the Fold.”

“I didn’t die!” I said furiously. “I survived because I escaped the Darkling, and I murdered an entire skiff of soldiers and Grisha to do it. Do you tell your followers that?”

“Your people are suffering. Only you can bring about the dawn of a new age, an age consecrated in holy fire.”

His eyes were wild, the black so deep I couldn’t see his pupils. But was his madness real or part of some elaborate act?

“Just who will rule this new age?”

“You, of course. Sol Koroleva, Sankta Alina.”

“With you at my right hand? I read the book you gave me. Saints don’t live long lives.”

“Come with me, Alina Starkov.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“You are not yet strong enough to face the Darkling. I can change that.”

I stilled. “Tell me what you know.”

“Join me, and all will be revealed.”

I advanced on him, surprised by the throb of hunger and rage that shot through me. “Where is the firebird?” I thought he might respond with confusion, that he might pretend ignorance. Instead, he smiled, his gums black, his teeth a

crooked jumble. “Tell me, priest,” I ordered, “or I’ll cut you open right here, and your followers can try to pray you back together.” With a start, I realized that I meant it.

For the first time, he looked nervous. *Good.* Had he expected a tame Saint?

He held up his hands placatingly.

“I do not know,” he said. “I swear it. But when the Darkling left the Little Palace, he did not realize it would be for the last time. He left many precious things behind, things others believed long since destroyed.”

Another surge of hunger crackled through me. “Morozova’s journals? You have them?”

“Come with me, Alina Starkov. There are secrets buried deep.”

Could he possibly be telling the truth? Or would he just hand me over to the Darkling?

“Alina!” Mal’s voice sounded from somewhere on the other side of the hedge.

“I’m here!” I called.

Mal burst into the courtyard, pistol drawn. Tamar was right behind him. She’d lost one of her axes, and there was blood smeared over the front of her cloak.

The Apparat turned in a musty whirl of cloth and slipped between the bushes.

“Wait!” I cried, already moving to follow. Tamar bolted past me with a furious roar, diving into the hedges to give chase.

“I need him alive!” I shouted at her disappearing back.

“Are you all right?” Mal panted as he came level with me.

I took hold of his sleeve. “Mal, I think he has Morozova’s journals.”

“Did he hurt you?”

“I can handle an old priest,” I said impatiently. “Did you hear what I said?”

He drew back. “Yes, I heard you. I thought you were in danger.”

“I wasn’t. I—”

But Tamar was already striding back to us, her face a mask of frustration. “I don’t understand it,” she said, shaking her head. “He was there and then he was just gone.”

“Saints,” I swore.

She hung her head. “Forgive me.”

I'd never seen her look so downcast. "It's all right," I said, my mind still churning. Part of me wanted to go back down that alley and shout for the Apparat, demand that he show himself, hunt him through the city streets until I found him and pried the truth from his lying mouth. I peered down the row of hedges. I could still hear shouting from the party far behind me, and somewhere in the dark, the bells of the convent began to ring. I sighed. "Let's get out of here."

We found our driver waiting on the narrow sidestreet where we'd left him. The ride back to the palace was tense.

"That brawl was no coincidence," said Mal.

"No," agreed Tamar, dabbing at the ugly cut on her chin. "He knew we would be there."

"How?" Mal demanded. "No one else knew we were going. Did you tell Nikolai?"

"Nikolai had nothing to do with this," I said.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because he has nothing to gain." I pressed my fingers to my temples. "Maybe someone saw us leaving the palace."

"How did the Apparat get into Os Alta without being seen? How did he even know we would be at that party?"

"I don't know," I replied wearily. "He said the faithful are everywhere. Maybe one of the servants overheard."

"We got lucky tonight," said Tamar. "This could have been much worse."

"I was never in any real danger," I insisted. "He just wanted to talk."

"What did he say?"

I gave her the barest description, but I didn't mention Morozova's journals. I hadn't talked to anyone except Mal about them, and Tamar knew too much about the amplifiers already.

"He's raising some kind of army," I finished. "People who believe that I've risen from the dead, who think I have some kind of holy power."

"How many?" Mal asked.

"I don't know. And I don't know what he intends to do with them. March them against the King? Send them to fight the Darkling's horde? I'm already responsible for the Grisha. I don't want the burden of an army of helpless

otkazat'sya."

"We're not all quite so feeble," said Mal, an edge to his voice.

"I didn't … I just meant he's using these people. He's exploiting their hope."

"Is it any different than Nikolai parading you from village to village?"

"Nikolai isn't telling people that I'm immortal or can perform miracles."

"No," Mal said. "He's just letting them believe it."

"Why are you so ready to attack him?"

"Why are you so quick to defend him?"

I turned away, tired, exasperated, unable to think past the whir of thoughts in my head. The lamplit streets of the upper town slid by the coach's window. We passed the rest of the ride in silence.

* * *

BACK AT THE LITTLE PALACE, I changed clothes while Mal and Tamar filled Tolya in on what had happened.

I was sitting on the bed when Mal knocked. He shut the door behind him and leaned against it, looking around.

"This room is so depressing. I thought you were going to redecorate."

I shrugged. I had too many other things to worry about, and I'd almost gotten used to the room's quiet gloom.

"Do you believe he has the journals?" Mal asked.

"I was surprised he even knew they existed."

He crossed to the bed, and I bent my knees to make room for him.

"Tamar's right," he said, settling by my feet. "That could have been much worse."

I sighed. "So much for seeing the sights."

"I shouldn't have suggested it."

"I shouldn't have gone along with it."

He nodded, scuffed the toe of his boot along the floor. "I miss you," he said quietly.

Soft words, but they sent a painful, welcome tremor through me. Had a part of me doubted it? He'd been gone so often.

I touched his hand. "I miss you too."

"Come to target practice with me tomorrow," he said. "Down by the lake."

“I can’t. Nikolai and I are meeting with a delegation of Kerch bankers. They want to see the Sun Summoner before they guarantee a loan to the Crown.”

“Tell him you’re sick.”

“Grisha don’t get sick.”

“Well, tell him you’re busy,” he said.

“I can’t.”

“Other Grisha take time to—”

“I’m not *other* Grisha,” I said, more harshly than I intended.

“I know that,” he said wearily. He let out a long breath. “Saints, I hate this place.”

I blinked, startled by the vehemence in his voice. “You do?”

“I hate the parties. I hate the people. I hate everything about it.”

“I thought … you seemed … not happy exactly, but—”

“I don’t belong here, Alina. Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed.”

That I didn’t believe. Mal fit in everywhere. “Nikolai says everyone adores you.”

“They’re amused by me,” Mal said. “That’s not the same thing.” He turned my hand over, tracing the scar that ran the length of my palm. “Do you know I actually miss being on the run? Even that filthy little boardinghouse in Cofton and working in the warehouse. At least then I felt like I was doing something, not just wasting time and gathering gossip.”

I shifted uncomfortably, feeling suddenly defensive. “You take every chance you get to be away. You don’t have to accept every invitation.”

He stared at me. “I stay away to protect you, Alina.”

“From what?” I asked incredulously.

He stood up, pacing restlessly across the room. “What do you think people asked me on the royal hunt? The first thing? They wanted to know about me and you.” He turned on me, and when he spoke his voice was cruel, mocking. “*Is it true that you’re tumbling the Sun Summoner? What’s it like with a Saint? Does she have a taste for trackers, or does she take all of her servants to her bed?*” He crossed his arms. “I stay away to put distance between us, to stop the rumors. I probably shouldn’t even be in here now.”

I circled my knees with my arms, drawing them more tightly to my chest. My cheeks were burning. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“What could I say? And when? I barely see you anymore.”

“I thought you wanted to go.”

“I wanted you to ask me to stay.”

My throat felt tight. I opened my mouth, ready to tell him that he wasn’t being fair, that I couldn’t have known. But was that the truth? Maybe I had really believed Mal was happier away from the Little Palace. Or maybe I’d just told myself that because it was easier with him gone, because it meant one less person watching and wanting something from me.

“I’m sorry,” I rasped.

He raised his hands as if to plead his case, then dropped them helplessly. “I feel you slipping away from me, and I don’t know how to stop it.”

Tears pricked my eyes. “We’ll find a way,” I said. “We’ll make more time —”

“It’s not just that. Ever since you put on that second amplifier, you’ve been different.” My hand strayed to the fetter. “When you split the dome, the way you talk about the firebird … I heard you speaking to Zoya the other day. She was scared, Alina. And you liked it.”

“Maybe I did,” I said, my anger rising. It felt so much better than guilt or shame. “So what? You have no idea what she’s like, what this place has been like for me. The fear, the responsibility—”

“I know that. I know. And I can see the toll it’s taking. But you chose this. You have a purpose. I don’t even know what I’m doing here anymore.”

“Don’t say that.” I swung my legs off the bed and stood. “We do have a purpose. We came here for Ravka. We—”

“No, Alina. *You* came here for Ravka. For the firebird. To lead the Second Army.” He tapped the sun over his heart. “I came here for you. *You’re* my flag. *You’re* my nation. But that doesn’t seem to matter anymore. Do you realize this is the first time we’ve really been alone in weeks?”

The knowledge of that settled over us. The room seemed unnaturally quiet. Mal took a single tentative step toward me. Then he closed the space between us in two long strides. One hand slid around my waist, the other cupped my face. Gently, he tilted my mouth up to his.

“Come back to me,” he said softly. He drew me to him, but as his lips met mine, something flickered in the corner of my eye.

The Darkling was standing behind Mal. I stiffened.

Mal pulled back. “What?” he said.

“Nothing. I just…” I trailed off. I didn’t know what to say.

The Darkling was still there. “Tell him you see me when he takes you in his arms,” he said.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

Mal dropped his hands and stepped away from me, his fingers curling into fists. “I guess that’s all I needed to know.”

“Mal—”

“You should have stopped me. All the time I was standing there, going on like a fool. If you didn’t want me, you should have just said so.”

“Don’t feel too bad, tracker,” said the Darkling. “All men can be made fools.”

“That’s not it—” I protested.

“Is it Nikolai?”

“What? No!”

“Another *otkazat’sya*, Alina?” the Darkling mocked.

Mal shook his head in disgust. “I let him push me away. The meetings, the council sessions, the dinners. I let him edge me out. Just waiting, hoping that you’d miss me enough to tell them all to go to hell.”

I swallowed, trying to block out the vision of the Darkling’s cold smile.

“Mal, the Darkling—”

“I don’t want to hear about the Darkling anymore! Or Ravka or the amplifiers or any of it.” He slashed his hand through the air. “I’m done.” He turned on his heel and strode toward the door.

“Wait!” I rushed after him and reached for his arm.

He turned around so fast, I almost careened into him. “Don’t, Alina.”

“You don’t understand—” I said.

“You *flinched*. Tell me you didn’t.”

“It wasn’t because of you!”

Mal laughed harshly. “I know you haven’t had much experience. But I’ve kissed enough girls to know what that means. Don’t worry. It won’t happen again.”

The words hit me like a slap. He slammed the door behind him.

I stood there, staring at the closed doors. I reached out and touched the bone handle.

You can fix this, I told myself. *You can make this right.* But I just stood there, frozen, Mal's words ringing in my ears. I bit down hard on my lip to silence the sob that shook my chest. *That's good,* I thought as the tears spilled over. *That way the servants won't hear.* An ache had started between my ribs, a hard, bright shard of pain that lodged beneath my sternum, pressing tight against my heart.

I didn't hear the Darkling move; I only knew when he was beside me. His long fingers brushed the hair back from my neck and rested on the collar. When he kissed my cheek, his lips were cold.

CHAPTER 19

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, I tracked down David on the roof of the Little Palace, where construction had begun on his gigantic mirrored dishes. He'd set up a makeshift workspace in the shade of one of the domes, and it was already covered in bits of shiny detritus and discarded drawings. The barest breeze ruffled their edges. I recognized Nikolai's scrawl in one of the margins.

"How's it going?" I asked.

"Better," he said, studying the slick surface of the nearest dish. "I think I've gotten the curvature right. We should be ready to try them out soon."

"How soon?" We were still receiving conflicting reports of the Darkling's location, but if he hadn't finished creating his army, it wouldn't be long.

"A couple of weeks," David said.

"That long?"

"You can have it soon, or you can have it right," he grumbled.

"David, I need to know—"

"I told you everything I know about Morozova."

"Not about him," I said. "Not exactly. If … if I wanted to remove the collar. How would I do that?"

"You can't."

"Not now. But after we've—"

"No," David said, without looking at me. "It's not like other amplifiers. It can't just be taken off. You'd have to break it, violate its structure. The results would be catastrophic."

"How catastrophic?"

“I can’t be certain,” he said. “But I’m pretty sure it would make the Fold look like a paper cut.”

“Oh,” I said softly. Then it would be the same with the fetter. Whatever I was becoming, there was no turning back. I’d hoped the visions were the result of the bite from the *nichevo’ya*, that the effects might somehow diminish as the wound slowly healed. But that didn’t seem to be happening. And even if it did, I would always be tied to the Darkling through the collar. Again, I wondered why he hadn’t chosen to try to kill the sea whip himself and bind us closer still.

David picked up a bottle of ink and began twirling it between his fingers. He looked miserable. *Not just miserable*, I thought. *Guilty.* He had forged this connection, placed this chain around my neck for eternity.

Gently, I took the ink bottle from his hands. “If you hadn’t done it, the Darkling would have found someone else.”

He twitched, something between a nod and a shrug. I set the ink down at the far edge of the table where his jittery fingers couldn’t reach it and turned to go.

“Alina…?”

I stopped and looked back at him. His cheeks had gone bright red. The warm breeze lifted the edges of his shaggy hair. At least that awful haircut was growing out.

“I heard … I heard Genya was on the ship. With the Darkling.”

I felt a pang of sorrow for Genya. So David hadn’t been completely oblivious.

“Yes,” I said.

“She’s all right?” he asked hopefully.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “She was when we escaped.” But if the Darkling knew that she’d as good as let us go, I didn’t know how he might have dealt with her. I hesitated. “I begged her to come with us.”

His face fell. “But she stayed?”

“I don’t think she felt like she had a choice,” I said. I couldn’t believe I was making excuses for Genya, but I didn’t like the idea of David thinking less of her.

“I should have…” He didn’t seem to know how to finish.

I wanted to say something comforting, something reassuring. But there were so many mistakes in my own past that I couldn’t think of anything that wouldn’t

ring false.

"We do the best we can," I offered lamely.

David looked at me then, the regret plain on his face. No matter what I said, we both knew the hard truth. We do our best. We try. And usually, it makes no difference at all.

* * *

I CARRIED MY BLACK MOOD with me to the next meeting at the Grand Palace. Nikolai's plan seemed to be working. Though Vasily still dragged himself to the council chamber for our meetings with the ministers, he arrived later and later, and occasionally I caught him dozing off. The one time he failed to appear, Nikolai hauled him from his bed, cheerfully insisting that he get dressed and that we simply couldn't proceed without him. A clearly hungover Vasily had made it through half of the meeting, swaying at the head of the table, before he bolted into the hallway to vomit noisily into a lacquered vase.

Today, even I was having trouble staying awake. Any bit of breeze had vanished, and despite the open windows, the crowded council chamber was unbearably stuffy. The meeting plodded on until one of the generals announced the dwindling numbers from the First Army's troop rolls. The ranks had been thinned by death, desertion, and years of brutal war, and given that Ravka was about to be fighting on at least one front again, the situation was dire.

Vasily waved a lazy hand and said, "Why all the gnashing of teeth? Just lower the draft age."

I sat up straighter. "To what?" I asked.

"Fourteen? Fifteen?" Vasily offered. "What is it now?"

I thought of all the villages Nikolai and I had passed through, the cemeteries that stretched for miles. "Why not just drop it to twelve?" I snapped.

"One is never too young to serve one's country," Vasily declared.

I don't know if it was exhaustion or anger, but the words were out of my mouth before I thought better of them. "In that case, why stop at twelve? I hear babies make excellent cannon fodder."

A disapproving murmur rose from the King's advisers. Beneath the table, Nikolai reached over and gave my hand a warning squeeze.

"Brother, bringing them in younger won't stop them from deserting," he said

to Vasily.

"Then we find some deserters and make an example of them."

Nikolai raised a brow. "Are you sure that death by firing squad is more terrifying than the prospect of being torn apart by *nichevo'ya*?"

"If they even exist," Vasily scoffed.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

But Nikolai just smiled pleasantly. "I saw them myself aboard the *Volkvolny*. Surely you're not calling me a liar."

"Surely you're not suggesting that treason is preferable to honest service in the King's Army."

"I'm suggesting that maybe these people are just as fond of life as you are. They're ill-equipped, undersupplied, and short on hope. If you'd read the reports, you'd know that officers are having trouble keeping order in the ranks."

"Then they should institute harsher punishments," said Vasily. "It's what peasants understand."

I'd already punched one prince. What was one more? I was halfway out of my seat before Nikolai yanked me back down.

"They understand full bellies and clear directives," he said. "If you would let me implement the changes I've suggested and open the coffers for—"

"You cannot always have your way, *little brother*."

Tension crackled through the room.

"The world is changing," said Nikolai, the steel edge emerging in his voice. "We change with it, or there will be nothing left to remember us but the dust."

Vasily laughed. "I can't decide if you're a fearmonger or a coward."

"And I can't decide if you're an idiot or an idiot."

Vasily's face turned purple. He shot to his feet and smacked his hands down on the table. "The Darkling is one man. If you're afraid to face him—"

"I *have* faced him. If you're not afraid—if *any* of you aren't afraid—it's because you lack the sense to understand what we're up against."

Some of the generals nodded. But the King's advisers, Os Alta's noblemen and bureaucrats, looked skeptical and sullen. To them, war was parades, military theory, little figures moved around on a map. If it came to it, these were the men who would ally themselves with Vasily.

Nikolai squared his shoulders, the actor's mask descending over his features

once more. “Peace, brother,” he said. “We both want what’s best for Ravka.”

But Vasily wasn’t interested in being soothed. “What’s best for Ravka is a Lantsov on the throne.”

I drew in a sharp breath. A deadly stillness descended over the room. Vasily had as good as called Nikolai a bastard.

But Nikolai had regained his composure, and now nothing would shake it. “Then let us all say a prayer for Ravka’s rightful King,” he said. “Now, shall we finish our business?”

The meeting limped along for a few more minutes and then came to a welcome close. On our walk back to the Little Palace, Nikolai was uncharacteristically silent.

When we reached the gardens by the pillared folly, he paused to pluck a leaf from a hedge and said, “I shouldn’t have lost my temper that way. It just pricks his pride, makes him dig in his heels.”

“So why did you?” I asked, genuinely curious. It was rare for Nikolai’s emotions to get the best of him.

“I don’t know,” he said, shredding the leaf. “You got angry. I got angry. The room was too damn hot.”

“I don’t think that’s it.”

“Indigestion?” he offered.

But I wasn’t going to be put off by a joke. Despite Vasily’s objections and the council’s reluctance to do much of anything, through some magical combination of patience and pressure, Nikolai had still managed to push through a few of his plans. He’d gotten them to approve relief for the refugees fleeing the shores of the Fold, and requisitioned Materialki corecloth to outfit key regiments of the First Army. He’d even gotten them to divert funds for a plan to modernize farm equipment so that peasants could manage something other than subsistence. Small things, but improvements that might make all the difference in time.

“It’s because you actually care about what happens to this country,” I said. “The throne is just a prize to Vasily, something he wants to squabble over like a favorite toy. You’re not like that. You’ll make a good king.”

Nikolai froze. “I…” For once, words seemed to have deserted him. Then a crooked, embarrassed smile crept across his face. It was a far cry from his usual self-assured grin. “Thank you,” he said.

I sighed as we resumed our pace. “You’re going to be insufferable now, aren’t you?”

Nikolai laughed. “I’m already insufferable.”

* * *

THE DAYS GREW LONGER. The sun stayed close beneath the horizon, and the festival of Belyanoch began in Os Alta. Even at midnight, the skies were never truly dark, and despite the fear of war and the looming threat of the Fold, the city celebrated the endless hours of twilight. In the upper town, the evenings were crowded with operas, masques, and lavish ballets. Over the bridge, raucous horse races and outdoor dances shook the streets of the lower town. An endless stream of pleasure boats bobbed through the canal, and beneath the glimmering dusk, the slow-moving water circled the capital like a jeweled bangle, alight with lanterns hung from a thousand prows.

The heat had relented slightly. Behind the palace walls, everyone seemed in better spirits. I’d continued to insist that the Grisha mix their Orders, and at some point, I still wasn’t sure how, uncomfortable silence had given way to laughter and noisy conversation. There were still cliques and conflicts, but there was also something comfortable and boisterous in the hall that hadn’t been there before.

I was glad—maybe even a little proud—to see Fabrikators and Etherealki drinking tea around one of the samovars, or Fedyor arguing a point with Pavel over breakfast, or Nadia’s little brother trying to chat up an older and decidedly disinterested Paja. But I felt as if I were watching them from a great distance.

I’d tried to talk to Mal several times since the night of our argument. He always found an excuse to walk away from me. If he wasn’t hunting, he was playing cards at the Grand Palace or haunting some tavern in the lower town with his new friends. I could tell he’d been drinking more. Some mornings his eyes looked bleary and he sported bruises and cuts as if he’d been in a brawl, but he was unfailingly punctual, relentlessly polite. He kept to his guard duties, stood silently in doorways, and maintained a respectful distance as he trailed me around the grounds.

The Little Palace had become a very lonely place. I was surrounded by people, but I almost felt like they couldn’t see me, only what they needed from me. I was afraid to show doubt or indecision, and there were days when I felt

like I was being worn down to nothing by the constant weight of responsibility and expectation.

I went to my meetings. I trained with Botkin. I spent long hours at the lake trying to hone my use of the Cut. I even swallowed my pride and made another attempt to visit Baghra, hoping that, if nothing else, she might help me to develop my power further. But she refused to see me.

None of it was enough. The ship that Nikolai was building in the lake was a reminder that everything we were doing was most likely futile. Somewhere out there, the Darkling was gathering his forces, building his army, and when they came, no gun, no bomb, no soldier or Grisha would be able to stop them. Not even me. If the battle went badly, we would retreat to the domed hall to await relief from Poliznaya. The doors were reinforced with Grisha steel, and the Fabrikators had already started sealing up cracks and gaps to prevent entry by the *nichevo'ya.*

I didn't think it would come to that. I'd reached a dead end in my attempts to locate the firebird. If David couldn't get those dishes working, then when the Darkling finally marched on Ravka, we would have no choice but to evacuate. Run and keep running.

Using my power brought me none of the comfort it once had. Every time I summoned light in the Materialki workshops or on the shore of the lake, I felt the bareness of my right wrist like a brand. Even with everything I knew about the amplifiers, the destruction they might bring, the permanence of the way they might change me, I couldn't escape my hunger for the firebird.

Mal was right. It had become an obsession. At night I lay in bed, imagining that the Darkling had already found the final piece of Morozova's puzzle. Maybe he held the firebird captive in a spun gold cage. Would it sing to him? I didn't even know if a firebird could sing at all. Some of the tales said so. One claimed the firebird's song could lull entire armies to sleep. When they heard it, soldiers would cease fighting, lay down their weapons, and nod off peacefully in their enemies' arms.

I knew all the stories by now. The firebird wept diamond tears, its feathers could heal mortal wounds, the future might be seen in the flap of its wings. I'd scoured book after book of folklore, epic poetry, and collections of peasant tales, searching for some pattern or clue. The sea whip's legends centered around the

icy waters of the Bone Road, but stories of the firebird came from every part of Ravka and beyond, and none of them connected the creature to a Saint.

Worse, the visions were getting clearer and more frequent. The Darkling appeared to me almost every day, usually in his chambers or the aisles of the library, sometimes in the war room during council meetings or as I walked back from the Grand Palace at dusk.

"Why won't you leave me alone?" I whispered one night as he hovered behind me while I tried to work at my desk.

Long minutes passed. I didn't think he would answer. I even had time to hope he might have gone, until I felt his hand on my shoulder.

"Then I'd be alone, too," he said, and he stayed the whole night through, till the lamps burned down to nothing.

I got used to seeing him waiting for me at the end of corridors, or sitting at the edge of my bed when I fell asleep at night. When he didn't appear, I sometimes found myself looking for him or wondering why he hadn't come, and that frightened me most of all.

The one bright spot was Vasily's decision to abandon Os Alta for the yearling auctions in Caryeva. I nearly crowed with delight when Nikolai gave me the news on one of our walks.

"Packed up in the middle of the night," Nikolai said. "He says he'll be back in time for my birthday, but I wouldn't be surprised if he finds some excuse to stay away."

"You should try not to look so smug," I said. "It's not very regal."

"Surely I'm allowed some small dispensation for gloating," he said with a laugh. He whistled that same off-key tune I remembered from the *Volkvolny* as we walked along. Then he cleared his throat. "Alina, not that you aren't always the picture of loveliness, but … are you sleeping?"

"Not much," I admitted.

"Nightmares?"

I did still dream of the broken skiff, of people running from the darkness of the Fold, but that wasn't what kept me up at night. "Not exactly."

"Ah," said Nikolai. He clasped his hands behind his back. "I notice your friend has been throwing himself into his work lately. He's much in demand."

"Well," I said, keeping my voice light, "that's Mal."

“Where did he learn to track? No one seems to be able to decide if it’s luck or skill.”

“He didn’t learn. He’s just always been able to do it.”

“How nice for him,” said Nikolai. “I’ve never been a natural at anything.”

“You’re a spectacular actor,” I said drily.

“Do you think so?” he asked. Then he leaned in and whispered, “I’m doing ‘humble’ right now.”

I shook my head in exasperation, but I was grateful for Nikolai’s cheery babble, and even more thankful when he let the subject drop.

* * *

IT TOOK DAVID almost two more weeks to get his dishes operational, but when he was finally ready, I had the Grisha gather on the Little Palace roof to watch the demonstration. Tolya and Tamar were there, alert as always, scanning the crowd. Mal was nowhere to be seen. I’d stayed up the previous night in the common room, hoping to catch him and ask him personally to attend. It was long past midnight when I gave up and went to bed.

The two huge dishes were positioned on opposite sides of the roof, on the flat lip that extended between the domes of the eastern and western wings. They could be rotated through a system of pulleys, and each was manned by a Materialnik and a Squaller, outfitted in goggles to protect against the glare. I saw that Zoya and Paja had been teamed together, and Nadia had been paired with a Durast on the second dish.

Even if this is a total failure, I thought anxiously, *at least they’re working together. Nothing like a fiery explosion to build camaraderie.*

I took my place at the center of the roof, directly between the dishes.

With a jolt of nervousness, I saw that Nikolai had invited the captain of the palace guard to observe, along with two generals and several of the King’s advisers. I hoped they weren’t expecting anything too dramatic. My power tended to show best in full darkness, and the long Belyanoch days made that impossible. I’d asked David if we should schedule the demonstration for later in the evening, but he’d just shaken his head.

“If it works, it will be plenty dramatic. And I suppose that if it doesn’t work, it will be even more dramatic, what with the blast.”

“David, I think you just made a joke.”

He frowned, utterly perplexed. “Did I?”

At Nikolai’s suggestion, David had chosen to take his cue from the *Volkvolny* and use a whistle to signal us. He gave a shrill blast, and the onlookers backed up against the domes, leaving us plenty of room. I raised my hands. David blew on the whistle again. I called the light.

It entered me in a golden torrent and burst from my hands in two steady beams. They struck the dishes, reflecting off them in a blinding glare. It was impressive, but nothing spectacular.

Then David whistled again, and the dishes rotated slightly. The light bounced off their mirrored surfaces, multiplying upon itself and focusing into two blazing white shafts that pierced the early twilight.

An *ahhhh* went up from the crowd as they shielded their eyes. I guess I didn’t have to worry about drama.

The beams sliced through the air, sending off waves of cascading brilliance and radiant heat, as if they were burning through the sky itself. David gave another short blast on the whistle, and the beams fused into a single molten blade of light. It was impossible to look directly at it. If the Cut was a knife in my hand, then this was a broadsword.

The dishes tilted, and the beam descended. The crowd gasped in astonishment as the light slashed through the edge of the woods below, leveling the treetops.

The dishes tilted further. The beam seared into the lakeshore and then into the lake itself. A wave of steam billowed into the air with an audible hiss, and for a moment, the entire surface of the lake seemed to boil.

David gave a panicked blast on the whistle. Hastily, I dropped my hands, and the light vanished.

We ran to the edge of the roof and gaped at the sight before us.

It was as if someone had taken a razor and lopped off the top of the woods in a clean diagonal cut from the tip of the tree line to the shore. Where the beam had touched down, the ground was marked by a glowing trench that ran all the way to the waterline.

“It worked,” David said in a dazed voice. “It actually worked.”

There was a pause and then Zoya burst out laughing. Sergei joined her, then

Marie and Nadia. Suddenly, we were all laughing and cheering, even moody Tolya, who swept a befuddled David up on his enormous shoulders. Soldiers were hugging Grisha, the King's advisers were hugging the generals, Nikolai was dancing a begoggled Paja around the roof, and the captain of the guard caught me up in a giddy embrace.

We whooped and screamed and bounced up and down, so that the whole palace seemed to shake. When the Darkling decided to march, the *nichevo'ya* would have quite a surprise waiting for them.

"Let's go see it!" someone shouted, and we raced down the stairs like children at the sound of the school bell, giggling and careening off the walls.

We charged through the Hall of the Golden Dome and flung open the doors, tumbling down the steps and outside. As everyone sprinted down to the lake, I skidded to a halt.

Mal was coming up the path from the wooded tunnel.

"Go on," I said to Nikolai. "I'll catch up."

Mal watched the path as he approached, not meeting my gaze. As he drew closer, I saw that his eyes were bloodshot and there was an ugly bruise on his cheekbone.

"What happened?" I asked, lifting a hand toward his face. He ducked away, darting a glance at the servants who stood by the Little Palace doors.

"Ran into a bottle of *kvas*," he said. "Is there something you need?"

"You missed the demonstration."

"I wasn't on duty."

I ignored the painful jab in my chest and pushed on. "We're going down to the lake. Would you like to come?"

For a moment, he seemed to hesitate, then he shook his head. "I just came back to get some coin. There's a card game going at the Grand Palace."

The shard twisted. "You may want to change," I said. "You look like you slept in your clothes." I was instantly sorry I'd said it, but Mal didn't seem to care.

"Maybe because I did," he said. "Is there anything else?"

"No."

"*Moi sovereny*i." He executed a sharp bow and vaulted up the steps as if he couldn't wait to be away from me.

I took my time walking down to the lake, hoping that somehow the ache in my heart would ease. My joy at the success on the roof had drained away, leaving me hollow, like a well someone could shout down and hear nothing back but echoes.

By the shore, a group of Grisha were walking the length of the trench, calling out measurements in growing triumph and elation. It was nearly two feet wide and just as deep, a furrow of charred earth that stretched to the water's edge. In the woods, felled treetops lay in a clutter of branches and bark. I reached out and ran my hand over one of the severed trunks. The wood was smooth, sliced cleanly across, and still warm to the touch. Two small fires had started, but the Tidemakers had quickly put them out.

Nikolai ordered food and champagne brought down to the lake, and we all spent the rest of the evening on the shore. The generals and advisers retired early, but the captain and some of his guard remained. They stripped off their jackets and shoes and waded into the lake, and it wasn't long before everyone decided they didn't care about wet clothes and plunged into the water, splashing and dunking each other, then organizing swim races to the little island. To no one's surprise, a Tidemaker always won, borne aloft by lucky waves.

Nikolai and his Squallers offered to take people up in the recently completed craft he'd dubbed the *Kingfisher*. At first they were wary, but after the first brave group came back flapping their arms and babbling about actually flying, everyone wanted a turn. I'd sworn my feet would never leave the ground again, but finally I gave in and joined them.

Maybe it was the champagne or just that I knew what to expect, but the *Kingfisher* seemed lighter and more graceful than the *Hummingbird*. Though I still gripped the cockpit with both hands, I felt my spirits lift as we rose smoothly into the air.

I gathered my courage and looked down. The rolling grounds of the Grand Palace stretched out below us, crosscut by white gravel paths. I saw the roof of the Grisha greenhouse, the perfect circle of the double eagle fountain, the golden glint of the palace gates. Then we were soaring over the mansions and long, straight boulevards of the upper town. The streets were full of people celebrating Belyanoch. I saw jugglers and stiltwalkers on Gersky Prospect, dancers twirling on a lit stage in one of the parks. Music floated up from the boats on the canal.

I wanted to stay up there forever, surrounded by the flood of wind, watching the tiny, perfect world beneath us. But eventually Nikolai turned the wheel and brought us back to the lake in a slow, descending arc.

The twilight deepened to a lush purple. The Inferni lit bonfires along the lakeshore, and somewhere in the dusk, someone tuned a balalaika. From the town below, I heard the whistle and clap of fireworks.

Nikolai and I sat at the end of the makeshift pier, our trousers rolled up, feet dangling over the side. The *Kingfisher* bobbed beside us, its white sails trimmed.

Nikolai kicked his foot through the water, sending up a little splash. “The dishes change everything,” he said. “If you can keep the *nichevo’ya* busy long enough, we’ll have time to find and target the Darkling.”

I flopped back on the dock, stretching my arms overhead and taking in the blooming violet of the night sky. When I turned my head, I could just make out the shape of the now-empty school building, its windows dark. I would have liked the students to see what the dishes could do, to give them that bit of hope. The prospect of a battle was still frightening, especially when I thought of all the lives that might be lost. But at least we weren’t just sitting on a hilltop waiting to die.

“We may actually have a fighting chance,” I said in amazement.

“Try not to let the excitement overwhelm you, but I have more good news.”

I groaned. I knew that tone of voice. “Don’t say it.”

“Vasily is back from Caryeva.”

“You could do the kind thing and drown me now.”

“And suffer alone? I think not.”

“Maybe for your birthday you can ask that he be fitted with a royal muzzle,” I suggested.

“But then we’d miss all his exciting stories about the summer auctions. You’re fascinated by the breeding superiority of the Ravkan racehorse, right?”

I let out a whimper. Mal was supposed to be on duty for Nikolai’s birthday dinner the following night. Maybe I could get Tolya or Tamar to take his place. Right now, I didn’t think I could handle watching him stand stone-faced at attention all night, especially not with Vasily yammering away.

“Be of good cheer,” said Nikolai. “Maybe he’ll propose again.”

I sat up. “How do you know about that?”

“If you recall, I did pretty much the same thing. I’m just surprised he hasn’t tried a second time.”

“Apparently I’m not easy to get alone.”

“I know,” said Nikolai. “Why do you think I walk you back from the Grand Palace after every meeting?”

“For my sparkling company?” I said sourly, annoyed by the twitch of disappointment I felt at his words. Nikolai was so good at making me forget that everything he did was calculated.

“That too,” he said. He lifted his foot out of the water and scrutinized his wiggling toes. “He’ll get around to it again, eventually.”

I sighed with exaggerated woe. “How does one say no to a prince?”

“You’ve managed it before,” Nikolai said, still contemplating his foot. “And are you so sure you want to?”

“You can’t be serious.”

Nikolai shifted uncomfortably. “Well, he is first in line for the throne, of pure royal stock, and all that.”

“I wouldn’t marry Vasily if he had a pet firebird named Ludmilla, and I couldn’t care less about his royal stock.” I peered at him. “You said the gossip about your bloodlines didn’t bother you.”

“I may not have been completely honest about that.”

“You? Less than truthful? I’m shocked, Nikolai. Shocked and horrified.”

He laughed. “I guess it’s easy to say it doesn’t matter when I’m away from court. But no one here seems to want to let me forget, especially my brother.” He shrugged. “It’s always been this way. There were rumors about me even before I was born. It’s why my mother never calls me Sobachka. She says it makes me sound like a mongrel.”

My heart gave a little pang at that. I’d been called plenty of names growing up.

“I like mongrels,” I said. “They have cute floppy ears.”

“My ears are very dignified.”

I ran my finger over one of the pier’s sleek planks. “Is that why you stayed away so long? Why you became Sturmhond?”

“I don’t know if there’s just one reason. I guess I never felt like I belonged here, so I tried to make a place where I could belong.”

“I never felt like I fit in anywhere either,” I admitted. *Except with Mal.* I pushed the thought away. Then I frowned. “You know what I hate about you?”

He blinked, startled. “No.”

“You always say the right thing.”

“And you hate that?”

“I’ve seen the way you change personas, Nikolai. You’re always what everyone needs you to be. Maybe you never felt like you belonged, or maybe you’re just saying that to make the poor, lonely orphan girl like you more.”

“So you do like me?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, when I don’t want to stab you.”

“It’s a start.”

“No it isn’t.”

He turned to me. In the half-light, his hazel eyes looked like chips of amber.

“I’m a privateer, Alina,” he said quietly. “I’ll take whatever I can get.”

I was suddenly aware of his shoulder resting against mine, the press of his thigh. The air felt warm and smelled sweet with the scent of summer and woodsmoke.

“I want to kiss you,” he said.

“You already kissed me,” I replied with a nervous laugh.

A smile tugged at his lips. “I want to kiss you again,” he amended.

“Oh,” I breathed. His mouth was inches from mine. My heart leapt into a panicked gallop. *This is Nikolai*, I reminded myself. *Pure calculation.* I didn’t even think I wanted him to kiss me. But my pride was still smarting from Mal’s rejection. Hadn’t he said he’d kissed plenty of girls?

“I want to kiss you,” Nikolai said. “But I won’t. Not until you’re thinking of me instead of trying to forget him.”

I shoved backward and lurched awkwardly to my feet, feeling flushed and embarrassed.

“Alina—”

“At least now I know you don’t always say the right thing,” I muttered.

I snatched up my shoes and escaped down the pier.

CHAPTER

20

I STAYED WELL CLEAR of the Grisha bonfires as I strode around the lakeshore. I didn't want to see or talk to anyone.

What had I expected from Nikolai? Distraction? Flirtation? Something to shake the ache in my heart free? Maybe I'd just wanted some petty way to get back at Mal. Or maybe I was so desperate to feel connected to anyone that I would settle for a false kiss from an untrustworthy prince.

The idea of tomorrow night's birthday dinner filled me with dread. Perhaps I could make some excuse, I considered as I stomped across the grounds. I could send a nice note to the Grand Palace sealed with wax and emblazoned with the Sun Summoner's official seal:

To Their Most Royal Majesties, the King and Queen of Ravka:

It is with a sad heart that I must proffer my regrets and inform you that I will be unable to attend the festivities celebrating the birth of Prince Nikolai Lantsov, Grand Duke of Udova.

Unfortunate circumstances have arisen, namely that my best friend can't seem to stand the sight of me, and your son didn't kiss me, and I wish he had. Or I wish he hadn't. Or I'm still not sure what I wish, but there's a very good chance that if I'm forced to sit through his stupid birthday dinner, I'll end up sobbing into my cake.

With best wishes on this most happy of occasions,

Alina Starkov, Idiot

When I reached the Darkling's chambers, Tamar was reading in the common room. She looked up when I entered, but my mood must have shown on my face, because she didn't say a word.

I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep, so I propped myself up in bed with one of the books I'd taken from the library, an old travel guide that listed Ravka's famous monuments. I had the barest hope that it would point me toward the arch.

I tried to focus, but I found myself reading the same sentence again and again. My head was muzzy with champagne, and my feet still felt cold and waterlogged from the lake. Mal might be back from his card game. If I knocked on his door and he answered, what would I say?

I tossed the book aside. I didn't know what to say to Mal. I never did these days. But maybe I could just start with the truth: that I was lost and confused, and maybe losing my mind, that I scared myself sometimes, and that I missed him so much it was like physical pain. I needed to at least try to heal the rift between us before it was completely beyond repair. No matter what he thought of me afterward, it couldn't get much worse. I could survive another rejection, but I couldn't bear the thought that I hadn't even tried to put this right.

I peeked into the common room.

"Is Mal here?" I asked Tamar.

She shook her head.

I swallowed my pride and asked, "Do you know where he went?"

Tamar sighed. "Get your shoes. I'll take you to him."

"Where is he?"

"The stables."

Unsettled, I ducked back into my bedroom and quickly pulled on my shoes. I followed Tamar out of the Little Palace and across the lawns.

"You're sure you want to do this?" Tamar asked.

I didn't reply. Whatever she had to show me, I knew I wasn't going to like it. But I refused to just go back to my room and bury my head under the covers.

We made our way down the gentle slope that led past the *banya*. Horses whinnied in the paddocks. The stables were dark, but the training rooms were ablaze with light. I heard shouting.

The largest training room was little more than a barn with a dirt floor, its walls covered in every weapon imaginable. Usually, it was where Botkin doled

out punishment to Grisha students and put them through their drills. But tonight it was crowded with people, mostly soldiers, some Grisha, even a few servants. They were all shouting and cheering, jostling and jockeying to try to get a better look at whatever was happening at the center of the room.

Unnoticed, Tamar and I worked our way through the crush of bodies. I glimpsed two royal trackers, several members of Nikolai's regiment, a group of Corporalki, and Zoya, who was screaming and clapping with the rest of them.

I'd almost reached the front of the crowd when I caught sight of a Squaller, fists raised, chest bare, stalking his way around the circle the onlookers had formed. *Eskil*, I remembered, one of the Grisha who had been traveling with Fedyor. He was Fjerdan and he looked it—blue eyes, white-blond hair, tall and broad enough that he completely blocked my view.

It's not too late, I thought. *You can still turn around and pretend you were never here.*

I stayed rooted to the spot. I knew what I would see, but it was still a shock when Eskil moved aside and I got my first glimpse of Mal. Like the Squaller, he was stripped to the waist, his muscled torso streaked with dirt and sweat. There were bruises on his knuckles. A trickle of blood coursed down his cheek from a cut below his eye, though he hardly seemed to notice.

The Squaller lunged. Mal blocked the first punch, but the next caught him beneath the kidneys. He grunted, dropped his elbow, and swung hard at the Squaller's jaw.

Eskil bobbed out of Mal's range and scooped his arm through the air in a swooping arc. With a stab of panic, I realized he was summoning. The gust rustled my hair, and in the next second, Mal was blown off his feet by Etherealki wind. Eskil threw out his other arm, and Mal's body shot upward, slamming into the roof of the barn. He hung there for a moment, pinned to the wooden beams by the Grisha's power. Then Eskil let him drop. He crashed to the dirt floor with bone-rattling force.

I screamed, but the sound was lost in the roar of the crowd. One of the Corporalki bellowed encouragement at Eskil while another was shouting at Mal to get up.

I pushed forward, light already blooming from my hands. Tamar grabbed my sleeve.

“He doesn’t want your help,” she said.

“I don’t care,” I yelled. “This isn’t a fair fight. That isn’t allowed!” Grisha were never permitted to use their powers in the training rooms.

“Botkin’s rules don’t apply after dark. Mal’s in the middle of a fight, not a lesson.”

I yanked away from her. Better Mal angry than Mal dead.

He was on his hands and knees, trying to get to his feet. I was amazed he could even move after the Squaller’s attack. Eskil raised his hands again. The air billowed up in a flurry of dust. I called the light to me, not caring what Tamar or Mal had to say about it. But this time, Mal rolled, dodging the current and launching to his feet with surprising speed.

Eskil scowled and scanned the perimeter, considering his options. I knew what he was weighing. He couldn’t just let loose without risking knocking us all down, and maybe part of the stables too. I waited, keeping a tenuous grasp on the light, unsure of what to do.

Mal was breathing hard, bent at the waist, hands resting on his thighs. He’d probably cracked at least one rib. He was lucky he hadn’t broken his spine. I willed him to get back down and stay there. Instead, he forced himself upright, hissing at the pain. He rolled his shoulders, cursed, spat blood. Then, to my horror, he curled his fingers and beckoned the Squaller forward. A cheer went up from the crowd.

“What is he doing?” I moaned. “He’s going to get himself killed.”

“He’ll be fine,” Tamar said. “I’ve seen him take worse.”

“*What?*”

“He fights here almost every night when he’s sober enough. Sometimes when he’s not.”

“He fights Grisha?”

Tamar shrugged. “He’s actually pretty good.”

This was what Mal did with his nights? I remembered all the mornings he’d appeared with bruises and scrapes. What was he trying to prove? I thought of my careless words as we’d returned from the fortune-telling party. *I don’t want the burden of an army of helpless* otkazat’sya.

I wished I could take them back.

The Squaller feinted left, then raised his hands for another attack. Wind blew

through the circle, and I saw Mal's feet lose contact with the floor. I gritted my teeth, sure I was about to see him tossed against the nearest wall. But at the last second, he spun, wrenching away from the blast of air and charging the startled Squaller.

Eskil let out a loud *oof* as Mal clamped his arms around him, keeping the Grisha's limbs pinned so that he couldn't summon his power. The big Fjerdan snarled, muscles straining, teeth bared as he tried to break Mal's hold.

I knew it must have cost him, but Mal tightened his grip. He shifted, then drove his forehead into his opponent's nose with a nauseating *crunch*. Before I could blink, he'd released Eskil and hammered a flurry of punches into the Squaller's gut and sides.

Eskil hunched over, trying to protect himself, struggling for breath as blood gushed over his open mouth. Mal pivoted and delivered a brutal kick to the back of the Squaller's legs. Eskil fell to his knees, swaying, but still somehow upright.

Mal backed away, surveying his work. The crowd was whooping and stomping, their screams rising to a frenzy, but Mal's wary eyes were trained on the kneeling Squaller.

He studied his opponent, then dropped his fists. "Go on," he said to the Grisha. The look on his face sent a chill through me. There was challenge there and a kind of grim satisfaction. What was he seeing when he looked at Eskil on his knees?

Eskil's eyes were glassy. With an effort, the Grisha lifted his palms. The barest breeze fluttered toward Mal. A chorus of boos rose from the crowd.

Mal let it wash over him, then stepped forward. Eskil's weak gust faltered. Mal planted his hand in the center of the Squaller's chest and gave a single, disdainful shove.

Eskil toppled. His big body hit the ground, and he curled in on himself, moaning.

Jeers and elated shrieks erupted all around us. A gleeful soldier grabbed Mal's wrist and lifted it over his head in triumph as money began to change hands.

The crowd surged toward Mal, carrying me with them. Everybody was talking at once. People slapped him on the back, jamming money into his palms. Then Zoya appeared in front of him. She flung her arms around his neck and

pressed her lips against his. I saw him go rigid.

A rushing sound filled my ears, drowning out the noise of the crowd.

Push her away, I begged silently. *Push her away.*

And for a moment, I thought he might. But then his arms closed around her, and he kissed her back as the crowd hooted and cheered.

The bottom fell out of my stomach. It was like putting a foot wrong on a frozen creek, the crack of ice, the sudden drop, the knowledge that there was nothing beneath but dark water.

He pulled away from her, grinning, his cheek still bloodied, and that was when his eyes met mine. His face went white.

Zoya followed his gaze and lifted a defiant brow when she saw me.

I turned and began forcing my way back through the crowd. Tamar fell into step beside me.

"Alina," she said.

"Leave me alone."

I broke away from her. I had to get outside, had to get away from everyone. Tears were beginning to blur my vision. I wasn't sure if they were for the kiss or what had gone before it, but I couldn't let them see. The Sun Summoner didn't cry, especially over one of her *otkazat'sya* guards.

And what right did I have? Hadn't I almost kissed Nikolai? Maybe I could find him now, convince him to kiss me no matter who I was thinking of.

I burst from the stables and into the half-light. The air was warm and thick. I felt like I couldn't breathe. I strode away from the well-lit path by the paddocks and made for the shelter of the birchwood grove.

Someone tugged at my arm.

"Alina," Mal said.

I shook him off and hurried my steps, practically running now.

"Alina, stop," he said, easily keeping pace with me, despite the injuries he'd received.

I ignored him and plunged into the woods. I could smell the hot springs that fed the *banya*, the sharp scent of birch leaves beneath my feet. My throat ached. All I wanted was to be left alone to cry or be sick, maybe both.

"Damn it, Alina, would you please stop?"

I couldn't give in to my hurt, so I gave in to my anger.

“You’re the captain of my guard,” I said, blundering through the trees. “You shouldn’t be brawling like some kind of commoner!”

Mal caught hold of my arm and yanked me around. “I *am* a commoner,” he growled. “Not one of your pilgrims or your Grisha or some pampered watchdog who sits outside your door all night on the off chance that you might need me.”

“Of course not,” I seethed. “You have much better things to do with your time. Like getting drunk and shoving your tongue down Zoya’s throat.”

“At least she doesn’t flinch when I touch her,” he spat. “You don’t want me, so why do you care if she does?”

“I don’t,” I said, but the words came out as a sob.

Mal released me so suddenly that I almost fell backward. He paced away from me, shoving his hands through his hair. The movement made him wince. His fingers tested the flesh at his side. I wanted to yell at him to go find a Healer. I wanted to smash my fist into the break and make it hurt worse.

“Saints,” he swore. “I wish we’d never come here.”

“Then let’s leave,” I said wildly. I knew I wasn’t making any sense, but I didn’t much care. “Let’s run away, tonight, and forget we ever saw this place.”

He let out a bitter bark of laughter. “Do you know how much I want that? To be with you without rank or walls or anything between us? Just to be *common* again together?” He shook his head. “But you won’t do it, Alina.”

“I will,” I said, tears spilling over my cheeks.

“Don’t kid yourself. You’d just find a way back.”

“I don’t know how to fix this,” I said desperately.

“You can’t fix it!” he shouted. “This is the way it is. Did it ever occur to you that maybe you were meant to be a queen and I’m not meant to be anything at all?”

“That isn’t true.”

He stalked toward me, the boughs of the trees making strange shifting shadows across his face in the twilight.

“I’m not a soldier anymore,” he said. “I’m not a prince, and I’m sure as hell not a Saint. So what am I, Alina?”

“I—”

“What am I?” he whispered.

He was close to me now. The scent I knew so well, that dark green scent of

the meadow, was lost beneath the smell of sweat and blood.

"Am I your guardian?" he asked.

He ran his hand slowly down my arm, from shoulder to fingertips.

"Your friend?"

His left hand skimmed down my other arm.

"Your servant?"

I could feel his breath on my lips. My heart thundered in my ears.

"Tell me what I am." He pulled me against his body, his hand circling my wrist.

When his fingers closed, a sharp jolt rocked through me, buckling my knees. The world tilted, and I gasped. Mal dropped my hand as if he'd been burned.

He backed away from me, stunned. "What was that?"

I tried to blink away the dizziness.

"What the hell was that?" he said again.

"I don't know." My fingers still tingled.

A humorless smile twisted his lips. "It's never easy with us, is it?"

I shoved to my feet, suddenly angry. "No, Mal, it isn't. It's never going to be easy or sweet or comfortable with me. I can't just leave the Little Palace. I can't run away or pretend that this isn't who I am, because if I do, more people will die. I can't ever just be Alina again. That girl is gone."

"I want her back," he said roughly.

"I can't go back!" I screamed, not caring who heard me. "Even if you take away this collar and the sea whip's scales, you can't carve this power out of me."

"And what if I could? Would you let it go? Would you give it up?"

"Never."

The truth of that word hung between us. We stood there, in the darkness of the woods, and I felt the shard in my heart shift. I knew what it would leave behind when the pain was gone: loneliness, nothingness, a deep fissure that would not mend, the desperate edge of the abyss I had once glimpsed in the Darkling's eyes.

"Let's go," Mal said at last.

"Where?"

"Back to the Little Palace. I'm not going to just leave you in the woods."

We walked up the hill in silence and entered the palace through the Darkling's chambers. The common room was blessedly empty.

At the door to my room, I turned to Mal.

"I see him," I said. "I see the Darkling. In the library. In the chapel. That time on the Fold when the *Hummingbird* nearly crashed. In my room, the night you tried to kiss me."

He stared at me.

"I don't know if they're visions or visitations. I didn't tell you because I think I might be going mad. And because I think you're already a little afraid of me."

Mal opened his mouth, closed it, tried again. Even then, I hoped he might deny it. Instead, he turned his back on me. He crossed to the guards' quarters, stopping only to snatch a bottle of *kvas* from the table, and softly shut the door behind him.

I got ready for bed and eased between the sheets, but the night was too warm. I kicked them into a tangle at my feet. I lay on my back gazing up at the obsidian dome marked by constellations. I wanted to bang on Mal's door, tell him I was sorry, that I'd made a terrible mess of things, that we should have marched into Os Alta that first day hand in hand. But would it have mattered in the end?

There is no ordinary life for people like you and me.

No ordinary life. Just battle and fear and mysterious crackling jolts that rocked us back on our heels. I'd spent so many years wishing to be the kind of girl that Mal could want. Maybe that wasn't possible anymore.

There are no others like us, Alina. And there never will be.

When the tears came, they burned hot and angry. I turned my face into my pillow so that no one would hear me cry. I wept, and when there was nothing left, I fell into a troubled sleep.

* * *

"ALINA."

I woke to the soft brush of Mal's lips on mine, the barest touch to my temple, my eyelids, my brow. The light from the guttering flame on my bedside table glinted off his brown hair as he bent to kiss the curve of my throat.

For a moment, I hesitated, confused, not quite awake, then I wrapped my

arms around him and pulled him closer. I didn't care that we'd fought, that he'd kissed Zoya, that he'd walked away from me, that everything felt so impossible. The only thing that mattered was that he'd changed his mind. He'd come back, and I wasn't alone.

"I missed you, Mal," I murmured against his ear. "I missed you so much."

My arms glided up his back and twined around his neck. He kissed me again, and I sighed into the welcome press of his mouth. I felt his weight slide over me and ran my hands over the hard muscles of his arms. If Mal was still with me, if he could still love me, then there was hope. My heart was pounding in my chest as warmth spread through me. There was no sound but our breathing and the shift of our bodies together. He was kissing my throat, my collarbone, drinking my skin. I shivered and pressed closer to him.

This was what I wanted, wasn't it? To find some way to heal the breach between us? Still, a sliver of panic cut through me. I needed to see his face, to know we were all right. I cupped his head with my hands, tilting his chin, and as my gaze met his, I shrank back in terror.

I looked into Mal's eyes—his familiar blue eyes that I knew even better than my own. Except they weren't blue. In the dying lamplight, they glimmered quartz gray.

He smiled then, a cold, clever smile like none I'd ever seen on his lips.

"I missed you too, Alina." That voice. Cool and smooth as glass.

Mal's features melted into shadow and then formed again like a face from the mist. Pale, beautiful, that thick shock of black hair, the perfect sweep of jaw.

The Darkling rested one gentle hand on my cheek. "Soon," he whispered.

I screamed. He broke into shadows and vanished.

I scrambled out of bed, clutching my arms around myself. My skin was crawling, my body quaking with terror and the memory of desire. I expected Tamar or Tolya to come bursting through the door. Already, I had a lie on my lips.

"Nightmare," I would say. And the word would come out steady, convincing, despite the rattling of my heart in my chest and the new scream I felt building in my throat.

But the room stayed silent. No one came. I stood shaking in the near dark.

I took a shallow, trembling breath. Then another.

When my legs felt steady enough, I pulled on my robe and peeked into the common room. It was empty.

I closed my door and pressed my back against it, staring at the rumpled covers of the bed. I was not going back to sleep. I might never sleep again. I glanced at the clock on the mantel. Sunrise came early during Belyanoch, but it would be hours before the palace woke.

I dug through the pile of clothes that I'd kept from our journey on the *Volkvolny* and pulled out a drab brown coat and a long scarf. It was too hot for either, but I didn't care. I drew the coat on over my nightshift, wrapped the scarf around my head and neck, and tugged on my shoes.

As I crept through the common room, I saw the door to the guards' quarters was closed. If Mal or the twins were inside, they must be sleeping deeply. Or maybe Mal was somewhere else beneath the domes of the Little Palace, tangled in Zoya's arms. My heart gave a sick twist. I took the doors to the left and hurried through the darkened halls, into the silent grounds.

CHAPTER 21

I DRIFTED THROUGH the half-light, past the silent lawns covered in mist, the clouded windows of the greenhouse. The only sound was the soft crunch of my shoes on the gravel path. The morning deliveries of bread and produce were being made at the Grand Palace, and I followed the caravan of wagons straight out the gates and through the cobblestone streets of the upper town. There were still a few revelers about, enjoying the twilight. I saw two people in party dress snoozing on a park bench. A group of girls laughed and splashed in a fountain, their skirts hiked up to their knees. A man wearing a wreath of poppies sat on a curb with his head in his hands while a girl in a paper crown patted his shoulder. I passed them all unseen and unremarked upon, an invisible girl in a drab brown coat.

I knew I was being foolish. The Apparat's spies might be watching, or the Darkling's. I might be seized and hauled away at any moment. I wasn't sure it mattered to me anymore. I needed to keep walking, to fill my lungs with clean air, to shake the feeling of the Darkling's hands on my skin.

I touched the scar at my shoulder. Even through the fabric of my coat, I could feel its raised edges. Aboard the whaler, I'd asked the Darkling why he'd let his monster bite me. I'd thought it was out of spite, so I would always wear his mark. Maybe there had been more to it than that.

Had the vision been real? Was he there, or was he something my mind had conjured? What sickness was inside of me that I would dream such a thing?

But I didn't want to think. I just wanted to walk.

I crossed the canal, the little boats bobbing in the water below. From

somewhere beneath the bridge, I heard the wheeze of an accordion.

I floated past the guard gate and into the narrow streets and clutter of the market town. It seemed even more crowded than it had before. People hung off stoops and overflowed from porches. Some played cards on makeshift tables made of boxes. Others slept propped up against each other. A couple swayed slowly on a tavern porch to music only they could hear.

When I came to the city walls, I told myself to stop, to turn around and go home. I almost laughed. The Little Palace wasn't really home.

There is no ordinary life for people like you and me.

My life would be allegiance instead of love, fealty instead of friendship. I would weigh each decision, consider every action, trust no one. It would be life observed from a distance.

I knew I should go back, but I kept on, and a moment later, I was on the other side of the wall. Just like that, I'd left Os Alta.

The tent city had grown. There were hundreds of people camped outside the walls, maybe thousands. The pilgrims weren't hard to find—I was surprised to see how their numbers had increased. They crowded near a large white tent, all facing east, awaiting the early sunrise.

The sound began as a swell of rustling whispers that fluttered on the air like the wings of birds and grew to a low hum as the sun peered over the horizon and lit the sky pale blue. Only then did I begin to make out the words.

Sankta. Sankta Alina. Sankta. Sankta Alina.

The pilgrims watched the growing dawn, and I watched them, unable to look away from their hope, their expectation. Their faces were exultant, and as the first rays of sun broke over them, some began to weep.

The hum rose and multiplied, cresting and falling, building to a wail that raised the hair on my arms. It was a creek overflowing its banks, a hive of bees shaken from a tree.

Sankta. Sankta Alina. Daughter of Ravka.

I closed my eyes as the sun played over my skin, praying I would feel something, anything.

Sankta Alina. Daughter of Keramzin.

Their hands lifted heavenward, their voices rose to a frenzy, shouting now, crying out. Old faces, young ones, the sick and the frail, the healthy and the

strong. Strangers every one.

I looked around me. *This isn't hope,* I thought. *It's madness. It's hunger, need, desperation*. I felt as if I were waking from a trance. Why had I come here? I was more alone among these people than behind the palace walls. They had nothing to give me, and I had nothing to offer them.

My feet ached, and I realized just how tired I was. I turned and began pushing my way back through the crowd, toward the city gates, as the chanting reached a roaring clamor.

Sankta, they shouted. *Sol Koroleva. Rebe Dva Stolba.*

Daughter of Two Mills. I'd heard that before, on the journey to Os Alta, a valley named after some ancient ruin, home to a sprawl of tiny, unimportant settlements on the southern border. Mal had been born near there too, but we'd never had a chance to go back. And what would have been the point? Any bit of family we might have had was long buried or burned.

Sankta Alina.

I thought again of my few memories from before Keramzin, of the dish of sliced beets, my fingers stained red with them. I remembered the dusty road, seen from someone's broad shoulders, the sway of ox tails, our shadows on the ground. A hand pointing out the ruins of the mills, two narrow fingers of rock, worn down to bare spindles by wind, rain, and time. That was all that remained in my memory. The rest was Keramzin. The rest was Mal.

Sankta Alina.

I shoved my way through the mass of bodies, pulling my scarf tighter around my ears to try to block out the noise. An old pilgrim woman stepped into my path, and I nearly knocked her over. I reached out to steady her, and she latched on to me, barely keeping her balance.

"Forgive me, *babya,*" I said formally. Never let it be said that Ana Kuya hadn't taught us manners. I gently set the woman back on her feet. "Are you all right?"

But she wasn't looking at my face—she was staring at my throat. My hand flew up to my neck. It was too late. The scarf had slipped free.

"Sankta," the woman moaned. "Sankta!" She fell to her knees and seized my hand, pressing it to her wrinkled cheek. "Sankta Alina!"

Suddenly there were hands all around me, grasping at my sleeves, the hem of

my coat.

“Please,” I said, trying to push away from them.

Sankta Alina. Muttered, whispered, wailed, shouted. My name was strange to me, spoken like a prayer, a foreign incantation to keep away the dark.

They crowded around me, closer and closer, jostling to get near, reaching out to feel my hair, my skin. I heard something rip and realized it was the fabric of my coat.

Sankta. Sankta Alina.

The bodies pressed tighter, pushing and shoving, shouting at each other, each wanting to get nearer. My feet lost contact with the ground. I cried out as a chunk of my hair was ripped from my scalp. They were going to tear me apart.

Let them do it, I thought with sudden clarity. It could be over that easily. No more fear, no more responsibility, no more nightmares of broken skiffs or children devoured by the Fold, no more visions. I could be free from the collar, from the fetter, from the crushing weight of their hope. *Let them do it.*

I closed my eyes. This would be my ending. They could give me a page in the *Istorii Sankt’ya* and put a gold halo around my head. Alina the Heartsick, Alina the Petty, Alina the Mad, Daughter of Dva Stolba, torn to pieces one morning in the shadow of the city walls. They could sell my bones by the side of the road.

Someone screamed. I heard an angry shout. Massive hands took hold of me, and I was lifted into the air.

I opened my eyes and saw Tolya’s grim face. He had me in his arms.

Tamar was beside him, palms up, turning in a slow arc.

“Stay back,” she warned the crowd. I saw some of the pilgrims blink sleepily, a few simply sat down. She was slowing their heart rates, trying to calm them, but there were just too many. A man dove forward. Like a flash, Tamar had drawn her axes. The man bellowed as a red streak bloomed on his arm.

“Come closer, and you’ll lose it,” she snapped.

The pilgrims’ faces were wild.

“Let me help,” I protested.

Tolya ignored me, pushing his way through the crowd; Tamar circled around him, blades in motion, widening the path. The pilgrims groaned and wailed, their arms outstretched, straining toward me.

“Now,” Tolya said. Then louder, “Now!”

He bolted. My head banged against his chest as we plunged toward the safety of the city walls, Tamar at our heels. The guards had already seen the turmoil erupting and had started to close the gates.

Tolya bulled forward, knocking people from his path, charging through the narrowing gap between the iron doors. Tamar slipped in after us, seconds before the gates clanged shut. On the other side, I heard the thump of bodies pounding against the doors, hands clawing, voices raised in hunger. Still I heard my name. *Sankta Alina.*

“What the hell were you thinking?” Tolya bellowed as he set me down.

“Later,” Tamar said curtly.

The city guards were glaring at me. “Get her out of here,” one of them yelled angrily. “We’ll be lucky if we don’t have a full-fledged riot on our hands.”

The twins had horses waiting. Tamar yanked a blanket from a market stall and threw it around my shoulders. I clutched it to my neck, hiding the collar. She leapt into her saddle, and Tolya tossed me up unceremoniously behind her.

We rode in harried silence all the way back to the palace gates. The unrest outside the city walls had not yet spread within, and all we garnered were a few questioning looks.

The twins didn’t say a word, but I could tell they were furious. They had every right to be. I’d behaved like an idiot, and now I could only hope that the guards below could restore order without resorting to violence.

Yet beneath the panic and regret, an idea had entered my mind. I told myself it was nonsense, wishful thinking, but I could not shake it.

When we arrived back at the Little Palace, the twins wanted to escort me straight to the Darkling’s rooms, but I refused.

“I’m safe now,” I said. “There’s something I need to do.”

They insisted on trailing me to the library.

It didn’t take me long to find what I wanted. I’d been a mapmaker, after all. I tucked the book under my arm and returned to my room with my scowling guards in tow.

To my surprise, Mal was waiting in the common room. He was seated at the table, nursing a glass of tea.

“Where were—” Mal began, but Tolya had him out of his chair and slammed

against the wall before I could even blink.

"Where were *you*?" he snarled into Mal's face.

"Tolya!" I shouted in alarm. I tried to pull his hand from around Mal's throat, but it was like trying to bend a steel bar. I turned to Tamar for help, but she stood back, arms crossed, looking just as angry as her brother.

Mal made a choking sound. He hadn't changed his clothes from last night. There was stubble on his chin, and the smell of blood and *kvas* hung on him like a dirty coat.

"Saints, Tolya! Would you just put him down?"

For a moment, Tolya looked like he had every intention of crushing the life out of him, but then he relaxed his fingers and Mal slid down the wall, coughing and gulping air.

"It was your shift," Tolya rumbled, jabbing a finger at Mal's chest. "You should have been with her."

"I'm sorry," Mal rasped, rubbing at his throat. "I must have fallen asleep. I was right next—"

"You were at the bottom of a bottle," Tolya seethed. "I can smell it on you."

"I'm sorry," Mal said again, miserably.

"*Sorry?*" Tolya's fists flexed. "I ought to tear you apart."

"You can dismember him later," I said. "Right now I need you to find Nikolai and tell him to meet me in the war room. I'm going to go change."

I crossed to my room and closed the doors behind me, trying to pull myself together. So far today, I'd nearly died and possibly started a riot. Maybe I could set fire to something before breakfast.

I washed my face and changed into my *kefta*, then hurried to the war room. Mal was waiting there, slumped in a chair, though I hadn't invited him. He'd changed clothes, but he still looked rumpled and red-eyed. There were fresh bruises on his face from the previous night. He glanced up at me as I entered, saying nothing. Would there ever be a time when it didn't hurt to look at him?

I set the atlas on the long table and crossed to the ancient map of Ravka that ran the length of the far wall. Of all the maps in the war room, this one was by far the oldest and most beautiful. I trailed my fingers over the raised ridges of the Sikurzoi, the mountains that marked Ravka's southernmost border with the Shu, then followed them down into the western foothills. The valley of Dva Stolba

was too small to be marked on this map.

"Do you remember anything?" I asked Mal without looking at him. "From before Keramzin?"

Mal hadn't been much older than I was when he came to the orphanage. I still remembered the day he'd arrived. I'd heard another refugee was coming, and I'd hoped it would be a girl for me to play with. Instead I'd gotten a pudgy, blue-eyed boy who would do anything on a dare.

"No." His voice still sounded rough from the near choking he'd received at Tolya's hands.

"Nothing?"

"I used to have dreams about a woman with long gold hair in a braid. She would dangle it in front of me like a toy."

"Your mother?"

"Mother, aunt, neighbor. How should I know? Alina, about what happened —"

"Anything else?"

He contemplated me for a long moment, then sighed and said, "Every time I smell licorice, I remember sitting on a porch with a red painted chair in front of me. That's it. Everything else…" He trailed off with a shrug.

He didn't have to explain. Memories were a luxury meant for other children, not the Keramzin orphans. *Be grateful. Be grateful.*

"Alina," Mal tried again, "what you said about the Darkling—"

But at that moment, Nikolai entered. Despite the early hour, he looked every inch the prince, blond hair gleaming, boots polished to a high shine. He took in Mal's bruises and stubble, then raised his brows and said, "Don't suppose anyone's rung for tea?"

He sat down and stretched his long legs out before him. Tolya and Tamar had taken up their posts, but I asked them to close the door and join us.

When they were all assembled around the table, I said, "I went among the pilgrims this morning."

Nikolai's head snapped up. In an instant, the easygoing prince had vanished. "I think I must have misheard you."

"I'm fine."

"She was almost killed," said Tamar.

“But I wasn’t,” I added.

“Are you completely out of your mind?” Nikolai asked. “Those people are fanatics.” He turned on Tamar. “How could you let her do something like that?”

“I didn’t,” said Tamar.

“Tell me you didn’t go alone,” he said to me.

“I didn’t go alone.”

“She went alone.”

“Tamar, shut up. Nikolai, I told you, I’m fine.”

“Only because we got there in time,” said Tamar.

“How did you get there?” Mal asked quietly. “How did you find her?”

Tolya’s face went dark, and he pounded one of his giant fists down on the table. “We shouldn’t have had to find her,” he said. “You had the watch.”

“Leave it alone, Tolya,” I said sharply. “Mal wasn’t where he should have been, and I’m perfectly capable of being stupid on my own.”

I took a breath. Mal looked desolate. Tolya looked like he was about to smash several pieces of furniture. Tamar’s face was stony, and Nikolai was about as angry as I’d ever seen him. But at least I had their attention.

I pushed the atlas to the center of the table. “There’s a name the pilgrims use for me sometimes,” I said. “Daughter of Dva Stolba.”

“Two Mills?” said Nikolai.

“A valley, named after the ruins at its mouth.”

I opened the atlas to the page I had marked. There was a detailed map of the southwestern border. “Mal and I are from somewhere around here,” I said, running my finger along the edge of the map. “The settlements stretch all along this area.”

I turned the page to an illustration of a road leading into a valley studded with towns. On either side of the road stood a slender spindle of rock.

“They don’t look like much,” grumbled Tolya.

“Exactly,” I said. “Those ruins are ancient. Who knows how long they’ve been there or what they might have been? The valley is called Two Mills, but maybe they were part of a gatehouse or an aqueduct.” I curved my finger across the spindles. “Or an arch.”

A sudden silence descended over the room. With the arch in the foreground and the mountains in the distance, the ruins looked exactly like the view behind

Sankt Ilya in the *Istorii Sankt'ya*. The only thing missing was the firebird.

Nikolai pulled the atlas toward him. "Are we just seeing what we want to see?"

"Maybe," I admitted. "But it's hard to believe it's a coincidence."

"We'll send scouts," he suggested.

"No," I said. "I want to go."

"If you leave now, everything you've accomplished with the Second Army will be undone. I'll go. If Vasily can run off to Caryeva to buy ponies, then no one will mind if I take a little hunting trip."

I shook my head. "I have to be the one to kill the firebird."

"We don't even know it's there."

"Why are we even discussing it?" asked Mal. "We all know it's going to be me."

Tamar and Tolya exchanged an uneasy glance.

Nikolai cleared his throat. "With all due respect, Oretsev, you don't quite seem at your best."

"I'm fine."

"Have you looked in a mirror lately?"

"I think you do that enough for the both of us," Mal shot back. Then he scrubbed a hand over his face, looking more weary than ever. "I'm too tired and too hungover to argue this. I'm the only one who can find the firebird. It has to be me."

"I'm going with you," I said.

"No," he said with surprising force. "I'll hunt it. I'll capture it. I'll bring it back to you. But you're not coming with me."

"It's too risky," I protested. "Even if you caught it, how would you get it back here?"

"Get one of your Fabrikators to rig something up for me," he said. "This is best for everyone. You get the firebird, and I get free of this saintsforsaken place."

"You can't travel by yourself. You—"

"Then give me Tolya or Tamar. We'll travel faster and draw less attention on our own." Mal pushed his chair back and stood. "You figure it out. Make whatever arrangements you want." He didn't look at me when he said, "Just tell

me when I can leave."

Before I could raise another objection, he was gone.

I turned away, fighting to hold back the tears that threatened. Behind me, I heard Nikolai murmuring instructions to the twins as they departed.

I studied the map. Poliznaya, where we'd done our military service. Ryevost, where we'd begun our journey into the Petrazoi. Tsibeya, where he'd kissed me for the first time.

Nikolai laid his hand on my shoulder. I didn't know whether I wanted to swat it away or turn and fall into his arms. What would he do if I did? Pat my back? Kiss me? Propose?

"It's for the best, Alina."

I laughed bitterly. "Have you ever noticed people only say that when it isn't true?"

He dropped his hand. "He doesn't belong here."

He belongs with me, I wanted to shout. But I knew it wasn't true. I thought of Mal's bruised face, of him pacing back and forth like a caged animal, of him spitting blood and beckoning to Eskil for more. *Go on.* I thought of him holding me in his arms as we crossed the True Sea. The map blurred as my eyes filled with tears.

"Let him go," said Nikolai.

"Go where? Chasing after some mythical creature that may not even exist? On some impossible quest into mountains crawling with Shu?"

"Alina," Nikolai said softly, "that's what heroes do."

"I don't want him to be a hero!"

"He can't change who he is any more than you can stop being Grisha."

It was an echo of what I'd said only hours ago, but I didn't want to hear it.

"You don't care what happens to Mal," I said angrily. "You just want to get rid of him."

"If I wanted you to fall out of love with Mal, I'd make him stay here. I'd let him keep soaking his troubles in *kvas* and acting like a wounded ass. But is this really the life you want for him?"

I took a shaky breath. It wasn't. I knew that. Mal was miserable here. He'd been suffering since the moment we arrived, but I had refused to see it. I'd railed at him for wanting me to be something I couldn't, and all the while, I'd

demanded the same thing from him. I brushed the tears from my cheeks. There was no point to arguing with Nikolai. Mal had been a soldier. He wanted purpose. Here it was, if I would just let him take it.

And why not admit it? Even as I protested, there was another voice inside me, a greedy, shameful hunger that demanded completion, that clamored for Mal to go out and find the firebird, that insisted he bring it back to me, no matter the cost. I'd told Mal that the girl he knew was gone. Better for him to leave before he saw just how true that was.

I let my fingers drift over the illustration of Dva Stolba. Two mills, or something more? Who could say when there was nothing left but ruins?

"You know the problem with heroes and saints, Nikolai?" I asked as I closed the book's cover and headed for the door. "They always end up dead."

CHAPTER 22

MAL AVOIDED ME all afternoon, so I was surprised when he showed up with Tamar to escort me to Nikolai's birthday dinner. I'd assumed he'd get Tolya to take his place. Maybe he was making amends for missing his previous shift.

I'd given serious thought to not attending the dinner myself, but there didn't seem to be much point. I couldn't think of a likely excuse, and my absence would just offend the King and Queen.

I'd dressed in a light *kefta* made of shimmering panels of sheer gold silk. The bodice was set with sapphires of deep Summoner's blue that matched the jewels in my hair.

Mal's eyes flickered over me as I entered the common room, and it occurred to me that the colors would have suited Zoya better. Then I had to wonder at myself. Gorgeous as she might be, Zoya wasn't the problem. Mal was leaving. I was letting him go. There was no one else to blame for the rift between us.

Dinner was held in one of the sumptuous dining rooms of the Grand Palace, a chamber known as the Eagle's Nest for the massive frieze on its ceiling depicting the crowned double eagle, a scepter in one talon and a cluster of black arrows bound by red, blue, and purple ribbons in the other. Its feathers had been wrought in real gold, and I couldn't help but think of the firebird.

The table was crowded with the highest-ranking generals of the First Army and their wives, as well as all the most prominent Lantsov uncles, aunts, and cousins. The Queen sat at one end of the table looking like a crumpled flower in pale rose silk. At the opposite end, Vasily sat next to the King, pretending not to notice as his father ogled an officer's young wife. Nikolai held court at center

table, with me beside him, his charm sparkling as always.

He'd asked that no ball be thrown in his honor. It didn't seem fitting with so many refugees going hungry outside the city walls. But it was Belyanoch, and the King and Queen didn't seem able to restrain themselves. The meal consisted of thirteen courses, including a whole suckling pig and a life-size gelatin mold cast in the shape of a fawn.

When the time came for gifts, Nikolai's father presented him with an enormous egg glazed in pale blue. It opened to reveal an exquisite miniature ship set on a lapis sea. Sturmhond's red dog banner flew from the ship's mast, and its little cannon fired with a *pop* that released the tiniest puff of white smoke.

Throughout the meal, I listened to the conversation with one ear while I studied Mal. The King's guards were placed at intervals along each wall. I knew Tamar stood somewhere behind me, but Mal was directly across from me, standing at rigid attention, hands behind his back, eyes straight ahead in the blank focus of all anonymous servants. It was like some kind of torture, watching him this way. We were just a few feet apart, but it felt like miles. And hadn't that been the way of it since we'd come to Os Alta? There was a knot in my chest that seemed to grow tighter every time I glanced at him. He'd shaved and had his hair trimmed. His uniform was neatly pressed. He looked weary and distant, but he looked like Mal again.

The nobles raised toasts to Nikolai's health. The generals praised his military leadership and courage. I expected to see Vasily sneer at all the praise being heaped onto his brother, but he looked positively cheery. His face was rosy with wine, and there was what could only be described as a smug smile on his lips. His trip to Caryeva seemed to have left him in a good mood.

My eyes flitted back to Mal. I didn't know whether I wanted to cry or stand up and start hurling dishes against the wall. The room felt too warm, and the wound at my shoulder had started to itch and pull again. I had to resist the urge to reach up and scratch it.

Great, I thought dismally. *Maybe I'll have another hallucination in the middle of the dining room, and the Darkling will climb out of the soup tureen.*

Nikolai bent his head and whispered, "I know my company doesn't count for much, but could you at least try? You look like you're about to burst into tears."

"Sorry," I murmured. "I'm just…"

“I know,” he said, and gave my hand a squeeze beneath the table. “But that gelatin deer gave its life for your entertainment.”

I tried to smile, and I did make an effort. I laughed and chatted with the round, red-faced general on my right and pretended to care as the freckled Lantsov boy across from me rambled on about repairs to the dacha he’d inherited.

When the flavored ices had been served, Vasily rose to his feet and lifted a glass of champagne.

“Brother,” he said, “it is good to be able to toast your birth this day and to celebrate with you when you have spent so long on other shores. I salute you and drink to your honor. To your health, little brother!”

“*Ne zalost!*” chorused the guests, drinking deeply from their glasses and resuming their conversations.

But Vasily wasn’t finished. He tapped the side of his glass with his fork, producing a loud *clink clink clink* that regained the party’s attention.

“Today,” he said, “we have more to celebrate than my brother’s *noble* birth.”

If the emphasis weren’t enough, Vasily’s smirk would have been. Nikolai continued to smile pleasantly.

“As you all know,” Vasily continued, “I have been traveling these last weeks.”

“And no doubt spending,” chortled the red-faced general. “Have to build yourself a new stable soon, I suspect.”

Vasily’s glare was icy. “I did not go to Caryeva. Instead, I journeyed north on a mission sanctioned by our dear father.”

Beside me, Nikolai went very still.

“After long and arduous negotiations, I am pleased to announce that Fjerda has agreed to join us in our fight against the Darkling. They have pledged both troops and resources to our cause.”

“Can this be?” asked one of the noblemen.

Vasily’s chest swelled with pride. “It can. At long last and through no small effort, our fiercest enemy has become our most powerful ally.”

The guests broke out into excited conversation. The King beamed and embraced his eldest son. “*Ne Ravka!*” he shouted, lifting his champagne.

“*Ne Ravka!*” sang the guests.

I was surprised to see Nikolai frowning. He'd said his brother liked shortcuts, and it seemed Vasily had found one. But it wasn't like Nikolai to let his disappointment or frustration show.

"An extraordinary achievement, brother. I salute you," Nikolai said, lifting his glass. "Dare I ask what they wanted in return for this support?"

"They do drive a hard bargain," Vasily said with an indulgent laugh. "But nothing too onerous. They sought access to our ports in West Ravka and requested our help policing the southern trade routes against Zemeni pirates. I imagine you'll be of some assistance with that, brother," he said with another warm chuckle. "They wanted a few of the northern logging roads reopened, and once the Darkling is defeated, they expect the cooperation of the Sun Summoner in our joint efforts to push back the Fold."

He grinned broadly at me. I bridled a little at his presumption, but it was an obvious and reasonable request, and even the leader of the Second Army was a subject of the King. I gave what I hoped was a dignified nod.

"Which roads?" asked Nikolai.

Vasily waved his hand dismissively. "They're somewhere south of Halmhend, west of the permafrost. They're sufficiently defended by the fort at Ulensk if the Fjerdans get any ideas."

Nikolai stood up, his chair scraping loudly against the parquet floor. "When did you lift the blockades? How long have the roads been open?"

Vasily shrugged. "What difference—"

"*How long?*"

The wound at my shoulder throbbed.

"A little over a week," Vasily said. "Surely you're not concerned that the Fjerdans intend to march on us from Ulensk? The rivers won't freeze for months, and until then—"

"Did you ever stop to consider why they might concern themselves with a logging route?"

Vasily gave a disinterested wave. "I assume because they're in need of timber," he said. "Or maybe it's sacred to one of their ridiculous woodsprites."

There was nervous laughter around the table.

"It's defended by a single fort," Nikolai growled.

"Because the passage is too narrow to accommodate any real force."

“You are waging an old war, brother. The Darkling doesn’t need a battalion of foot soldiers or heavy guns. All he needs are his Grisha and the *nichevo’ya.* We have to evacuate the palace immediately.”

“Don’t be absurd!”

“Our one advantage was early warning, and the scouts at those blockades were our first defense. They were our eyes, and you blinded us. The Darkling could be mere miles from us by now.”

Vasily shook his head sadly. “You make yourself ridiculous.”

Nikolai slammed his hands down on the table. The dishes jumped with a loud rattle. “Why isn’t the Fjerdan delegation here to share in your glory? To toast this unprecedented alliance?”

“They sent their regrets. They were not able to travel immediately, due—”

“They’re not here because there’s about to be a massacre. Their pact is with the Darkling.”

“All of our intelligence puts him in the south with the Shu.”

“You think he doesn’t have spies? That he doesn’t have his own operatives within our network? He laid a trap that any child could recognize, and you walked right into it.”

Vasily’s face turned purple.

“Nikolai, surely—” his mother objected.

“The fort at Ulensk is manned by a full regiment,” put in one of the generals.

“You see?” said Vasily. “This is fearmongering of the worst kind, and I will not stand for it.”

“A regiment against an army of *nichevo’ya*? Everyone at that fort is already dead,” said Nikolai, “sacrificed to your pride and stupidity.”

Vasily’s hand went to his sword hilt. “You overreach, you little bastard.”

The Queen gasped.

Nikolai released a harsh laugh. “Yes, call me out, brother. A lot of good it will do. Look around this table,” he said. “Every general, every nobleman of high rank, most of the Lantsov line, *and* the Sun Summoner. All in one place, on one night.”

A number of faces at the table went suddenly pale.

“Perhaps,” said the freckle-faced boy across from me, “we should consider —”

“No!” said Vasily, his lip trembling. “This is his own petty jealousy! He cannot stand to see me succeed. He—”

The warning bells began to ring, distant at first, down near the city walls, one and then another, joining each other in a rising chorus of alarm that echoed up the streets of Os Alta, through the upper town, and over the walls of the Grand Palace.

“You’ve handed him Ravka,” said Nikolai.

The guests rose, pushing back from the table in a gabble of panic.

Mal was at my side immediately, his saber already drawn.

“We have to get to the Little Palace,” I said, thinking of the mirrored dishes mounted on the roof. “Where’s Tamar?”

The windows exploded.

Glass rained down on us. I threw up my arms to shield my face and the guests screamed, huddling against each other.

The *nichevo’ya* swarmed into the room on wings of molten shadow, filling the air with the whirring buzz of insects.

“Get the King to safety!” Nikolai cried, unsheathing his sword and running to his mother’s side.

The palace guards stood paralyzed, frozen in terror.

A shadow lifted the freckled boy from his feet and threw him against the wall. He slid to the ground, his neck broken.

I raised my hands, but the room was too crowded for me to risk using the Cut.

Vasily still stood at the table, the King cowering beside him.

“You did this!” he screamed at Nikolai. “You and the witch!”

He lifted his saber high and charged, bellowing with rage. Mal stepped in front of me, raising his sword to block the blow. But before Vasily could bring down his weapon, a *nichevo’ya* grabbed hold of him and tore his arm from its socket, sword and all. He stood for a moment, swaying, blood pumping from his wound, then dropped to the floor in a lifeless heap.

The Queen began to shriek hysterically. She shoved forward, trying to reach her son’s body, feet slipping in his blood as Nikolai held her back.

“Don’t,” he pleaded, wrapping his arms around her. “He’s gone, *Madraya.* He’s gone.”

Another pack of *nichevo'ya* descended from the windows, clawing their way toward Nikolai and his mother.

I had to take a chance. I brought the light down in two blazing arcs, cutting through one monster after another, barely missing one of the generals who crouched cowering on the floor. People were screaming and weeping as the *nichevo'ya* fell upon them.

"To me!" Nikolai shouted, herding his mother and father toward the door. We followed with the guards, backing our way into the hall, and ran.

The Grand Palace had erupted into chaos. Panicked servants and footmen crowded the corridors, some scrambling for the entrance, others barricading themselves into rooms. I heard wailing, the sound of breaking glass. A *boom* sounded from somewhere outside.

Let it be the Fabrikators, I thought desperately.

Mal and I burst from the palace and careened down the marble steps. A screech of twisting metal rent the air. I looked down the white gravel path in time to see the golden gates of the Grand Palace blown off their hinges by a wall of Etherealki wind. The Darkling's Grisha streamed onto the grounds in their brightly colored *kefta*.

We pelted down the path toward the Little Palace. Nikolai and the royal guards trailed behind us, slowed by his frail father.

At the entrance to the wooded tunnel, the King bent double, wheezing badly as the Queen wept and held tight to his arm.

"I have to get them to the *Kingfisher*," said Nikolai.

"Take the long way around," I said. "The Darkling will be headed to the Little Palace first. He'll be coming for me."

"Alina, if he captures you—"

"Go," I said. "Save them, save Baghra. I won't leave the Grisha."

"I'll get them out and come back. I promise."

"On your word as a cutthroat and a pirate?"

He touched my cheek once, briefly. "Privateer."

Another explosion rocked the grounds.

"Let's go!" shouted Mal.

As we sprinted into the tunnel, I glanced back and saw Nikolai silhouetted against the purple twilight. I wondered if I'd ever see him again.

* * *

THE WOUND AT my shoulder burned and throbbed, driving me faster as we raced along the path. My mind was reeling—*if they had a chance to seal themselves in the main hall, if they had time to man the guns on the roof, if I can just reach the dishes*. All of our plans, undone by Vasily's arrogance.

I burst into the open, and my slippered feet sent gravel flying as I skidded to a halt. I don't know if it was momentum or the sight before me that drove me to my knees.

The Little Palace was wreathed in seething shadows. They clicked and whirred as they skittered over the walls and swooped down on the roof. There were bodies lying on the steps, bodies crumpled on the ground. The front doors were wide open.

The path in front of the steps was littered with shards of broken mirror. Lying on its side was the shattered hulk of one of David's dishes, a girl's body crushed beneath it, her goggles askew. Paja. Two *nichevo'ya* crouched before the dish, gazing at their broken reflections.

I released a howl of pure rage and sent a fiery swath of light burning through both of them. It fractured along the edges of the dish as the *nichevo'ya* disappeared.

I heard the rattle of gunfire from up on the roof. Someone was still alive. Someone was still fighting. And there was one dish left. It wasn't much, but it was all we had.

"This way," said Mal.

We tore across the lawn and in through the door that led to the Darkling's chambers. At the base of the stairs, a *nichevo'ya* came shrieking at us from a doorway, knocking me off my feet. Mal slashed at it with his saber. It wavered, then re-formed.

"Get back!" I yelled. He ducked, and I sent the Cut slicing through the shadow soldier. I took the stairs two at a time, my heart pounding, Mal close on my heels. The air was thick with the smell of blood and the bone-shaking clatter of gunfire.

As we emerged onto the roof, I heard someone shout. "Away!"

We just had time to duck before the *grenatki* exploded high above us, searing our eyelids with light and leaving our ears ringing. Corporalki manned Nikolai's

guns, sending torrents of bullets into the mass of shadows as Fabrikators fed them ammunition. The remaining dish was surrounded by armed Grisha, struggling to keep the *nichevo'ya* at bay. David was there, clinging awkwardly to a rifle and trying to hold his ground. I threw the light high in a blazing whipcrack that split the sky overhead and bought us a few precious seconds.

"David!"

David gave two hard blasts on the whistle around his neck. Nadia dropped her goggles, and the Durast manning the dish moved into position. I didn't wait —I lifted my hands and sent light streaming at the dish. The whistle blew. The dish tilted. A single pure beam of light blasted from the mirrored surface. Even without the second dish, it skewered the sky, slashing through the *nichevo'ya* as they burned away to nothing.

The beam swept the air in a gleaming arc, dissolving black bodies before it, thinning the horde until we could see the deep Belyanoch twilight. A cheer went up from the Grisha at the first sight of stars, and a thin sliver of hope pierced my terror.

Then a *nichevo'ya* broke through. It dodged the beam and hurled itself at the dish, rocking it on its moorings.

Mal was on the creature in an instant, slashing and cutting. A group of Grisha tried to seize its muscled legs, but the thing shifted and skittered away from them. Then the *nichevo'ya* were descending from all sides. I saw one slip past the beam and dive straight into the back of the dish. The mirror rocked forward. The light faltered, then winked out.

"Nadia!" I screamed. She and the Durast leapt from the dish just in time. It toppled on its side in a tremendous crash of breaking glass as the *nichevo'ya* renewed their attack.

I threw out arc after arc of light.

"Get to the hall!" I cried. "Seal the doors!"

The Grisha ran, but they were not fast enough. I heard a shout and saw the brief flash of Fedyor's face as he was lifted from his feet and tossed from the roof. I lay down a bright shower of cover, but the *nichevo'ya* just kept coming. If only we'd had both dishes. If only we'd had a little more time.

Mal was suddenly beside me again, rifle in hand. "It's no good," he said. "We have to get out of here."

I nodded, and we backed toward the stairs as the sky grew dense with writhing shapes. My foot connected with something soft behind me, and I stumbled.

Sergei was huddled against the dome. He held Marie in his arms. She'd been torn open from neck to navel.

"There's no one left," he sobbed, tears running down his cheeks. "There's no one left." He rocked back and forth, holding Marie tighter. I couldn't bear to look at her. Silly, giggling Marie with her lovely brown curls.

The *nichevo'ya* were skittering over the roof, rushing toward us in a black tide.

"Mal, get him up!" I shouted. I slashed out at the throng of shadows rushing toward us.

Mal grabbed Sergei and pulled him away from Marie. He flailed and struggled, but we got him inside and banged the door shut behind us. We half carried, half shoved him down the stairs. On the second flight, we heard the roof door blow open above us. I threw a slicing cut of light high, hoping to hit something other than the staircase, and we tumbled down the final flight.

We threw ourselves into the main hall, and the doors crashed closed behind us as the Grisha rammed the lock into place. There was a loud *thud* and then another as the *nichevo'ya* tried to break through the door.

"Alina!" Mal shouted. I turned and saw that the other doors were sealed, but there were still *nichevo'ya* inside. Zoya and Nadia's brother were backed against a wall, using Squaller winds to heave tables and chairs and broken bits of furniture at an oncoming pack of shadow soldiers.

I raised my hands, and the light swept forward in sizzling cords, tearing through the *nichevo'ya* one by one, until they were gone. Zoya dropped her hands, and a samovar fell with a loud clang.

At every door we heard thumping and scraping. The *nichevo'ya* were clawing at the wood, trying to get in, searching for a crack or gap to seep through. The buzzing and clicking seemed to come from all sides. But the Fabrikators had done their work well. The seals would hold, at least for a little while.

Then I looked around the room. The hall was bathed in blood. The walls were smeared with it, the stone floor was wet with it. There were bodies

everywhere, little heaps of purple, red, and blue.

"Are there any others?" I asked. I couldn't keep the tremor from my voice.

Zoya gave a single, dazed shake of her head. A spatter of blood covered one of her cheeks. "We were at dinner," she said. "We heard the bells. We didn't have time to seal the doors. They were just … everywhere."

Sergei was sobbing quietly. David looked pale, but calm. Nadia had made it down to the hall. She had her arm around Adrik, and he still had that stubborn tilt to his chin, though he was shaking. There were three Inferni and two more Corporalki—one Healer and one Heartrender. They were all that remained of the Second Army.

"Did anyone see Tolya and Tamar?" I asked. But no one had. They might be dead. Or maybe they'd played some part in this disaster. Tamar had disappeared from the dining room. For all I knew, they'd been working with the Darkling all along.

"Nikolai might not have left yet," Mal said. "We could try to make it to the *Kingfisher*."

I shook my head. If Nikolai wasn't gone, then he and the rest of his family were dead, and possibly Baghra too. I had a sudden image of Nikolai's body floating facedown in the lake beside the splintered pieces of the *Kingfisher*.

No. I would not think that way. I remembered what I'd thought of Nikolai the first time I'd met him. I had to believe the clever fox would escape this trap, too.

"The Darkling concentrated his forces here," I said. "We can make a run for the upper town and try to fight our way out from there."

"We'll never make it," said Sergei hopelessly. "There are too many of them." It was true. We'd known it might come to this, but we'd assumed we'd have greater numbers, and the hope of reinforcements from Poliznaya.

From somewhere in the distance, we heard a rolling crack of thunder.

"He's coming," moaned one of the Inferni. "Oh, Saints, he's coming."

"He'll kill us all," whispered Sergei.

"If we're lucky," replied Zoya.

It wasn't the most helpful thing to say, but she was right. I'd seen the truth of how the Darkling dealt with traitors in the shadowy depths of his own mother's eyes, and I suspected Zoya and the others would be treated far more harshly.

Zoya tried to wipe the blood from her face, but only succeeded in leaving a

smear across her cheek. “I say we try to get to the upper town. I’d rather take my chances with the monsters outside than sit here waiting for the Darkling.”

“The odds aren’t good,” I warned, hating that I had no hope to offer. “I’m not strong enough to stop them all.”

“At least with the *nichevo’ya* it will be relatively quick,” David said. “I say we go down fighting.” We all turned to look at him. He seemed a little surprised himself. Then he shrugged. He met my eyes and said, “We do the best we can.”

I looked around the circle. One by one they nodded.

I took a breath. “David, do you have any *grenatki* left?”

He pulled two iron cylinders from his *kefta*. “These are the last.”

“Use one, keep the other in reserve. I’ll give the signal. When I open the doors, run for the palace gates.”

“I’m staying with you,” Mal said.

I opened my mouth to argue, but one look told me there would be no point.

“Don’t wait for us,” I said to the others. “I’ll give you as much cover as I can.”

Another clap of thunder split the air.

The Grisha plucked rifles from the arms of the dead and gathered around me at the door.

“All right,” I said. I turned and laid my hands on the carved handles. Through my palms, I felt the thump of *nichevo’ya* bodies as they heaved themselves against the wood. My wound gave a searing throb.

I nodded to Zoya. The lock snicked back.

I threw the door open and shouted, “Now!”

David lobbed the flash bomb into the twilight as Zoya swooped her arms through the air, lofting the cylinder higher on a Squaller draft.

“Get down!” David yelled. We turned toward the shelter of the hall, eyes squeezed shut, hands thrown over our heads, bracing for the explosion.

The blast shook the stone floor beneath our feet, and the glare burned red across my closed lids.

We ran. The *nichevo’ya* had scattered, startled by the burst of light and sound, but only seconds later, they were whirling back toward us.

“Run!” I shouted. I raised my arms and brought the light down in fiery scythes, cutting through the violet sky, carving through one *nichevo’ya* after the

next as Mal opened fire. The Grisha ran for the wooded tunnel.

I called on every bit of the stag's power, the sea whip's strength, every trick Baghra had ever taught me. I pulled the light toward me and honed it into searing arcs that cut luminous trails through the shadow army.

But there were just too many of them. What had it cost the Darkling to raise such a multitude? They surged forward, bodies shifting and whirling like a glittering cloud of beetles, arms stretched forward, sharp talons bared. They pushed the Grisha back from the tunnel, black wings beating the air, the wide, twisted holes of their mouths already yawning open.

Then the air came alive with the rattle of gunfire. There were soldiers pouring out of the woods to my left, shooting as they ran. The war cry that issued from their lips raised the hair on my arms. *Sankta Alina.*

They hurtled toward the *nichevo'ya*, drawing swords and sabers, slashing out at the monsters with terrifying ferocity. Some were dressed as farmers, some wore ragged First Army uniforms, but each of them bore identical tattoos: my sunburst, wrought in ink over the sides of their faces.

Only two were unmarked. Tolya and Tamar led the charge, eyes wild, blades flashing, roaring my name.

CHAPTER

23

THE SUN SOLDIERS plunged into the shadow horde, cutting and thrusting, pushing the *nichevo'ya* back as the riflemen fired again and again. But despite their ferocity, they were only human, flesh and steel pitted against living shadow. One by one, the *nichevo'ya* began to pick them off.

"Make for the chapel!" Tamar shouted.

The chapel? Did she plan to throw hymnals at the Darkling?

"We'll be trapped!" cried Sergei, running toward me.

"We're already trapped," Mal replied, slinging his rifle onto his back and grabbing my arm. "Let's go!"

I didn't know what to think, but we were out of options.

"David!" I yelled. "The second bomb!"

He flung it toward the *nichevo'ya*. His aim was wild, but Zoya was there to help it along.

We dove into the woods, the sun soldiers bringing up the rear. The blast tore through the trees in a gust of white light.

Lamps had been lit in the chapel and the door stood open. We burst inside, the echoes from our footfalls bouncing up over the pews and off the glazed blue dome.

"Where do we go?" Sergei cried in panic.

Already we could hear the whirring, clicking hum from outside. Tolya slammed the chapel door shut, dropping a heavy wooden bolt into place. The sun soldiers took up positions by the windows, rifles in hand.

Tamar hurdled over a pew and shot past me up the aisle. "Come on!"

I watched her in confusion. Just where were we supposed to go?

She tore past the altar and grasped one gilded wood corner of the triptych. I gaped as the water-damaged panel swung open, revealing the dark mouth of a passageway. This was how the sun soldiers had gotten onto the grounds. And how the Apparat had escaped from the Grand Palace.

“Where does it go?” asked David.

“Does it matter?” Zoya shot back.

The building shook as a loud crack of thunder split the air. The chapel door blew to pieces. Tolya was thrown backward, and darkness flooded through.

The Darkling came borne on a tide of shadow, held aloft by monsters who set his feet upon the chapel floor with infinite care.

“Fire!” Tamar shouted.

Shots rang out. The *nichevo’ya* writhed and whirled around the Darkling, shifting and re-forming as the bullets struck their bodies, one taking the place of another in a seamless tide of shadow. He didn’t even break stride.

Nichevo’ya were streaming through the chapel door. Tolya was already on his feet and rushing to my side with pistols drawn. Tamar and Mal flanked me, the Grisha arrayed behind us. I raised my hands, summoning the light, bracing for the onslaught.

“Stand down, Alina,” said the Darkling. His cool voice echoed through the chapel, cutting through the noise and chaos. “Stand down, and I will spare them.”

In answer, Tamar scraped one axe blade over the other, raising a horrible shriek of metal on metal. The sun soldiers lifted their rifles, and I heard the sound of Inferni flint being struck.

“Look around, Alina,” the Darkling said. “You cannot win. You can only watch them die. Come to me now, and I will do them no harm—not your zealot soldiers, not even the Grisha traitors.”

I took in the nightmare of the chapel. The *nichevo’ya* swarmed above us, crowding up against the inside of the dome. They clustered around the Darkling in a dense cloud of bodies and wings. Through the windows I could see more, hovering in the twilight sky.

The sun soldiers’ faces were determined, but their ranks had been badly thinned. One of them had pimples on his chin. Beneath his tattoo, he didn’t look

much older than twelve. They needed a miracle from their Saint, one I couldn't perform.

Tolya cocked the triggers on his pistols.

"Hold," I said.

"Alina," Tamar whispered, "we can still get you out."

"*Hold*," I repeated.

The sun soldiers lowered their rifles. Tamar brought her axes to her hips but kept her grip tight.

"What are your terms?" I asked.

Mal frowned. Tolya shook his head. I didn't care. I knew it might be a ploy, but if there was even a chance of saving their lives, I had to take it.

"Give yourself up," said the Darkling. "And they all go free. They can climb down that rabbit hole and disappear forever."

"Free?" Sergei whispered.

"He's lying," said Mal. "It's what he does."

"I don't need to lie," said the Darkling. "Alina wants to come with me."

"She doesn't want any part of you," Mal spat.

"No?" the Darkling asked. His dark hair gleamed in the lamplight of the chapel. Summoning his shadow army had taken its toll. He was thinner, paler, but somehow the sharp angles of his face had only become more beautiful. "I warned you that your *otkazat'sya* could never understand you, Alina. I told you that he would only come to fear you and resent your power. Tell me I was wrong."

"You were wrong." My voice was steady, but doubt rustled in my heart.

The Darkling shook his head. "You cannot lie to me. Do you think I could have come to you again and again, if you had been less alone? You called to me, and I answered."

I couldn't quite believe what I was hearing. "You … you were there?"

"On the Fold. In the palace. Last night."

I flushed as I remembered his body on top of mine. Shame washed through me, but with it came overwhelming relief. I hadn't imagined it all.

"That isn't possible," Mal bit out.

"You have no idea what I can make possible, tracker."

I shut my eyes.

“Alina—”

“I’ve seen what you truly are,” said the Darkling, “and I’ve never turned away. I never will. Can he say the same?”

“You don’t know anything about her,” Mal said fiercely.

“Come with me now, and it all stops—the fear, the uncertainty, the bloodshed. Let him go, Alina. Let them all go.”

“No,” I said. But even as I shook my head, something in me cried out, *Yes.*

The Darkling sighed and glanced back over his shoulder. “Bring her,” he said.

A figure shuffled forward, draped in a heavy shawl, hunched and slow-moving, as if every step brought pain. *Baghra.*

My stomach twisted sickly. *Why did she have to be so stubborn? Why couldn’t she have gone with Nikolai?* Unless Nikolai had never made it out.

The Darkling laid a hand on Baghra’s shoulder. She flinched.

“Leave her alone,” I said angrily.

“Show them,” he said.

She unwound her shawl. I drew in a sharp breath. I heard someone behind me moan.

It was not Baghra. I didn’t know what it was. The bites were everywhere, raised black ridges of flesh, twisting lumps of tissue that could never be healed, not by Grisha hand or by any other, the unmistakable marks of the *nichevo’ya*. Then I saw the faded flame of her hair, the lovely amber hue of her one remaining eye.

“Genya,” I gasped.

We stood in terrible silence. I took a step toward her. Then David pushed past me down the altar steps. Genya cringed away from him, pulling up her shawl, and turned to hide her face.

David slowed. He hesitated. Gently, he reached out to touch her shoulder. I saw the rise and fall of her back, and knew she was crying.

I covered my mouth as a sob tore free from my throat.

I’d seen a thousand horrors on this long day, but this was the one that broke me, Genya cringing away from David like a frightened animal. Luminous Genya, with her alabaster skin and graceful hands. Resilient Genya, who had endured countless indignities and insults, but who had always held her lovely

chin high. Foolish Genya, who had tried to be my friend, who had dared to show me mercy.

David drew his arm around Genya's shoulders and slowly led her back up the aisle. The Darkling didn't stop them.

"I've waged the war you forced me to, Alina," said the Darkling. "If you hadn't run from me, the Second Army would still be intact. All those Grisha would still be alive. Your tracker would be safe and happy with his regiment. When will it be enough? When will you let me stop?"

You cannot be helped. Your only hope was to run. Baghra was right. I'd been a fool to think I could fight him. I'd tried, and countless people had lost their lives for it.

"You mourn the people killed in Novokribirsk," the Darkling continued, "the people lost to the Fold. But what of the thousands that came before them, given over to endless wars? What of the others dying now on distant shores? Together, we can put an end to all of it."

Reasonable. Logical. For once, I let the words in. An end to all of it.

It's over.

I should have felt beaten down by the thought, defeated, but instead it filled me with a curious lightness. Hadn't some part of me known it would end this way all along?

The moment the Darkling had slipped his hand over my arm in the Grisha pavilion so long ago, he'd taken possession of me. I just hadn't realized it.

"All right," I whispered.

"Alina, no!" Mal said furiously.

"You'll let them go?" I asked. "All of them?"

"We need the tracker," said the Darkling. "For the firebird."

"He goes free. You can't have both of us."

The Darkling paused, then nodded once. I knew he thought he would find a way to claim Mal. Let him believe it. I would never let it happen.

"I'm not going anywhere," Mal said through clenched teeth.

I turned to Tolya and Tamar. "Take him from here. Even if you have to carry him."

"Alina—"

"We won't go," said Tamar. "We are sworn."

“You will.”

Tolya shook his huge head. “We pledged our lives to you. All of us.”

I turned to face them. “Then do as I command,” I said. “Tolya Yul-Baatar, Tamar Kir-Baatar, you will take these people from here to safety.” I summoned the light, letting it blaze in a glorious halo around me. A cheap trick, but a good one. Nikolai would have been proud. “*Do not fail me.*”

Tamar had tears in her eyes, but she and her brother bowed their heads.

Mal hooked my arm and turned me around roughly. “What are you doing?”

“I want this.” *I need it.* Sacrifice or selfishness, it didn’t matter anymore.

“I don’t believe you.”

“I can’t run from what I am, Mal, from what I’m becoming. I can’t bring the Alina you knew back, but I can set you free.”

“You can’t … you *can’t* choose him.”

“There isn’t any choice to make. This is what was meant to be.” It was true. I felt it in the collar, in the weight of the fetter. For the first time in weeks, I felt strong.

He shook his head. “This is all wrong.” The look on his face almost undid me. It was lost, startled, like a little boy standing alone in the ruin of a burning village. “Please, Alina,” he said softly. “Please. This can’t be how it ends.”

I rested my hand on his cheek, hoping that there was still enough between us that he would understand. I stood on my toes and kissed the scar on his jaw.

“I have loved you all my life, Mal,” I whispered through my tears. “There is no end to our story.”

I stepped back, memorizing every line of his beloved face. Then I turned and walked up the aisle. My steps were sure. Mal would have a life. He’d find his purpose. I had to seek mine. Nikolai had promised me a chance to save Ravka, to make amends for all I’d done. He’d tried, but it was the Darkling’s gift to give.

“Alina!” Mal shouted. I heard scuffling behind me and knew Tolya had taken hold of him. “Alina!” His voice was raw white wood, torn from the heart of a tree. I did not turn.

The Darkling stood waiting, his shadow guard hovering and shifting around him.

I was afraid, but beneath the fear, I was eager.

“We are alike,” he said, “as no one else is, as no one else will ever be.”

The truth of it rang through me. *Like calls to like.*

He held out his hand, and I stepped into his arms.

I cupped the back of his neck, feeling the silken brush of his hair on my fingertips. I knew Mal was watching. I needed him to turn away. I needed him to go. I tilted my face up to the Darkling's.

"My power is yours," I whispered.

I saw the elation and triumph in his eyes as he lowered his mouth to mine. Our lips met, and the connection between us opened. This was not the way he'd touched me in my visions, when he'd come to me as shadow. This was real, and I could drown in it.

Power flowed through me—the power of the stag, its strong heart beating in both our bodies, the life he'd taken, the life I'd tried to save. But I also felt the Darkling's power, the power of the Black Heretic, the power of the Fold.

Like calls to like. I'd sensed it when the *Hummingbird* entered the Unsea, but I'd been too afraid to embrace it. This time, I didn't fight. I let go of my fear, my guilt, my shame. There was darkness inside me. He had put it there, and I would no longer deny it. The volcra, the *nichevo'ya,* they were my monsters, all of them. And he was my monster, too.

"My power is yours," I repeated. His arms tightened around me. "And yours is mine," I whispered against his lips.

Mine. The word reverberated through me, through both of us.

The shadow soldiers shifted and whirred.

I remembered the way it had felt in that snowy glade, when the Darkling had placed the collar around my neck and seized control of my power. I reached across the connection between us.

He reared back. "What are you doing?"

I knew why he had never intended to kill the sea whip himself, why he hadn't wanted to form that second connection. He was afraid.

Mine.

I forced my way across the bond forged by Morozova's collar and grabbed hold of the Darkling's power.

Darkness spilled from him, black ink from his palms, billowing and skittering, blooming into the shape of a *nichevo'ya*, forming hands, head, claws, wings. The first of my abominations.

The Darkling tried to pull away from me, but I clutched him tighter, calling his power, calling the darkness as he had once used the collar to summon my light.

Another creature burst forth, and then another. The Darkling cried out as it was wrenched from him. I felt it too, felt my heart constrict as each shadow soldier tore a little bit of me away, exacting the price of its creation.

"Stop," the Darkling rasped.

The *nichevo'ya* whirred nervously around us, clicking and humming, faster and faster. One after another, I pulled my dark soldiers into being, and my army rose up around us.

The Darkling moaned, and so did I. We fell against each other, but still I did not relent.

"You'll kill us both!" he cried.

"Yes," I said.

The Darkling's legs buckled, and we collapsed to our knees.

This was not the Small Science. This was magic, something ancient, the making at the heart of the world. It was terrifying, limitless. No wonder the Darkling hungered for more.

The darkness buzzed and clattered, a thousand locusts, beetles, hungry flies, clicking their legs, beating their wings. The *nichevo'ya* wavered and re-formed, whirring in a frenzy, driven on by his rage and my exultation.

Another monster. Another. Blood was pouring from the Darkling's nose. The room seemed to rock, and I realized I was convulsing. I was dying, bit by bit, with every monster that wrenched itself free.

Just a little longer, I thought. *Just a few more. Just enough so I know that I've sent him to the next world before I follow.*

"Alina!" I heard Mal calling as if from a great distance. He was tugging at me, pulling me away.

"No!" I shouted. "Let me end this."

"Alina!"

Mal seized my wrist, and a shock passed through me. Through the haze of blood and shadow, I glimpsed something beautiful, as if through a golden door.

He wrenched me away from the Darkling, but not before I called out to my children in one final exhortation: *Bring it down.*

The Darkling slumped to the ground. The monsters rose in a whirling black column around him, then crashed against the walls of the chapel, shaking the little building to its very foundations.

Mal had me in his arms and was running up the aisle. The *nichevo'ya* were hurling themselves against the chapel walls. Slabs of plaster crashed to the floor. The blue dome swayed as its supports began to give way.

Mal leapt past the altar and plunged into the passage. The smell of wet earth and mold filled my nostrils, mingling with the sweet incense scent of the chapel. He ran, racing against the disaster I'd unleashed.

A *boom* sounded from somewhere far behind us as the chapel collapsed. The impact roared through the passageway. A cloud of dirt and debris struck us with the force of an oncoming wave. Mal flew forward. I tumbled from his arms, and the world came down around us.

* * *

THE FIRST THING I HEARD was the low rumble of Tolya's voice. I couldn't speak, couldn't scream. All I knew was pain and the relentless weight of the earth. Later I would find out that they'd labored over me for hours, breathing air back into my lungs, staunching the flow of blood, trying to mend the worst breaks in my bones.

I drifted in and out of consciousness. My mouth felt dry and swollen shut. I was pretty sure I'd bitten my tongue. I heard Tamar giving orders.

"Bring the rest of the tunnel down. We need to get as far from here as we possibly can."

Mal.

Was he here? Buried beneath the rubble? I could not let them leave him. I forced my lips to form his name.

"Mal." Could they even hear me? My voice sounded muffled and wrong to my ears.

"She's hurting. Should we put her under?" Tamar asked.

"I don't want to risk her heart stopping again," replied Tolya.

"Mal," I repeated.

"Leave the passage to the convent open," Tamar said to someone. "Hopefully, he'll think we went out there."

The convent. Sankta Lizabeta. The gardens next to the Gritzki mansion. I couldn't order my thoughts. I tried to speak Mal's name again, but I couldn't make my mouth work. The pain was crowding in on me. What if I'd lost him? If I'd had the strength, I would have screamed. I would have railed. Instead, I sank into darkness.

* * *

WHEN I CAME TO, the world was swaying beneath me. I remembered waking aboard the whaler, and for a terrifying moment, I thought I might be on a ship. I opened my eyes, saw earth and rock high above me. We were moving through a massive cavern. I was on my back on some kind of litter, borne between the shoulders of two men.

It was a struggle to stay conscious. I'd spent most of my life feeling sick and weak, but I'd never known fatigue like this. I was a husk, hollowed out, scraped clean. If any breeze could have reached us so far below the earth, I would have blown away to nothing.

Though every bone and muscle in my body shrieked in protest, I managed to turn my head.

Mal was there, lying on another litter, carried along just a few feet beside me. He was watching me, as if he'd been waiting for me to wake. He reached out.

I found some reservoir of strength and stretched my hand over the litter's edge. When our fingers met, I heard a sob and realized I was crying. I wept with relief that I would not have to live with the burden of his death. But lodged in my gratitude, I felt a bright thorn of resentment. I wept with rage that I would have to live at all.

* * *

WE TRAVELED FOR MILES, through passages so tight that they had to lower my litter to the ground and slide me along the rock, through tunnels high and wide enough for ten haycarts. I don't know how long we went on that way. There were no nights and days belowground.

Mal recovered before I did and limped along beside the litter. He'd been injured when the tunnel collapsed, but the Grisha had restored him. What I had endured, what I had embraced, they had no power to heal.

At some point, we stopped at a cave dripping with rows of stalactites. I'd heard one of my carriers call it the Worm's Mouth. When they set me down, Mal was there, and with his help, I managed to get into a sitting position, propped against the cave wall. Even that effort left me dizzy, and when he dabbed his sleeve to my nose, I saw that I was bleeding.

"How bad is it?" I asked.

"You've looked better," he admitted. "The pilgrims mentioned something called the White Cathedral. I think that's where we're headed."

"They're taking me to the Apparat."

He glanced around the cavern. "This is how he escaped the Grand Palace after the coup. How he managed to evade capture for so long."

"It's also how he appeared and disappeared at the fortune-telling party. The mansion was next to the Convent of Sankta Lizabeta, remember? Tamar led me straight to him, and then she let him get away." I heard the bitterness in my weak voice.

Slowly, my addled mind had pieced it all together. Only Tolya and Tamar had known about the party, and they'd arranged for the Apparat to meet me. They'd already been among the pilgrims that morning when I'd nearly started the riot, there to watch the sunrise with the faithful. That was how they'd gotten to me so quickly. And Tamar had vanished from the Eagle's Nest as soon as she'd begun to suspect danger. I knew that the twins and their sun soldiers were the only reason any of the Grisha had survived, but their lies still stung.

"How are the others?"

Mal looked over to where the ragged group of Grisha huddled in the shadows.

"They know about the fetter," he said. "They're frightened."

"And the firebird?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so."

"I'll tell them soon enough."

"Sergei isn't doing well," Mal continued. "I think he's still in shock. The rest seem to be holding up."

"Genya?"

"She and David stay behind the group. She can't move very quickly." He paused. "The pilgrims call her *Razrusha'ya*."

The Ruined.

“I need to see Tolya and Tamar.”

“You need to rest.”

“Now,” I said. “Please.”

He stood, but hesitated. When he spoke again, his voice was raw. “You should have told me what you intended to do.”

I looked away. The distance between us felt even deeper than it had before. *I tried to free you, Mal. From the Darkling. From me.*

“You should have let me finish him,” I said. “You should have let me die.”

When I heard his footsteps fade, I let my chin droop. I could hear my breath coming in shallow pants. When I worked up the strength to lift my eyes, Tolya and Tamar were kneeling before me, their heads bowed.

“Look at me,” I said.

They obeyed. Tolya’s sleeves were rolled up, and I saw that his massive forearms were emblazoned with suns.

“Why not just tell me?”

“You never would have let us stay so close,” replied Tamar.

That was true. Even now I wasn’t sure what to make of them.

“If you believe I’m a Saint, why not let me die in the chapel? What if that was meant to be my martyrdom?”

“Then you would have died,” said Tolya without hesitation. “We wouldn’t have found you in the rubble in time or been able to revive you.”

“You let Mal come back for me. After you gave me your vow.”

“He broke away,” said Tamar.

I lifted a brow. The day Mal could break Tolya’s hold was indeed a day of miracles.

Tolya hung his head and heaved his huge shoulders. “Forgive me,” he said. “I couldn’t be the one to keep him from you.”

I sighed. Some holy warrior.

“Do you serve me?”

“Yes,” they said in unison.

“Not the priest?”

“We serve you,” said Tolya, his voice a fierce rumble.

“We’ll see,” I murmured, and waved them away. They rose to go, but I called

them back. “Some of the pilgrims have taken to calling Genya *Razrusha’ya*. Warn them once. If they speak that word again, cut out their tongues.”

They didn’t blink, didn’t flinch. They made their bows and were gone.

* * *

THE WHITE CATHEDRAL was a cavern of alabaster quartz, so vast it might have held a city in its glowing ivory depths. Its walls were damp and bloomed with mushrooms, salt lilies, toadstools shaped like stars. It was buried deep beneath Ravka, somewhere north of the capital.

I wanted to meet the priest standing, so I held tight to Mal’s arm as we were brought before him, trying to hide the effort it took just to stay upright and the way my body shook.

“Sankta Alina,” the Apparat said, “you are come to us at last.”

Then he fell to his knees in his tattered brown robes. He kissed my hand, my hem. He called out to the faithful, thousands of them gathered in the belly of the cavern. When he spoke, the very air seemed to tremble. “We will rise to make a new Ravka,” he roared. “A country free from tyrants and kings! We will spill from the earth and drive the shadows back in a tide of righteousness!”

Below us, the pilgrims chanted. *Sankta Alina.*

There were rooms carved into the rock, chambers that glowed ivory and glittered with thin veins of silver. Mal helped me to my quarters, made me eat a few bites of sweet pea porridge, and brought me a pitcher of fresh water to fill the basin. A mirror had been set directly into the stone, and when I glimpsed myself, I let out a little cry. The heavy pitcher shattered on the floor. My skin was pale, stretched tight over jutting bones. My eyes were bruised hollows. My hair had gone completely white, a fall of brittle snow.

I touched my fingertips to the glass. Mal’s gaze met mine in the reflection.

“I should have warned you,” he said.

“I look like a monster.”

“More like a *khitka*.”

“Woodsprites eat children.”

“Only when they’re hungry,” he said.

I tried to smile, to hold tight to this glimmer of warmth between us. But I noticed how far from me he stood, arms at his back, like a guard at attention. He

mistook the sheen of tears in my eyes.

“It will get better,” he said. “Once you use your power.”

“Of course,” I replied, turning away from the mirror, feeling exhaustion and pain settle into my bones.

I hesitated, then cast a meaningful glance at the men the Apparat had stationed at the door to the chamber. Mal stepped closer. I wanted to press my cheek to his chest, feel his arms around me, listen to the steady, human beat of his heart. I didn’t.

Instead, I spoke low, barely moving my lips. “I’ve tried,” I whispered. “Something’s wrong.”

He frowned. “You can’t summon?” he asked hesitantly. Was there fear in his voice? Hope? Concern? I couldn’t tell. All I could sense in him was caution.

“I’m too weak. We’re too far belowground. I don’t know.”

I watched his face, remembering the argument we’d had in the birchwood grove, when he’d asked if I would give up being Grisha. *Never*, I’d said. Never.

Hopelessness crowded in on me, dense and black, heavy like the press of soil. I didn’t want to say the words, didn’t want to give voice to the fear I’d carried with me through the long, dark miles beneath the earth, but I forced myself to speak it. “The light won’t come, Mal. My power is gone.”

AFTER

AGAIN, THE GIRL dreamed of ships, but this time, they flew. They had white wings made of canvas, and a clever-eyed fox stood behind the wheel. Sometimes the fox became a prince who kissed her lips and offered her a jeweled crown. Sometimes he was a red hellhound, foam on his muzzle, snapping at her heels as she ran.

Every so often, she dreamed of the firebird. It caught her up in wings of flame and held her as she burned.

Long before word came, she knew the Darkling had survived and that she had failed once more. He had been rescued by his Grisha and now ruled Ravka from a throne wreathed in shadows, surrounded by his monstrous horde. Whether he'd been weakened by what she'd done in the chapel, she didn't know. He was ancient, and power was familiar to him as it had never been to her.

His *oprichniki* guards marched into monasteries and churches, tore up tiles and dug down through floors, seeking the Sun Summoner. Rewards were offered, threats were made, and once again the girl was hunted.

The priest swore that she was safe in the sprawling web of passages that crisscrossed Ravka like a secret map. There were those who claimed the tunnels had been made by armies of the faithful, that it had taken hundreds of years with picks and axes to carve them. Others said they were the work of a monster, a great worm who swallowed soil, rock, root, and gravel, who hollowed out the underground roads that led to the old holy places, where half-remembered prayers were still said. The girl only knew that no place would keep them safe for long.

She looked into the faces of her followers: old men, young women, children,

soldiers, farmers, convicts. All she saw were corpses, more bodies for the Darkling to lay at her feet.

The Apparat wept, shouting his gratitude that the Sun Saint still lived, that she had once again been spared. In his wild black gaze, the girl saw a different truth: A dead martyr was less trouble than a living Saint.

The prayers of the faithful rose around the boy and the girl, echoing and multiplying beneath the earth, bouncing off the soaring stone walls of the White Cathedral. The Apparat said it was a holy place, their haven, their sanctuary, their home.

The boy shook his head. He knew a cell when he saw one.

He was wrong, of course. The girl could tell from the way the Apparat watched her struggle to her feet. She heard it in each fragile thump of her heart. This place was no prison. It was a tomb.

But the girl had spent long years being invisible. She'd already had a ghost's life, hidden from the world and from herself. Better than anyone, she knew the power of things long buried.

At night, she heard the boy pacing outside her room, keeping watch with the golden-eyed twins. She lay quiet in her bed, counting her breaths, stretching toward the surface, seeking the light. She thought of the broken skiff, of Novokribirsk, of red names crowding a crooked church wall. She remembered little human heaps slumped beneath the golden dome; Marie's butchered body; Fedyor, who had once saved her life. She heard the pilgrims' songs and exhortations. She thought of the volcra and of Genya huddled in the dark.

The girl touched the collar at her neck, the fetter at her wrist. So many men had tried to make her a queen. Now she understood that she was meant for something more.

The Darkling had told her he was destined to rule. He had claimed his throne, and a part of her too. He was welcome to it. For the living and the dead, she would make herself a reckoning.

She would rise.

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The problem with acknowledgments is that they quickly devolve into long lists of names suitable for skimming. But many people are required to make a book happen, and they deserve recognition, so please bear with me. (If it gets boring, I recommend singing aloud. Get a friend to beatbox for you. I'll wait.)

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RUIN AND RISING

LEIGH BARDUGO

BEFORE

THE MONSTER'S NAME was Izumrud, the great worm, and there were those who claimed he had made the tunnels that ran beneath Ravka. Sick with appetite, he ate up silt and gravel, burrowing deeper and deeper into the earth, searching for something to satisfy his hunger, until he'd gone too far and lost himself in the dark.

It was just a story, but in the White Cathedral, people were careful not to stray too far from the passages that curled around the main caverns. Strange sounds echoed through the dim warren of tunnels, groans and unexplained rumblings; cold pockets of silence were broken by low hisses that might be nothing or might be the sinuous movement of a long body, snaking closer through a nearby passage in search of prey. In those moments, it was easy to believe that Izumrud still lived somewhere, waiting to be woken by the call of heroes, dreaming of the fine meal he would have if only some hapless child would walk into his mouth. A beast like that rests; he does not die.

The boy brought the girl this tale, and others too, all the new stories he could gather, in the early days when he was allowed near her. He would sit beside her bed, trying to get her to eat, listening to the pained whistle of her lungs, and he would tell the story of a river, tamed by a powerful Tidemaker and trained to dive through layers of rock, seeking a magic coin. He'd whisper of poor cursed Pelyekin, laboring for a thousand years with his magic pickaxe, leaving caverns and passages in his wake, a lonely creature in search of nothing but distraction, amassing gold and jewels he never intended to spend.

Then, one morning, the boy arrived to find his way to the girl's room barred by armed men. And when he would not leave, they dragged him from her door in chains. The priest warned the boy that faith would bring him peace and obedience would keep him breathing.

Locked in her cell, alone but for the drip of the water and the slow beat of her

heart, the girl knew the stories of Izumrud were true. She had been swallowed whole, devoured, and in the echoing alabaster belly of the White Cathedral, only the Saint remained.

* * *

THE SAINT WOKE every day to the sound of her name being chanted, and each day her army grew, its ranks swollen with the hungry and the hopeless, with wounded soldiers and children barely large enough to carry rifles. The priest told the faithful that she would be Queen one day, and they believed him. But they wondered at her bruised and mysterious court: the raven-haired Squaller with her sharp tongue, the Ruined One with her black prayer shawl and hideous scars, the pale scholar who huddled away with his books and strange instruments. These were the sorry remnants of the Second Army—unfit company for a Saint.

Few knew that she was broken. Whatever power had blessed her, divine or otherwise, was gone—or at least out of reach. Her followers were kept at a distance so they could not see that her eyes were dark hollows, that her breath came in frightened gasps. She walked slowly, tentatively, her driftwood bones fragile in her body, this sickly girl upon whom all their hopes rested.

On the surface, a new King ruled with his shadow army, and he demanded that his Sun Summoner be returned. He offered threats and rewards, but the answer he received came in the form of a challenge—from an outlaw the people had dubbed the Prince of the Air. He struck along the northern border, bombing supply lines, forcing the Shadow King to renew trade and travel across the Fold with nothing but luck and Inferni fire to keep the monsters at bay. Some said this challenger was a Lantsov prince. Some said he was a Fjerdan rebel who refused to fight alongside witches. But all agreed he must have powers of his own.

The Saint rattled the bars of her underground cage. This was her war, and she demanded freedom to fight it. The priest refused.

But he’d forgotten that before she’d become a Grisha and a Saint, she’d been a ghost of Keramzin. She and the boy had hoarded secrets as Pelyekin hoarded treasure. They knew how to be thieves and phantoms, how to hide strength as well as mischief. Like the teachers at the Duke’s estate, the priest thought he

knew the girl and what she was capable of.

He was wrong.

He did not hear their hidden language, did not understand the boy’s resolve. He did not see the moment the girl ceased to bear her weakness as a burden and began to wear it as a guise.

CHAPTER 1

I STOOD ON a carved stone balcony, arms spread, shivering in my cheap robes, and tried to put on a good show. My *kefta* was a patchwork, sewn together from scraps of the gown I was wearing the night we fled the palace and garish curtains that I'd been told came from a defunct theater somewhere near Sala. Beads from the lobby chandeliers made up the trim. The embroidery at the cuffs was already coming undone. David and Genya had done their best, but there were limited resources underground.

From a distance, it did the trick, sparkling gold in the light that seemed to emanate from my palms, sending bright glimmers over the ecstatic faces of my followers far below. Up close, it was all loose threads and false shine. Just like me. The threadbare Saint.

The Apparat's voice boomed through the White Cathedral, and the crowd swayed, eyes closed, hands raised, a field of poppies, arms like pale stalks shaken by some wind I couldn't feel. I followed a choreographed series of gestures, moving deliberately so that David and whichever Inferni was helping him this morning could track my movements from their position in the chamber hidden just above the balcony. I dreaded morning prayers, but according to the priest, these false displays were a necessity.

"It is a gift you give your people, Sankta Alina," he said. "It is hope."

Actually, it was an illusion, a pale suggestion of the light I'd once commanded. The golden haze was really Inferni fire, reflected off a beaten mirror dish that David had fashioned from salvaged glass. It was something like the dishes we'd used in our failed attempt to stave off the Darkling's horde

during the battle in Os Alta. We'd been taken by surprise; and my power, our planning, all of David's ingenuity, and Nikolai's resourcefulness hadn't been enough to stop the slaughter. Since then, I'd been unable to summon so much as a sunbeam. But most of the Apparat's flock had never seen what their Saint could really do, and for now, this deception was enough.

The Apparat finished his sermon. That was the signal to end. The Inferni let the light flare bright around me. It jumped and wavered erratically, then finally faded as I dropped my arms. Well, now I knew who was on fire duty with David. I cast a scowl up at the cave. *Harshaw.* He was always getting carried away. Three Inferni had made it out of the battle at the Little Palace, but one had died just days later from her wounds. Of the two that remained, Harshaw was the most powerful and the most unpredictable.

I stepped down from the platform, eager to be out of the Apparat's presence, but my foot faltered and I stumbled. The priest grasped my arm, steadying me.

"Have a care, Alina Starkov. You are incautious with your safety."

"Thanks," I said. I wanted to pull away from him, from the turned-soil and incense stench he brought with him everywhere.

"You're feeling poorly today."

"Just clumsy." We both knew that was a lie. I was stronger than when I'd come to the White Cathedral—my bones had mended, I'd managed to keep down meals—but I was still frail, my body plagued by aches and constant fatigue.

"Perhaps a day of rest, then."

I gritted my teeth. Another day confined to my chamber. I swallowed my frustration and smiled weakly. I knew what he wanted to see.

"I'm so cold," I said. "Some time in the Kettle would do me good." Strictly speaking, it was true. The kitchens were the one place in the White Cathedral where the damp could be held at bay. By this time, at least one of the breakfast fires would be lit. The big round cavern would be full of the smells of baking bread and the sweet porridge the cooks made from stores of dried peas and powdered milk provided by allies on the surface and stockpiled by the pilgrims.

I added a shiver for good measure, but the priest's only reply was a noncommittal "hmm."

Movement at the base of the cavern caught my attention: pilgrims, newly arrived. I couldn't help but look at them with a strategic eye. Some wore uniforms that marked them as First Army deserters. All were young and able-bodied.

"No veterans?" I asked. "No widows?"

"It's a hard journey underground," the Apparat replied. "Many are too old or weak to move. They prefer to stay in the comfort of their homes."

Unlikely. The pilgrims came on crutches and canes, no matter how old or sick. Even dying, they came to see the Sun Saint in their last days. I cast a wary glance over my shoulder. I could just glimpse the Priestguards, bearded and heavily armed, standing sentinel in the archway. They were monks, scholar priests like the Apparat, and belowground they were the only people allowed to carry weapons. Above, they were the gatekeepers, ferreting out spies and unbelievers, granting sanctuary to those they deemed worthy. Lately, the pilgrims' numbers had been dwindling, and those who did join our ranks seemed more hearty than pious. The Apparat wanted potential soldiers, not just mouths to feed.

"I could go to the sick and elderly," I said. I knew the argument was futile, but I made it anyway. It was almost expected. "A Saint should walk amongst her people, not hide like a rat in a warren."

The Apparat smiled—the benevolent, indulgent smile that the pilgrims adored and that made me want to scream. "In times of trouble, many animals go to ground. That's how they survive," he said. "After fools wage their battles, it is the rats that rule the fields and towns."

And feast on the dead, I thought with a shudder. As if he could read my thoughts, he pressed a hand to my shoulder. His fingers were long and white, splaying over my arm like a waxen spider. If the gesture was meant to comfort me, it failed.

"Patience, Alina Starkov. We rise when the time is right and not before."

Patience. That was always his prescription. I resisted the urge to touch my bare wrist, the empty place where the firebird's bones were meant to reside. I had claimed the sea whip's scales and the stag's antlers, but the final piece in Morozova's puzzle was missing. We might have had the third amplifier by now

if the Apparat had lent his support to the hunt or just let us return to the surface. But that permission would only come at a price.

"I'm cold," I repeated, burying my irritation. "I want to go to the Kettle."

He frowned. "I don't like you huddling down there with that girl—"

Behind us, the guards muttered restlessly, and a word floated back to me. *Razrusha'ya*. I batted the Apparat's hand away and marched into the passage. The Priestguards came to attention. Like all their brothers, they were dressed in brown and wore the golden sunburst, the same symbol that marked the Apparat's robes. *My* symbol. But they never looked directly at me, never spoke to me or the other Grisha refugees. Instead, they stood silently at the edges of rooms and trailed me everywhere like bearded, rifle-wielding specters.

"That name is forbidden," I said. They stared straight ahead, as if I were invisible. "Her name is Genya Safin, and I'd still be the Darkling's prisoner if it weren't for her." No reaction. But I saw them tense at even the sound of her name. Grown men with guns, afraid of a scarred girl. Superstitious idiots.

"Peace, Sankta Alina," said the Apparat, taking my elbow to shepherd me across the passage and into his audience chamber. The silver-veined stone of the ceiling was carved into a rose, and the walls were painted with Saints in their golden halos. It must have been Fabrikator craft because no ordinary pigment could withstand the cold and damp of the White Cathedral. The priest settled himself in a low wooden chair and gestured for me to take another. I tried to hide my relief as I sank down into it. Even standing for too long left me winded.

He peered at me, taking in my sallow skin, the dark smudges beneath my eyes. "Surely *Genya* can do more for you."

It had been over two months since my battle with the Darkling, and I hadn't fully recovered. My cheekbones cut the hollows of my face like angry exclamations, and the white fall of my hair was so brittle it seemed to float like cobwebs. I'd finally talked the Apparat into letting Genya attend me in the kitchens with the promise that she might work her craft and make me more presentable. It was the only real contact I'd had with the other Grisha in weeks. I'd savored every moment, every bit of news.

"She's doing her best," I said.

The priest sighed. "I suppose we must all be patient. You will heal in time.

Through faith. Through prayer."

A surge of rage took hold of me. He knew damn well that the only thing that would heal me was using my power, but to do that, I needed to return to the surface.

"If you would just let me venture aboveground—"

"You are too precious to us, Sankta Alina, and the risk is far too great." He shrugged apologetically. "You will not have a care for your safety, so I must."

I stayed silent. This was the game we played, that we'd been playing since I'd been brought here. The Apparat had done a lot for me. He was the only reason any of my Grisha had made it out of the battle with the Darkling's monsters. He'd given us safe haven underground. But every day the White Cathedral felt more like a prison than a refuge.

He steepled his fingers. "Months gone by, and still you do not trust me."

"I do," I lied. "Of course I do."

"And yet, you will not let me help you. With the firebird in our possession, all this might change."

"David is working his way through Morozova's journals. I'm sure the answer is there."

The Apparat's flat black gaze burrowed into me. He suspected I knew the location of the firebird—Morozova's third amplifier and the key to unlocking the only power that might defeat the Darkling and destroy the Fold. And he was right. At least, I hoped he was. The only clue we had to its location was buried in my scant childhood memories and the hope that the dusty ruins of Dva Stolba were more than they seemed. But right or wrong, the firebird's possible location was a secret I intended to keep. I was isolated underground, close to powerless, spied upon by the Priestguards. I wasn't about to give up the one bit of leverage I had.

"I want only the best for you, Alina Starkov. For you and your friends. So few remain. If anything were to happen to them—"

"You leave them be," I snarled, forgetting to be sweet, to be gentle.

The Apparat's look was too keen for my liking. "I simply meant that accidents happen underground. I know you would feel each loss deeply, and you are so very *weak.*" On the last word, his lips stretched back over his gums. They

were black like a wolf's.

Again, rage coursed through me. From my first day in the White Cathedral, threat had hung heavy in the air, suffocating me with the steady press of fear. The Apparat never missed an opportunity to remind me of my vulnerability. Almost without thinking, I twitched my fingers in my sleeves. Shadows leapt up the walls of the chamber.

The Apparat reared back in his chair. I frowned at him, feigning confusion. "What's wrong?" I asked.

He cleared his throat, eyes darting right and left. "It's … it's nothing," he stammered.

I let the shadows fall. His reaction was well worth the wave of dizziness that came when I used this trick. And that's all it was. I could make the shadows jump and dance but nothing more. It was a sad little echo of the Darkling's power, some remnant left behind in the wake of the confrontation that had nearly killed us both. I'd discovered it when trying to summon light, and I'd struggled to hone it to something greater, something I could fight with. I'd had no success. The shadows felt like a punishment, ghosts of greater power that served only to taunt me, the Saint of shams and mirrors.

The Apparat rose, attempting to regain his composure. "You will go to the archives," he said decisively. "Time in quiet study and contemplation will help to ease your mind."

I stifled a groan. This really was punishment—hours spent fruitlessly perusing old religious texts for information on Morozova. Not to mention that the archives were damp, miserable, and crawling with Priestguards. "I will escort you," he added. Even better.

"And the Kettle?" I asked, trying to hide the desperation in my voice.

"Later. *Razru*— Genya will wait," he said as I followed him into the passage. "You needn't scurry off to the Kettle, you know. You could meet with her here. In privacy."

I glanced at the guards, who had fallen into step behind us. Privacy. That was laughable. But the idea of being kept from the kitchens was not. Maybe today the master flue would open for more than a few seconds. It was a slim hope, but it was all the hope I had.

“I prefer the Kettle,” I said. “It’s warm there.” I gave him my meekest smile, let my lip tremble slightly, and added, “It reminds me of home.”

He loved that—the image of a humble girl, huddling by a cookstove, hem trailing in ash. Another illusion, one more chapter in his book of Saints.

“Very well,” he said at last.

It took a long while to wend our way down from the balcony. The White Cathedral took its name from the alabaster of its walls and the massive main cavern where we held services every morning and evening. But it was much more than that—a sprawling network of tunnels and caves, a city underground. I hated every inch of it. The moisture that seeped through the walls, dripped from the ceilings, clustered in beads on my skin. The chill that couldn’t be dispelled. The toadstools and night flowers that bloomed in cracks and crevices. I hated the way we marked time: morning services, afternoon prayer, evening services, Saints’ days, days for fasting and half fasting. But mostly I hated the feeling that I really was a little rat, pale and red-eyed, scrabbling at the walls of my maze with feeble pink-tinged claws.

The Apparat led me through the caverns north of the main basin, where the Soldat Sol trained. People backed against the rock or reached out to touch my golden sleeve as we passed. We set a slow pace, dignified—necessary. I couldn’t move any faster without getting winded. The Apparat’s flock knew I was sick and said prayers for my health, but he feared there would be a panic if they discovered just how fragile—how very human—I was.

The Soldat Sol had already begun their training by the time we arrived. These were the Apparat’s holy warriors, sun soldiers who bore my symbol tattooed on their arms and faces. Most of them were First Army deserters, though others were simply young, fierce, and willing to die. They’d helped to rescue me from the Little Palace, and the casualties had been brutal. Holy or not, they were no match for the Darkling’s *nichevo’ya.* Still, the Darkling had human soldiers and Grisha in his service too, so the Soldat Sol trained.

But now they did it without real weapons, with dummy swords and rifles loaded with wax pellets. The Soldat Sol were a different kind of pilgrim, brought to the cult of the Sun Saint by the promise of change, many of them young and ambivalent about the Apparat and the old ways of the church. Since my arrival

underground, the Apparat had kept them on a far tighter leash. He needed them, but he didn't wholly trust them. I knew the feeling.

Priestguards lined the walls, maintaining a close eye on the proceedings. Their bullets were real, and so were the blades of their sabers.

As we entered the training area, I saw that a group had gathered to watch Mal spar with Stigg, one of our two surviving Inferni. He was thick-necked, blond, and utterly humorless—Fjerdan to the core.

Mal dodged an arc of fire, but the second spurt of flame caught on his shirt. The onlookers gasped. I thought he might draw back, but instead he charged. He dove into a roll, dousing the flames on the ground and knocking Stigg's feet from beneath him. In a flash, he had the Inferni pinned facedown. He secured Stigg's wrists, preventing another attack.

The watching sun soldiers broke into appreciative applause and whistles.

Zoya tossed her glossy black hair over one shoulder. "Well done, Stigg. You're trussed and ready for basting."

Mal silenced her with a look. "Distract, disarm, disable," he said. "The trick is not to panic." He rose and helped Stigg to his feet. "You all right?"

Stigg scowled, annoyed, but nodded and moved to spar with a pretty young soldier.

"Come on, Stigg," the girl said with a wide grin. "I won't go too rough on you."

The girl's face was familiar, but it took me a long moment to place her—Ruby. Mal and I had trained with her at Poliznaya. She'd been in our regiment. I remembered her as giggling, cheerful, the kind of happy, flirtatious girl who made me feel awkward and hopeless in my skin. She still had the same ready smile, the same long blond braid. But even from a distance, I could see the watchfulness in her, the wariness that came with war. There was a black sun tattooed over the right side of her face. Strange to think that a girl who had once sat across from me in the mess hall now thought I was divine.

It was rare that the Apparat or his guards took me this way to the archives. What was different today? Had he brought me here so I could look over the shreds of my army and remember the price of my mistakes? To show me how few allies I had left?

I watched Mal pair sun soldiers with Grisha. There were the Squallers: Zoya, Nadia, and her brother Adrik. With Stigg and Harshaw, they made up the last of my Etherealki. But Harshaw was nowhere to be seen. He'd probably rolled back into bed after summoning flame for me during morning prayers.

As for the Corporalki, the only Heartrenders on the training floor were Tamar and her massive twin, Tolya. I owed them my life, but the debt didn't rest easy with me. They were close to the Apparat, charged with the instruction of the Soldat Sol, and they'd lied to me for months at the Little Palace. I wasn't quite sure what to make of them. Trust was a luxury I could ill afford.

The remaining soldiers would have to wait for a turn to fight. There were simply too few Grisha. Genya and David kept to themselves, and weren't much for combat, anyway. Maxim was a Healer and preferred to practice his craft in the infirmary, though few of the Apparat's flock trusted Grisha enough to take advantage of his services. Sergei was a powerful Heartrender, but I'd been told he was too unstable to be considered safe around students. He'd been in the thick of the fighting when the Darkling launched his surprise attack, had seen the girl he loved torn open by monsters. We'd lost our only other Heartrender to the *nichevo'ya* somewhere between the Little Palace and the chapel.

Because of you, said a voice in my head. *Because you failed them.*

I was drawn from my bleak thoughts by the Apparat's voice. "The boy oversteps."

I followed his gaze to where Mal was moving between the soldiers, speaking to one or correcting another. "He's helping them train," I said.

"He's giving orders. Oretsev," the priest called, beckoning him over. I tensed, watching Mal approach. I'd barely seen him since he'd been banned from my chamber. Aside from my carefully rationed interactions with Genya, the Apparat kept me isolated from potential allies.

Mal looked different. He wore the peasant roughspun that had served as his uniform at the Little Palace, but he was leaner, paler from time spent belowground. The narrow scar on his jaw stood out in sharp relief.

He stopped before us and bowed. It was the closest we'd been allowed to each other in months.

"You are not the captain here," said the Apparat. "Tolya and Tamar outrank

you.”

Mal nodded. “They do.”

“So why are you leading the exercises?”

“I wasn’t leading anything,” he said. “I have something to teach. They have something to learn.”

True enough, I thought bitterly. Mal had gotten very good at fighting Grisha. I remembered him bruised and bleeding, standing over a Squaller in the stables of the Little Palace, a look of challenge and contempt in his eyes. Another memory I could do without.

“Why haven’t those recruits been marked?” the Apparat asked, gesturing toward a group sparring with wooden swords near the far wall. None of them could have been more than twelve years old.

“Because they’re children,” Mal replied, ice in his voice.

“It’s their choice. Would you deny them the chance to show fealty to our cause?”

“I’d deny them regret.”

“No one has that power.”

A muscle ticked in Mal’s jaw. “If we lose, those tattoos will brand them as sun soldiers. They might as well sign up to face the firing squad now.”

“Is that why your own features bear no mark? Because you have so little faith in our victory?”

Mal glanced at me, then back at the Apparat. “I save my faith for Saints,” he said evenly. “Not men who send children to die.”

The priest’s eyes narrowed.

“Mal’s right,” I interjected. “Let them remain unmarked.” The Apparat scrutinized me with that flat black gaze. “Please,” I said softly, “as a kindness to me.”

I knew how much he liked that voice—gentle, warm, a lullaby voice.

“Such a tender heart,” he said, clucking his tongue. But I could tell he was pleased. Though I’d spoken against his wishes, this was the Saint he wanted me to be, a loving mother, a comfort to her people. I dug my fingernails into my palm.

“That’s Ruby, isn’t it?” I asked, eager to change the subject and divert the

Apparat's attention.

"She got here a few weeks back," Mal said. "She's good—came from the infantry." Despite myself, I felt the tiniest twinge of envy.

"Stigg doesn't look happy," I said, bobbing my head toward where the Inferni seemed to be taking out his loss on Ruby. The girl was doing her best to hold her own, but she was clearly outmatched.

"He doesn't like getting beaten."

"I don't think you even broke a sweat."

"No," he said. "It's a problem."

"Why is that?" asked the Apparat.

Mal's eyes darted to me for the briefest second. "You learn more by losing." He shrugged. "At least Tolya's around to keep kicking my ass."

"Mind your tongue," the Apparat snapped.

Mal ignored him. Abruptly, he put two fingers to his lips and gave a sharp whistle. "Ruby, you're leaving yourself open!"

Too late. Her braid was on fire. Another young soldier ran at her with a bucket of water and tossed it over her head.

I winced. "Try not to get them too crispy."

Mal bowed. "*Moi sovereny*i." He jogged back to the troops.

That title. He said it without any of the rancor he had seemed to carry at Os Alta, but it still hit me like a punch to the gut.

"He should not address you so," complained the Apparat.

"Why not?"

"It was the Darkling's title and is unfitting for a Saint."

"Then what should he call me?"

"He should not address you directly at all."

I sighed. "Next time he has something to say, I'll have him write me a letter."

The Apparat pursed his lips. "You're restless today. I think an extra hour in the solace of the archives will do you good."

His tone was chiding, as if I were a cranky child who had stayed up past her bedtime. I made myself think of the promise of the Kettle and forced a smile. "I'm sure you're right." *Distract, disarm, disable.*

As we turned down the passage that would take us to the archives, I looked

over my shoulder. Zoya had flipped a soldier on his back and was spinning him like a turtle, her hand making lazy circles in the air. Ruby was talking to Mal, her smile broad, her expression avid. But Mal was watching me. In the ghostly light of the cavern, his eyes were a deep and steady blue, the color at the center of a flame.

I turned away and followed the Apparat, hurrying my steps, trying to temper the wheeze of my lungs. I thought of Ruby's smile, her singed braid. A nice girl. A normal girl. That was what Mal needed. If he hadn't taken up with someone new already, eventually he would. And someday I'd be a good enough person to wish him well. Just not today.

* * *

WE CAUGHT DAVID on his way into the archives. As usual, he was a mess—hair going every direction, sleeves blotted with ink. He had a glass of hot tea in one hand and a piece of toast tucked into his pocket.

His eyes flickered from the Apparat to the Priestguards.

"More salve?" he asked.

The Apparat curled his lip slightly at this. The salve was David's concoction for Genya. Along with her own efforts, it had helped to fade some of the worst of her scarring, but wounds from the *nichevo'ya* never healed completely.

"Sankta Alina has come to spend her morning in study," the Apparat declared with great solemnity.

David gave a twitch that vaguely resembled a shrug as he ducked through the doorway. "But you're going to the Kettle later?"

"I will have guards sent to escort you in two hours," said the Apparat. "Genya Safin will be waiting for you." His eyes scanned my haggard face. "See that she gives better attention to her work."

He bowed deeply and vanished down the tunnel. I looked around the room and blew out a long, dejected breath. The archives should have been the kind of place I loved, full of the smell of ink on paper, the soft crackle of quills. But this was the Priestguards' den—a dimly lit maze of arches and columns carved from white rock. The closest I'd come to seeing David lose his temper had been the first time he'd laid eyes on these little domed niches, some of them caved in, all

of them lined with ancient books and manuscripts, their pages black with rot, their spines bloated with moisture. The caves were damp enough that puddles had seeped up through the floors. “You can’t … you can’t have kept Morozova’s journals in here,” he’d practically shrieked. “It’s a *bog*.”

Now David spent his days and most of his nights in the archives, poring over Morozova’s writings, jotting down theories and sketches in a notebook of his own. Like most other Grisha, he’d believed that Morozova’s journals had been destroyed after the creation of the Fold. But the Darkling would never have let knowledge like that go. He’d hidden the journals away, and though I’d never been able to get a straight answer from the Apparat, I suspected the priest had somehow discovered them in the Little Palace and then stolen them when the Darkling had been forced to flee Ravka.

I slumped down on a stool across from David. He had dragged a chair and a table into the driest of the caves, and stocked one of the shelves with extra oil for his lanterns and the herbs and unguents he used to make Genya’s salve. Usually, he hunched over some formula or bit of tinkering and didn’t look up for hours, but today he couldn’t seem to settle, fussing with his inks, fidgeting with the pocket watch he’d propped up on the table.

I thumbed listlessly through one of Morozova’s journals. I’d come to loathe the sight of them—useless, confusing, and most importantly, *incomplete*. He described his hypotheses regarding amplifiers, his tracking of the stag, his two-year journey aboard a whaler seeking the sea whip, his theories on the firebird, and then … nothing. Either there were journals missing or Morozova had left his work unfinished.

The prospect of finding and using the firebird was daunting enough. But the idea that it might not exist, that I might have to face the Darkling again without it? The thought was too terrifying to contemplate, so I simply shoved it away.

I made myself turn the pages. The only means I had of keeping track of time was David’s watch. I didn’t know where he’d found it, how he’d gotten it working, or if the time he’d set it to had any correlation to time on the surface, but I glared at its face and willed the minute hand to move faster.

The Priestguards came and went, always watching or bent to their texts. They were meant to be illuminating manuscripts, studying holy word, but I doubted

that was the bulk of their work. The Apparat's network of spies reached throughout Ravka, and these men considered it their calling to maintain it, deciphering messages, gathering intelligence, building the cult of a new Saint. It was hard not to compare them to my Soldat Sol, most of them young and illiterate, locked out of the old mysteries these men guarded.

When I couldn't bear any more of Morozova's ramblings, I twisted in my seat, trying to release a crick from my back. Then I pulled down an old collection of what were mostly debates on prayer, but that turned out to also contain a version of Sankt Ilya's martyrdom.

In this one, Ilya was a mason, and the neighbor boy was crushed beneath a horse—that was new. Usually, the boy was cut down by a plow blade. But the story ended as all the tellings did: Ilya brought the child back from the brink of death, and for his trouble, the villagers threw him into the river, bound by iron chains. Some tales claimed he never sank but floated out to sea. Others vowed his body had emerged days later on a sandbank miles away, perfectly preserved and smelling of roses. I knew them all, and none of them said a word about the firebird or indicated that Dva Stolba was the right place to start looking for it.

All our hope for finding the firebird resided in an old illustration: Sankt Ilya in Chains, surrounded by the stag, the sea whip, and the firebird. Mountains could be glimpsed behind him, along with a road and an arch. That arch had long since fallen, but I thought the ruins could be found at Dva Stolba, not far from the settlements where Mal and I had been born. At least, that's what I believed on my good days. Today, I felt less sure that Ilya Morozova and Sankt Ilya were the same man. I couldn't bring myself to look at the copies of the *Istorii Sankt'ya* anymore. They lay in a moldy stack in a forgotten corner, seeming less like portents of some grand destiny than children's books that had fallen out of fashion.

David picked up his watch, put it down, reached for it again, knocked over a bottle of ink then righted it with fumbling fingers.

"What's with you today?" I asked.

"Nothing," he said sharply.

I blinked at him. "Your lip is bleeding."

He wiped his palm across it, and the blood beaded up again. He must have

bitten it. Hard.

“David—”

He rapped his knuckles against his desk, and I nearly jumped. There were two guards behind me. Punctual and creepy as always.

“Here,” David said, handing me a small tin. Before I could take it, a guard had snatched it up.

“What are you doing?” I asked angrily. But I knew. Nothing passed between me and the other Grisha without being thoroughly inspected. For my safety, of course.

The Priestguard ignored me. He ran his fingers over the top and bottom of the tin, opened it, smelled the contents, investigated the lid, then closed it and handed it back without a word. I plucked it from his hand.

“Thanks,” I said sourly. “And thank you, David.”

He had already bent back over his notebook, seemingly lost in whatever he was reading. But he gripped his pen so hard I thought it might snap.

* * *

GENYA WAS WAITING for me in the Kettle, the vast, almost perfectly round cavern that provided food for all those in the White Cathedral. Its curved walls were studded with stone hearths, reminders of Ravka’s ancient past that the kitchen staff liked to complain weren’t nearly as convenient as the cookstoves and tile ovens above. The giant spits had been made for large game, but the cooks rarely had access to fresh meat. So instead they served salt pork, root vegetable stews, and a strange bread made from coarse gray flour that tasted vaguely of cherries.

The cooks had nearly gotten used to Genya, or at least they didn’t cringe and start praying when they saw her anymore. I found her keeping warm at a hearth on the Kettle’s far wall. This had become our spot, and the cooks left a small pot of porridge or soup there for us every day. As I approached with my armed escort, Genya let her shawl drop away, and the guards flanking me stopped short. She rolled her remaining eye and gave a catlike hiss. They dropped back, hovering by the entrance.

“Too much?” she asked.

“Just enough,” I replied, marveling at the changes in her. If she could laugh at the way those oafs reacted to her, it was a very good sign. Though the salve David had created for her scars had helped, I was pretty sure most of the credit belonged to Tamar.

For weeks after we’d arrived at the White Cathedral, Genya had refused to leave her chambers. She simply lay there, in the dark, unwilling to move. Under the supervision of the guards, I’d talked to her, cajoled her, tried to make her laugh. Nothing had worked. In the end, it had been Tamar who lured her out into the open, demanding that she at least learn to defend herself.

“Why do you even care?” Genya had muttered to her, pulling the blankets up.

“I don’t. But if you can’t fight, you’re a liability.”

“I don’t care if I get hurt.”

“I do,” I’d protested.

“Alina needs to watch her own back,” Tamar said. “She can’t be looking after you.”

“I never asked her to.”

“Wouldn’t it be nice if we only got what we asked for?” Tamar said. Then she’d pinched and prodded and generally harassed, until finally Genya had thrown off her covers and agreed to a single combat lesson—in private, away from the others, with only the Priestguards as audience.

“I’m going to flatten her,” she’d grumbled to me. My skepticism must have been evident, because she’d blown a red curl off her scarred forehead and said, “Fine, then I’ll wait for her to fall asleep and give her a pig nose.”

But she’d gone to that lesson and the next one, and as far as I knew, Tamar hadn’t woken up with a pig nose or with her eyelids sealed shut.

Genya continued to keep her face covered and spent most of her time in her chamber, but she no longer hunched, and she didn’t shy away from people in the tunnels. She’d made herself a black silk eye patch from the lining of an old coat, and her hair was looking distinctly redder. If Genya was using her power to alter her hair color, then maybe some of her vanity had returned, and that could only mean more progress.

“Let’s get started,” she said.

Genya turned her back to the room, facing the fire, then drew her shawl over

her head, keeping the fringed sides spread wide to create a screen that would hide us from prying eyes. The first time we'd tried this, the guards had been on us in seconds. But as soon as they'd seen me applying the salve to Genya's scars, they'd given us distance. They considered the wounds she bore from the Darkling's *nichevo'ya* some kind of divine judgment. For what, I wasn't sure. If Genya's crime was siding with the Darkling, then most of us had been guilty of it at one time or another. And what would they say to the bite marks on my shoulder? Or the way I could make shadows curl?

I took the tin from my pocket and began applying salve to her wounds. It had a sharp green scent that made my eyes water.

"I never realized what a pain it is to sit still this long," she complained.

"You're not sitting still. You're wriggling around."

"It itches."

"How about I jab you with a tack? Will that distract you from the itching?"

"Just tell me when you're done, you dreadful girl." She was watching my hands closely. "No luck today?" she whispered.

"Not so far. There are only two hearths going, and the flames are low." I wiped my hand on a grubby kitchen towel. "There," I said. "Done."

"Your turn," she said. "You look—"

"Terrible. I know."

"It's a relative term." The sadness in her voice was unmistakable. I could have kicked myself.

I touched my hand to her cheek. The skin between the scars was smooth and white as the alabaster walls. "I'm an ass."

The corner of her lip pulled crookedly. Almost a smile. "On occasion," she said. "But I'm the one who brought it up. Now be quiet and let me work."

"Just enough so that the Apparat lets us keep coming here. I don't want to give him a pretty little Saint to show off."

She sighed theatrically. "This is a violation of my most core beliefs, and you *will* make it up to me later."

"How?"

She cocked her head to one side. "I think you should let me make you a redhead."

I rolled my eyes. “Not in this lifetime, Genya.”

As she began the slow work of altering my face, I fiddled with the tin in my fingers. I tried to fit the lid back on, but some part of it had come loose from beneath the salve. I lifted it with the tips of my fingernails—a thin, waxy disc of paper. Genya saw it at the same time I did.

Written on the back, in David’s nearly illegible scrawl, was a single word: *today.*

Genya snatched it from my fingers. “Oh, Saints. Alina—”

That was when we heard the stomp of heavy-booted feet and a scuffle outside. A pot hit the ground with a loud *clang,* and a shriek went up from one of the cooks as the room flooded with Priestguards, rifles drawn, eyes seeming to blaze holy fire.

The Apparat swept in behind them in a swirl of brown robes. “Clear the room,” he bellowed.

Genya and I shot to our feet as the Priestguards roughly herded the cooks from the kitchen in a confusion of protests and frightened exclamations.

“What is this?” I demanded.

“Alina Starkov,” said the Apparat, “you are in danger.”

My heart was hammering, but I kept my voice calm. “Danger from what?” I asked, glancing at the pots boiling in the hearths. “Lunch?”

“Conspiracy,” he proclaimed, pointing at Genya. “Those who would claim your friendship seek to destroy you.”

More of the Apparat’s bearded henchmen marched through the door behind him. When they parted ranks, I saw David, his eyes wide and frightened.

Genya gasped and I laid a hand on her arm to keep her from charging forward.

Nadia and Zoya were next, both with wrists bound to prevent them from summoning. A trickle of blood leaked from the corner of Nadia’s mouth, and her skin was white beneath her freckles. Mal was with them, his face badly bloodied. He was clutching his side as if cradling a broken rib, his shoulders hunched against the pain. But worse was the sight of the guards who flanked him—Tolya and Tamar. Tamar had her axes back. In fact, they were both armed as thoroughly as the Priestguards. They would not meet my eyes.

“Lock the doors,” the Apparat commanded. “We will have this sad business done in private.”

CHAPTER 2

THE KETTLE'S MASSIVE DOORS slammed shut, and I heard the lock turn. I tried to put aside the sick twist in my gut and make sense of what I was seeing. Nadia and Zoya—two Squallers—Mal, and David, a harmless Fabrikator. *Today*, the note had said. What had it meant?

"I'll ask you again, priest. What is this? Why are my friends in custody? Why are they *bleeding*?"

"These are not your friends. A plot has been discovered to bring the White Cathedral down around our very ears."

"What are you talking about?"

"You saw the boy's insolence today—"

"Is that the problem? He doesn't tremble properly in your presence?"

"The issue here is treason!" He drew a small canvas pouch from his robes and held it out, letting it dangle from his fingers. I frowned. I'd seen pouches like that in the Fabrikator workshops. They were used for—

"Blasting powders," the Apparat said. "Made by this Fabrikator filth with materials gathered by your supposed friends."

"So David made blasting powders. There could be a hundred reasons for that."

"Weapons are forbidden within the White Cathedral."

I arched a brow at the rifles currently pointed at Mal and my Grisha. "And what are those? Ladles? If you're going to make accusations—"

"Their plans were overheard. Stand forward, Tamar Kir-Bataar. Speak the truth you've discovered."

Tamar bowed deeply. “The Grisha and the tracker planned to drug you and take you to the surface.”

“I *want* to return to the surface.”

“The blasting powders would have been used to ensure that no one followed,” she continued, “to bring down the caverns on the Apparat and your flock.”

“Hundreds of innocent people? Mal would never do that. None of them would.” Not even Zoya, that wretch. “And it doesn’t make any sense. Just how were they supposed to drug me?”

Tamar nodded to Genya and the tea that sat beside us.

“I drink that tea myself,” Genya snapped. “It isn’t laced with anything.”

“She is an accomplished poisoner and liar,” Tamar replied coldly. “She has betrayed you to the Darkling before.”

Genya’s fingers clenched around her shawl. We both knew there was truth in the charge. I felt an unwelcome prickle of suspicion.

“You trust her,” Tamar said. There was something strange in her voice. She sounded less like she was issuing an accusation than a command.

“They were only waiting to stockpile enough blasting powder,” said the Apparat. “Then they intended to strike, to take you aboveground and give you up to the Darkling.”

I shook my head. “You really expect me to believe that Mal would hand me over to the Darkling?”

“He was a dupe,” said Tolya quietly. “He was so desperate to free you that he became their pawn.”

I glanced at Mal. I couldn’t read his expression. The first real sliver of doubt entered me. I’d never trusted Zoya, and how well did I really know Nadia? Genya—Genya had suffered so much at the Darkling’s hand, but their ties ran deep. Cold sweat broke out on my neck, and I felt panic pull at me, fraying my thoughts.

“Plots within plots,” hissed the Apparat. “You have a soft heart, and it has betrayed you.”

“No,” I said. “None of this makes sense.”

“They are spies and deceivers!”

I pressed my fingers to my temples. “Where are my other Grisha?”

“They have been contained until they can be properly questioned.”

“Tell me they are unharmed.”

“See this concern for those who would wrong her?” he asked of the Priestguards. *He’s enjoying this*, I realized. *He’s been waiting for it.* “This is what marks her kindness, her generosity.” His gaze locked on mine. “There *are* some injuries, but the traitors will have the best of care. You need only say the word.”

The warning was clear, and finally I understood. Whether the Grisha plot was real or some subterfuge invented by the priest, this was the moment he had been hoping for, the chance to make my isolation complete. No more visits to the Kettle with Genya, no more stolen conversation with David. The priest would use this chance to separate me from anyone whose loyalties were tied more tightly to me than his cause. And I was too weak to stop him.

But was Tamar telling the truth? Were these allies really enemies? Nadia hung her head. Zoya kept her chin lifted, her blue eyes bright with challenge. It was easy to believe that either or both of them might turn against me, might seek the Darkling out and offer me as a gift with some hope of clemency. And David had helped to place the collar around my neck.

Could Mal have been tricked into helping them betray me? He didn’t look frightened or concerned—he looked the way he had at Keramzin when he was about to do something that got us both in trouble. His face was bruised, but I noticed he was standing straighter. And then he glanced up, almost as if he were casting his eyes heavenward, as if he were praying. I knew better. Mal had never been the religious sort. He was looking at the master flue.

Plots within plots. David’s nervousness. Tamar’s words. *You trust her*.

“Release them,” I commanded.

The Apparat shook his head, his expression full of sorrow. “Our Saint is being weakened by those who claim to love her. See how frail she is, how sickly. This is the corruption of their influence.” A few of the Priestguards nodded, and I saw that strange fanatical light in their eyes. “She is a Saint, but also a young girl governed by emotion. She does not understand the forces at work here.”

“I understand that you have lost your way, priest.”

The Apparat gave me that pitying, indulgent smile. “You are ill, Sankta

Alina. Not in your right mind. You do not know friend from foe."

Goes with the territory, I thought bleakly. I took a deep breath. This was the moment to choose. I had to believe in someone, and it wasn't the Apparat, a man who had betrayed his King, then betrayed the Darkling, who I knew would gladly orchestrate my martyrdom if it served his purpose.

"You will release them," I repeated. "I will not warn you again."

A smirk flickered over his lips. Behind the pity, there was arrogance. He was perfectly aware of how weak I was. I had to hope the others knew what they were doing.

"You will be escorted to your chambers so that you may spend the day in solitude," he said. "You will think on what has happened, and good sense will return. Tonight we will pray together. For guidance."

Why did I suspect that "guidance" meant the location of the firebird and possibly any information I had on Nikolai Lantsov?

"And if I refuse?" I asked, scanning the Priestguards. "Will your soldiers take up arms against their Saint?"

"You will remain untouched and protected, Sankta Alina," said the Apparat. "I cannot extend the same courtesy to those you would call friends."

More threats. I looked into the guards' faces, their fervent eyes. They would murder Mal, kill Genya, lock me in my chambers, and feel righteous in the act.

I took a small step back. I knew the Apparat would read it as a sign of weakness. "Do you know why I come here, priest?"

He gave a dismissive wave, his impatience showing through. "It reminds you of home."

My eyes met Mal's briefly. "You should know by now," I said, "an orphan has no home."

I twitched my fingers in my sleeves. Shadows surged up the Kettle walls. It wasn't much of a distraction, but it was enough. The Priestguards startled, rifles swinging wildly, as their Grisha captives recoiled in shock. Mal didn't hesitate.

"Now!" he shouted. He shot forward, snatching the blasting powder from the Apparat's hand.

Tolya threw out his fists. Two of the Priestguards crumpled, clutching their chests. Nadia and Zoya held up their hands, and Tamar spun, her axes slicing

through their bonds. Both Squallers raised their arms, and wind rushed through the room, lifting the sawdust on the floor.

“Seize them!” yelled the Apparat. The guards sprang into action.

Mal hurled the pouch of powder into the air. Nadia and Zoya lobbed it higher, up into the master flue.

Mal slammed into one of the guards. The broken ribs must have been an act, because there was nothing tentative in his movements now. A fist, a thrown elbow. The Priestguard went down. Mal grabbed his pistol and aimed high, up into the flue, into darkness.

This was the plan? No one could make that shot.

Another guard threw himself at Mal. Mal pivoted from his grasp and fired.

For a moment, there was a hush, suspended silence, and then high above us, I heard it: a dampened *boom.*

A roaring sound rushed toward us. A cloud of soot and rubble billowed from the flue above.

“Nadia!” cried Zoya, who was grappling with a guard.

Nadia arced her arms and the cloud hovered, twisted, siphoned into the shape of a whirling column. It spun away and collapsed to the floor in a harmless clatter of pebbles and dirt.

I took all of this in dimly—the fighting, the Apparat’s shouts of rage, the grease fire that had broken out against the far wall.

Genya and I had come to the kitchens for one reason alone: the hearths. Not for the heat or for any sense of comfort, but because each of those ancient hearths led to the master flue. And that flue was the only place in the White Cathedral with direct access to the surface. Direct access to the sun.

“Strike them down!” the Apparat shouted at his Priestguards. “They’re trying to kill our Saint! They’re trying to kill us all!”

I’d come here every day, hoping the cooks might use more than a few fires so that the flue would open all the way. I’d tried to summon, hidden from the Priestguards by Genya’s thick shawl and their superstitious fear of her. I’d tried and failed. Now Mal had blown the flue wide open. I could only call and pray that the light would answer.

I felt it, miles above me—so tentative, barely a whisper. Panic gripped me.

The distance was too great. I'd been foolish to hope.

Then it was as if something within me rose and stretched, like a creature that had lain idle for too long. Its muscles had gone soft from disuse, but it was still there, waiting. I called and the light answered with the strength of the antlers at my throat, the scales at my wrist. It came to me in a rush, triumphant and eager.

I grinned at the Apparat, letting exultation fill me. "A man so obsessed with holy fire should pay more attention to the smoke."

The light slammed through me and burst over the room in a blinding cascade that illuminated the almost comical expression of shock on the Apparat's face. The Priestguards threw up their hands, eyes squeezed shut against the glare.

Relief came with the light, a sense of being right and whole for the first time in months. Some part of me had truly feared I might never be restored completely, that by using *merzost* in my fight with the Darkling, by daring to create shadow soldiers and trespass in the making at the heart of the world, I had somehow forfeited this gift. But now it was as if I could feel my body coming to life, my cells reviving. Power rippled through my blood, reverberated in my bones.

The Apparat recovered quickly. "Save her!" he bellowed. "Save her from the traitors!"

Some of the guards looked confused, some frightened, but two jumped forward to do his bidding, sabers raised to attack Nadia and Zoya.

I honed my power to a gleaming scythe, felt the strength of the Cut in my hands.

Then Mal lunged in front of me. I barely had time to draw back. The jolt of unused power recoiled through me, making my heart stutter.

Mal had gotten hold of a sword, and his blade flashed as he cut through one guard, then the other. They toppled like trees.

Two more advanced, but Tolya and Tamar were there to stop them. David ran to Genya's side. Nadia and Zoya flipped another guard in the air. I saw Priestguards on the periphery raising their rifles to open fire.

Rage coursed through me, and I fought to rein it in. *No more,* I told myself. *No more deaths today.* I hurled the Cut in a fiery arc. It crashed through a long table and tore into the earth before the Priestguards, opening a dark, yawning

trench in the kitchen floor. There was no way of knowing how deep it went.

Terror was written on the Apparat's face—terror and what might well have been awe. The guards fell to their knees, and a moment later, the priest followed. Some wept, chanting prayers. Beyond the kitchen doors, I heard fists pounding, voices wailing, "Sankta! Sankta!"

I was glad they were crying out for me and not the Apparat. I dropped my hands, letting the light recede. I didn't want to let it go. I looked at the bodies of the fallen guards. One of them had sawdust in his beard. I had almost been the person to end his life.

I drew a little light and kept it burning in a warm halo around me. I had to be cautious. The power was feeding me, but I'd been too long without it. My weakened body was having trouble keeping up, and I wasn't sure of my limits. Still, I'd been under the Apparat's control for months, and I wouldn't have an opportunity like this again.

Men lay dead and bleeding, and a crowd was waiting outside the Kettle doors. I could hear Nikolai's voice in my head: *The people like spectacle.* The show wasn't over yet.

I walked forward, stepping carefully around the trench I'd opened, and stood before one of the kneeling guards.

He was younger than the others—his beard just coming in; his gaze fastened on the ground as he mumbled prayers. I caught not just my name, but the names of real Saints, strung together as if in a single word. I touched my hand to his shoulder, and his eyes slid shut, tears rolling down his cheeks.

"Forgive me," he said. "Forgive me."

"Look at me," I said gently.

He forced himself to look up. I cupped his face in my hand, gentle, like a mother, though he was barely older than I was. "What's your name?"

"Vladim … Vladim Ozwal."

"It's good to doubt Saints, Vladim. And men."

He gave a shaky nod as another tear spilled over.

"My soldiers bear my mark," I said, referring to the tattoos borne by the Soldat Sol. "Until this day you have put yourself apart from them, buried yourself in books and prayer instead of hearing the people. Will you wear my

mark now?”

“Yes,” he said, fervently.

“Will you swear loyalty to me and only me?”

“Gladly!” he cried. “Sol Koroleva!” Sun Queen.

My stomach turned. Part of me hated what I was about to do. *Can’t I just make him sign something? Give a blood oath? Make me a really firm promise?* But I had to be stronger than that. This boy and his comrades had taken up arms against me. I couldn’t let that happen again, and this was the language of Saints and suffering, the language they understood.

“Open your shirt,” I commanded. Not a loving mother now, but a different kind of Saint, a warrior wielding holy fire.

His fingers fumbled with his buttons, but he didn’t hesitate. He pulled the fabric apart, baring the skin of his chest. I was tired, still weak. I had to concentrate. I wanted to make a point, not kill him.

I felt the light in my hand. I pressed my palm to the smooth skin over his heart and let the power pulse. Vladim flinched when it connected, scorching his flesh, but he did not cry out. His eyes were wide and unblinking, his expression rapt. When I pulled my hand back, my palm print remained, the brand throbbing red and angry on his chest.

Not bad, I thought grimly, *for your first time mutilating a man.*

I let the power go, grateful to be finished.

“It is done.”

Vladim looked down at his chest, and his face broke into a beatific grin. *He has dimples*, I realized with a lurch. *Dimples and a hideous scar he’ll bear for the rest of his life.*

“Thank you, Sol Koroleva.”

“Rise,” I commanded.

He stood, beaming down at me, tears still running from his eyes.

The Apparat moved as if to stand. “Stay where you are,” I snapped, my rage returning. He was the reason I’d just had to brand a young man. He was the reason two men lay dead, their blood pooling over discarded onion skins and carrot shavings.

I looked down at him. I could feel the temptation to take his life, to be rid of

him forever. It would be deeply stupid. I'd awed a few soldiers, but if I murdered the Apparat, who knew what chaos I might unleash? *You want to, though*, said a voice in my head. For the months underground, for the fear and intimidation, for every day sacrificed below the surface when I could have been hunting the firebird and seeking revenge on the Darkling.

He must have read the intent in my eyes.

"Sankta Alina, I only wanted for you to be safe, for you to be whole and well again," he said shakily.

"Then consider your prayers answered." That was a lie if I'd ever told one. The last words I would have chosen to describe myself were *whole* or *well*. "Priest," I said. "You will offer sanctuary to all those who seek it, not just those who worship the Sun Saint."

He shook his head. "The security of the White Cathedral—"

"If not here, then elsewhere. Figure it out."

He took a breath. "Of course."

"And there will be no more child soldiers."

"If the faithful wish to fight—"

"You are on your knees," I said. "We are not negotiating."

His lips thinned, but after a moment, he dipped his chin in assent.

I looked around. "You are all witness to these decrees." Then I turned to one of the guards. "Give me your gun."

He handed it over without a second's pause. With some satisfaction, I saw the Apparat's eyes widen in dismay, but I simply passed the weapon to Genya, then demanded a saber for David, though I knew he wouldn't be much good with it. Zoya and Nadia stood ready to summon, and Mal and the twins were already well armed.

"Up," I said to the Apparat. "Let us have peace. We have seen miracles this day."

He rose, and as I embraced him, I whispered in his ear. "You will lend your blessing to our mission, and you will follow the orders I've laid out for you. Or I will carve you in half and throw the pieces into the Fold. Understood?"

He swallowed and nodded.

I needed time to think, but I didn't have it. We had to open those doors, to

offer the people an explanation for the fallen guards and for the explosion.

"See to your dead," I said to one of the Priestguards. "We'll bear them with us. Do they … do they have family?"

"We are their family," said Vladim.

I addressed the others. "Gather the faithful from all over the White Cathedral and bring them to the main cavern. I will speak to them in one hour's time. Vladim, once we're out of the Kettle, free the other Grisha and get them to my quarters."

He touched the brand at his chest in a kind of salute. "Sankta Alina."

I glanced at Mal's bruised face. "Genya, clean him up. Nadia—"

"I've got it," Tamar said, already dabbing the blood on Nadia's lip with a towel she'd dunked into a cookpot full of hot water. "Sorry about that," I heard her say.

Nadia smiled. "Had to make it look good. Besides, I'll get you back."

"We'll see," Tamar replied.

I looked over the other Grisha in their bedraggled *kefta*. We didn't make for a very impressive parade. "Tolya, Tamar, Mal, you'll walk beside me with the Apparat." I lowered my voice. "Try to look confident and … regal."

"I have a question—" Zoya began.

"I have about a hundred, but they'll have to wait. I don't want the crowd out there turning into a mob." I looked at the Apparat. I felt the dark urge to humble him, to make him crawl in front of me for these long weeks of subjugation underground. Ugly, foolish thoughts. It might gain me petty satisfaction, but what would it cost? I took a deep breath and said, "I want everyone else interspersed with the Priestguards. This is a show of alliance."

We arranged ourselves in front of the doors. The Apparat and I took the lead, the Priestguards and Grisha arrayed behind us, the corpses of the fallen borne aloft by their brothers.

"Vladim," I said, "open the doors."

As Vladim moved to turn the locks, Mal took his place beside me.

"How did you know I'd be able to summon?" I asked under my breath.

He glanced at me, and a faint grin touched his lips. "Faith."

CHAPTER 3

THE DOORS FLEW OPEN. I threw out my hands and let light blast into the passageway. A cry went up from the people lining the tunnel. Those who weren't already kneeling fell to their knees, and a chorus of prayer washed over me.

"Speak," I muttered to the Apparat as I bathed the supplicants in glowing sunlight. "And make it good."

"We have faced a great trial this day," he declared hurriedly. "Our Saint has emerged from it stronger than before. Darkness came to this hallowed place—"

"I saw it!" cried one of the Priestguards. "Shadows climbed the walls—"

"About that…," murmured Mal.

"Later."

"But they were vanquished," continued the Apparat, "as they will always be vanquished. By faith!"

I stepped forward. "And by power."

Again, I let light sweep through the passage, a blinding cascade. Most of these people had never seen what my power could truly do. Someone was weeping, and I heard my name, buried in the cries of "Sankta! Sankta!"

As I led the Apparat and the Priestguards through the White Cathedral, my mind was working, turning over options. Vladim went ahead of us, to see my orders done.

We finally had a chance to get free of this place. But what would it mean to leave the White Cathedral behind? I'd be abandoning an army and leaving them in the Apparat's care. And yet, there weren't many options open to us. I needed

to get aboveground. I needed the firebird.

Mal dispatched Tamar to rally the rest of the Soldat Sol and search out more working firearms. My control of the Priestguards was tenuous at best. In case of trouble, we wanted guns at the ready, and I hoped I could rely on the sun soldiers to stay loyal to me.

I escorted the Apparat to his quarters myself, Mal and Tolya trailing us.

At his door, I said, “In one hour, we’ll lead services together. Tonight, I leave with my Grisha and you’ll sanction our departure.”

“Sol Koroleva,” the Apparat whispered, “I urge you not to return to the surface so soon. The Darkling’s position is not a strong one. The Lantsov boy has few allies—”

“I’m his ally.”

“He abandoned you at the Little Palace.”

“He *survived*, priest. That’s something you should understand.” Nikolai had intended to get his family and Baghra to safety, then return to the fight. I could only hope he’d succeeded and that the rumors of him wreaking havoc on the northern border were true.

“Let them weaken each other, see which way the wind blows—”

“I owe Nikolai Lantsov more than that.”

“Is it loyalty that drives you? Or greed?” pressed the Apparat. “The amplifiers have waited countless years to be brought together, and you cannot wait a few more months?”

My jaw clenched at the thought. I wasn’t sure what was driving me, if it was my need for vengeance or something higher, if it was hunger for the firebird or friendship with Nikolai. But it didn’t much matter. “This is my war too,” I said. “I won’t hide like a lizard under a rock.”

“I beg you to heed my words. I have done nothing but serve you faithfully.”

“The way you served the King? The way you served the Darkling?”

“I am the voice of the people. They did not choose the Lantsov Kings or the Darkling. They chose you as their Saint, and they will love you as their Queen.”

Even the sound of those words made me weary.

I glanced over my shoulder to where Mal and Tolya waited a respectful distance away. “Do you believe it?” I asked the priest. The question had plagued

me since I'd first heard word of him gathering this cult. "Do you really think I'm a Saint?"

"What I believe doesn't matter," he replied. "That's what you've never understood. Do you know they've started building altars to you in Fjerda? In *Fjerda*, where they burn Grisha at the stake. There is a fine line between fear and veneration, Alina Starkov. I can move that line. That is the prize I offer you."

"I don't want it."

"But you will have it. Men fight for Ravka because the King commands it, because their pay keeps their families from starving, because they have no choice. They will fight for you because to them you are salvation. They will starve for you, lay down their lives and their children's lives for you. They will make war without fear and die rejoicing. There is no greater power than faith, and there will be no greater army than one driven by it."

"Faith didn't protect your soldiers from the *nichevo'ya*. No amount of fanaticism will."

"You see only war, but I see the peace that will come. Faith knows no border and no nationality. Love for you has taken root in Fjerda. The Shu will follow, then the Kerch. Our people will go forward and spread the word, not just through Ravka but through the world. This is the way to peace, Sankta Alina. Through you."

"The cost is too high."

"War is the price of change."

"And it's ordinary people who pay it, peasants like me. Never men like you."

"We—"

I silenced him with a hand. I thought of the Darkling laying waste to an entire town, of Nikolai's brother Vasily commanding that the draft age be lowered. The Apparat claimed to speak for the people, but he was no different than the rest.

"Keep them safe, priest—this flock, this army. Keep them fed. Keep marks off of the children's faces and rifles out of their hands. You leave the rest to me."

"Sankta Alina—"

I held open the door to his chamber. "We'll pray together soon," I said. "But I think you could use a head start."

* * *

MAL AND I LEFT the Apparat secured in his chambers and guarded by Tolya —with strict orders to make sure that the door stayed closed and that no one disturbed the priest's prayers.

I suspected that the Apparat would soon have the Priestguards, maybe even Vladim, back under his control. But all we needed were a few hours' start. He was lucky I didn't cram him into a damp corner of the archives.

When we finally arrived at my chamber, I found the narrow white room packed with Grisha and Vladim waiting at the door. My sleeping quarters were among the largest in the White Cathedral, but it was still a challenge to accommodate a group of twelve. No one looked too badly off. Nadia's lip was swollen, and Maxim was tending to a cut over Stigg's eye. It was the first time we'd been allowed to gather underground, and there was something comforting about seeing Grisha crowded together and sprawled over the meager furniture.

Mal didn't seem to agree. "We might as well travel with a marching band," he grumbled under his breath.

"What the hell is going on?" Sergei asked as soon as I'd dismissed Vladim. "One minute I'm in the infirmary with Maxim, the next I'm in a cell." He paced back and forth. There was a clammy sheen to his skin, and he had dark circles beneath his eyes.

"Calm down," said Tamar. "You're not behind bars now."

"I might as well be. We're all trapped down here. And that bastard is just looking for a chance to get rid of us."

"If you want out of the caves, then this is your opportunity," I said. "We're leaving. Tonight."

"How?" Stigg asked.

By way of answer, I let sunlight flare for a brief, brilliant moment in my palm —proof that my power had ignited in me once more, even if that small gesture took more effort than it should.

The room erupted into whistles and cheers.

"Yes, yes," said Zoya. "The Sun Summoner can summon. And all it took was a few deaths and a minor explosion."

“You blew something up?” said Harshaw plaintively. “Without me?”

He was wedged up against the wall next to Stigg. Our two Inferni couldn’t have looked more different. Stigg was short and stocky with nearly white blond hair. He had the solid, stubby appearance of a prayer candle. Harshaw was tall and rangy, his hair redder than Genya’s, nearly the color of blood. A scrawny orange tabby had somehow made her way down to the bowels of the White Cathedral and taken a liking to him. She followed him everywhere, slinking between his legs or clinging to his shoulder.

“Where *did* those blasting powders come from?” I asked, perching next to Nadia and her brother on the edge of my bed.

“I made them when I was supposed to be making salve,” said David. “Just like the Apparat said.”

“Right under the noses of the Priestguards?”

“It’s not as if they know anything about the Small Science.”

“Well, somebody must. You got caught.”

“Not exactly,” said Mal. He’d stationed himself by the doorway with Tamar, each of them keeping an eye on the passage beyond.

“David knew we were meeting in the Kettle,” said Genya, “and he guessed about the master flue.”

David frowned. “I don’t guess.”

“But there was no way to get the powders out of the archives, not with the guards searching everything.”

Tamar grinned. “So we had the Apparat deliver it.”

I stared at them in disbelief. “You meant to get caught?”

“Turns out the easiest way to schedule a meeting is to get arrested,” said Zoya.

“Do you know how risky that was?”

“Blame Oretsev,” Zoya replied with a sniff. “It was his idea of a brilliant plan.”

“It did *work*,” Genya observed.

Mal lifted a shoulder. “Like Sergei said, the Apparat was waiting for an opportunity to take us out of action. I figured we’d give him one.”

“We were just never sure when you’d be in the Kettle,” Nadia said. “When

you left the archives today, David claimed he'd forgotten something in his quarters and came by the training rooms to give us the signal. We knew the Apparat would be more likely to trust Tolya and Tamar, so they roughed us up a little—"

"A lot," put in Mal.

"Then they claimed to have discovered a devious plot involving a few wicked Grisha and one very gullible tracker."

Mal gave a mock salute.

"I was afraid he'd insist on putting everyone in the cells," said Tamar. "So we claimed you were in immediate danger and that we had to get to the Kettle right away."

Nadia smiled. "And then we just hoped the whole kitchen wouldn't fall in on us."

David's frown deepened. "It was a controlled blast. The odds that the cave's structure would hold were well above average."

"Ah. Above average," said Genya. "Why didn't you say so?"

"I just did."

"What about those shadows on the wall?" asked Zoya. "Who pulled that off?"

I tensed, unsure of what to say.

"I did it," said Mal. "We rigged it as a distraction."

Sergei paced back and forth, cracking his knuckles. "You should have told us about the plan. We deserved a warning."

"You could have at least let me blow something up," added Harshaw.

Zoya gave an elaborate shrug. "I'm *so* sorry you felt excluded. Never mind how closely we've been watched and that it was a miracle we weren't found out. We definitely should have jeopardized the whole operation to spare your feelings."

I cleared my throat. "In less than an hour, I'll be leading services with the Apparat. We'll leave directly after that, and I need to know who's going with me."

"Any chance you're going to tell us where the third amplifier is?" asked Zoya. Thus far, only the twins, Mal, and I knew where we hoped to find the firebird. *And Nikolai,* I reminded myself. Nikolai knew too—if he was still alive.

Mal shook his head. “The less you know, the safer we’ll be.”

“So you’re not even telling us where we’re going?” Sergei said sulkily.

“Not quite. We’re going to attempt to make contact with Nikolai Lantsov.”

“I think we should try Ryevost,” said Tamar.

“Go to the river cities?” I asked. “Why?”

“Sturmhond had smuggling lines throughout Ravka. It’s possible Nikolai is using them to get arms into the country.” Tamar would know. She and Tolya had been trusted members of Sturmhond’s crew. “If the rumors are true and he’s based somewhere in the north, then there’s a good chance the drop point near Ryevost is active.”

“That’s a lot of maybe and not much more,” Harshaw observed.

Mal nodded. “True. But it’s our best lead.”

“And if it’s a dead end?” asked Sergei.

“We split up,” said Mal. “We find a safe house where you can lie low, and I take a team to find the firebird.”

“You’re welcome to remain here,” I said to the others. “I know the pilgrims aren’t friendly to Grisha, and after tonight, I’m not sure how sentiment will change. But if we’re captured aboveground—”

“The Darkling doesn’t deal kindly with traitors,” finished Genya quietly.

Everyone shifted uncomfortably, but I made myself meet her gaze. “No. He doesn’t.”

“He’s had his shot at me,” she said. “I’m going.”

Zoya smoothed the cuff of her coat. “We’d move faster without you.”

“I’ll keep up,” Genya countered.

“See that you do,” said Mal. “We’ll be entering an area crawling with militias, not to mention the Darkling’s *oprichniki*. You’re recognizable,” he said to Genya. “So is Tolya, for that matter.”

Tamar’s lips twitched. “Would you like to be the one to tell him he can’t come?”

Mal considered this. “Maybe we can disguise him as a really big tree.”

Adrik shot to his feet so fast he nearly bounced me from the bed. “See you in an hour,” he declared, as if daring anyone to argue. Nadia gave me a shrug as he marched out of the room. Adrik wasn’t much younger than the rest of us, but

maybe because he was Nadia's little brother, he always seemed to be looking to prove himself.

"Well, I'm going," said Zoya. "The humidity down here is murder on my hair."

Harshaw rose and pushed off from the wall. "I'd prefer to stay," he said with a yawn. "But Oncat says we go." He hefted the tabby onto his shoulder with one hand.

"Are you ever going to name that thing?" Zoya asked.

"She has a name."

"*Oncat* is not a name. It's just Kaelish for cat."

"Suits her, doesn't it?"

Zoya rolled her eyes and flounced out the door, followed by Harshaw and then Stigg, who gave a polite bow and said, "I'll be ready."

The others trickled out after them. I suspected David would have preferred to remain at the White Cathedral, cloistered with Morozova's journals. But he was our only Fabrikator, and assuming we found the firebird, we would need him to forge the second fetter. Nadia seemed happy to go with her brother, though it was Tamar she grinned at on the way out. I'd guessed that Maxim would choose to remain here at the infirmary, and I'd been right. Maybe I could get Vladim and the other Priestguards to set an example for the pilgrims and take advantage of Maxim's skills as a Healer.

The only surprise was Sergei. Though the White Cathedral was miserable, damp, and dull, it was also relatively secure. As eager as Sergei had seemed to escape the Apparat's grasp, I hadn't been sure he'd want to take his chances with us aboveground. But he'd nodded tersely and simply stated, "I'll be there." Maybe we were all desperate for blue sky and a chance to feel free again, no matter the risk.

When they were gone, Mal sighed and said, "Well, it was worth a try."

"All that talk of militias," I said, realization dawning. "You were trying to scare them off."

"Twelve is too many. A group that big will slow us through the tunnels, and once we're aboveground, they'll put us at greater risk. As soon as we have a chance, we'll need to split up. There's no way I'm taking a dozen Grisha into the

southern mountains.”

“All right,” I said. “Assuming we can find a safe place for them.”

“No easy task, but we’ll manage it.” He moved toward the door. “I’ll be back in a half hour to take you to the main cavern.”

“Mal,” I said, “why did you step between me and the Priestguards?”

He shrugged. “Those aren’t the first men I’ve killed. They won’t be the last.”

“You kept me from using the Cut on them.”

He didn’t look at me when he said, “You’re going to be a queen someday, Alina. The less blood on your hands, the better.”

The word *queen* came so easily to his lips. “You seem certain we’ll find Nikolai.”

“I’m certain we’ll find the firebird.”

“I need an army. The firebird may not be enough.” I rubbed a hand over my eyes. “Nikolai may not even be in Ravka.”

“The reports coming out of the north—”

“Could be lies spread by the Darkling. ‘The Prince of the Air’ might be a myth created to draw us out of hiding. Nikolai might never have made it out of the Grand Palace.” It hurt me to say it, but I forced myself to speak the words. “He could be dead.”

“Do you believe that?”

“I don’t know.”

“If anyone could make that escape, it’s Nikolai.”

The too-clever fox. Even once he’d abandoned his disguise as Sturmhond, that’s who Nikolai had been to me, always thinking, always scheming. But he hadn’t predicted his brother’s betrayal. He hadn’t seen the Darkling coming.

“All right,” I said, embarrassed by the quaver in my voice. “You haven’t asked about the shadows.”

“Should I?”

I couldn’t resist. Maybe I wanted to see how he would react. I curled my fingers, and shadows unspooled from the corners.

Mal’s eyes followed their progress. What did I expect to see in him? Fear? Anger?

“Can you do more with it?” he asked.

“No. It’s just some kind of remnant of what I did in the chapel.”

“You mean saving all our lives?”

I let the shadows fall and pinched the bridge of my nose with my fingers, trying to stave off a rush of dizziness. “I mean using *merzost.* This isn’t real power. It’s just a carnival trick.”

“It’s something you took from him,” he said. I didn’t think I imagined the satisfaction in his voice. “I won’t say a word, but you shouldn’t hide it from the others.”

I could worry about that later. “What if Nikolai’s men aren’t in Ryevost?”

“You think I can track a giant mythic bird, but I can’t locate one loudmouthed prince?”

“A prince who’s managed to evade the Darkling for months.”

Mal studied me.

“Alina, do you know how I made that shot? Back in the Kettle?”

“If you say it’s because you’re just that good, I’m going to take off my boot and beat you with it.”

“Well, I *am* that good,” he said with a faint grin. “But I had David put a beetle in the pouch.”

“Why?”

“To make aiming easier. All I had to do was track it.”

My brows rose. “Now, *that’s* an impressive trick.”

He shrugged. “It’s the only one I know. If Nikolai’s alive, we’ll find him.” He paused, then added, “I won’t fail you again.” He turned to go, but before he shut the door, he said, “Try to rest. I’ll be outside if you need me.”

I stood there for a long moment. I wanted to tell him that he hadn’t failed me, but that wasn’t quite true. I’d lied to him about the visions that plagued me. He’d pushed me away when I’d needed him most. Maybe we’d both asked each other to give up too much. Fair or not, I felt like Mal had turned his back on me, and some part of me resented him for it.

I glanced around the empty room. It had been disconcerting to see so many people crammed in here. How well did I know any of them? Harshaw and Stigg were a few years older than the others, Grisha who had made their way to the Little Palace after they’d heard the Sun Summoner had returned. They were

practically strangers to me. The twins believed I was blessed by divine power. Zoya followed me only grudgingly. Sergei was falling apart, and I knew he probably blamed me for Marie's death. Nadia might too. She'd grieved more quietly, but they'd been best friends.

And Mal. I supposed we'd made a kind of peace, but it wasn't an easy one. Or maybe we had just accepted what I would become, that our paths would inevitably diverge. *You're going to be a queen someday, Alina.*

I knew I should at least try to sleep for a few minutes, but my mind wouldn't slow down. My body was thrumming with the power I'd used and eager for more.

I glanced at the door, wishing it had a lock. There was something I wanted to try. I'd attempted it a few times and never managed anything more than a headache. It was dangerous, probably stupid, but now that my power had returned, I wanted to try again.

I kicked off my boots and lay back on the narrow bed. I closed my eyes, felt the collar at my throat, the scales at my wrist, the presence of my power inside me like the beat of my heart. I felt the wound at my shoulder, the dark knot of scars made by the Darkling's *nichevo'ya.* It had strengthened the bond between us, giving him access to my mind as the collar had given him access to my power. In the chapel, I had used that connection against him and almost destroyed both of us in the process. I was foolish to test it now. Still, I was tempted. If the Darkling had access to that power, why shouldn't I? It was a chance to glean information, to understand the way the bond between us functioned.

It won't work, I reassured myself. *You'll try, you'll fail, you'll have a little nap.*

I slowed my breathing, letting power course through me. I thought of the Darkling, of the shadows I could bend to my fingers, of the collar around my neck that he had placed there, the fetter at my wrist that had separated me irrevocably from any other Grisha and truly set me on this path.

Nothing happened. I was lying on my back in a bed in the White Cathedral. I hadn't gone anywhere. I was alone in a vacant room. I blinked up at the damp ceiling. It was better that way. At the Little Palace, my isolation had nearly

destroyed me, but that was because I had hungered for something else, for the sense of belonging I'd been chasing my whole life. I'd buried that need in the ruins of a chapel. Now I would think in terms of alliance instead of affection, of who and what would make me strong enough for this fight.

I'd contemplated killing the Apparat today; I'd burned my mark into Vladim's flesh. I'd told myself I had to, but the girl I'd been never would have considered such things. I hated the Darkling for what he'd done to Baghra and Genya, but was I so different? And when the third amplifier was around my wrist, would I be different at all?

Maybe not, I conceded, and with that admission came the barest tremor—a vibration moving over the connection between us, an answering echo at the other end of an invisible tether.

It called to me through the collar at my neck and the bite at my shoulder, amplified by the fetter at my wrist, a bond forged by *merzost* and the dark poison in my blood. *You called to me, and I answered.* I felt myself drawn upward, out of myself, speeding toward him. Maybe this was what Mal felt when he tracked—the distant pull of the other, a presence that demanded attention even if it couldn't be seen or touched.

One moment I was floating in the darkness of my closed eyes, and the next I was standing in a brightly lit room. Everything around me was blurry, but I recognized this place just the same: I was in the throne room at the Grand Palace. People were talking. It was as if they were underwater. I heard noise but not words.

I knew the moment the Darkling saw me. He came into sharp focus, though the room around him remained a murky blur.

His self-control was so great that no one near him would have noticed the fleeting look of shock that passed over his perfect features. But I saw his gray eyes widen, his chest lock as his breath caught. His fingers clenched the arms of his chair—no, his throne. Then he relaxed, nodding along to whatever the person before him was saying.

I waited, watching. He'd fought for that throne, endured hundreds of years of battle and servitude to claim it. I had to admit it suited him well. Some petty part of me had hoped I'd find him weakened, his black hair turned to white like mine.

But whatever damage I'd done to him that night in the chapel, he'd recovered better than I had.

When the murmur of the supplicant's voice cut off, the Darkling rose. The throne faded into the background, and I realized that the things closest to him looked the clearest, as if he were the lens through which I was seeing the world.

"I will take it under advisement," he said, voice cool as cut glass, so familiar. "Now leave me." He gave a brusque wave. "All of you."

Did his lackeys exchange baffled glances or simply bow and depart? I couldn't tell. He was already moving down the stairs, his gaze fastened on me. My heart clenched, and a single clear word reverberated in my mind: *run.* I'd been mad to attempt this, to seek him out. But I didn't move. I didn't release the tether.

Someone approached him, and when he was just inches from the Darkling, he came into clearer focus—red Grisha robes, a face I didn't recognize. I could even make out his words: "… the matter of signatures for…" Then the Darkling cut him off.

"Later," he said sharply, and the Corporalnik skittered away.

The room emptied of sound and movement, and all the while, the Darkling kept his eyes on me. He crossed the parquet floor. With each step, the polished wood came into focus beneath his boot, then faded away again.

I had the strange sensation of lying on my bed in the White Cathedral and being here, in the throne room, standing in a warm square of sunlight.

He stopped before me, his eyes studying my face. What did he see there? He had come to me unscarred in my visions. Did he see me healthy and whole, my hair brown, my eyes bright? Or did he see the little mushroom girl, pale and gray, battered by our fight in the chapel, weakened by life underground?

"If only I'd known you'd prove such an apt pupil." His voice was genuinely admiring, almost surprised. To my horror, I found that pathetic orphaned part of me taking pleasure in his praise. "Why come to me now?" he asked. "Has it taken you this long to recover from our skirmish?"

If that had been a mere skirmish, then we really were lost. *No,* I told myself. He'd chosen that word deliberately, to intimidate me.

I ignored his question and said, "I didn't expect compliments."

“No?”

“I left you buried beneath a pile of rubble.”

“And if I told you I respect your ruthlessness?”

“I don’t think I’d believe you.”

The barest smile touched his lips. “An apt pupil,” he repeated. “Why waste my anger on you when the fault is mine? I should have anticipated another betrayal from you, one more mad grasp at some kind of childish ideal. But I seem to be a victim of my own wishes where you are concerned.” His expression hardened. “What have you come here for, Alina?”

I answered him honestly. “I wanted to see you.”

I caught the briefest glimpse of surprise before his face shuttered again. “There are two thrones on that dais. You could see me anytime you liked.”

“You’re offering me a crown? After I tried to kill you?”

He shrugged again. “I might have done the same.”

“I doubt it.”

“Not to save that motley of traitors and fanatics, no. But I understand the desire to remain free.”

“And still you tried to make me a slave.”

“I sought Morozova’s amplifiers *for you,* Alina, that we might rule as equals.”

“You tried to take my power for your own.”

“After you ran from me. After you chose—” He stopped, shrugged. “We would have ruled as equals in time.”

I felt that pull, the longing of a frightened girl. Even now, after everything he’d done, I wanted to believe the Darkling, to find some way to forgive him. I wanted Nikolai to be alive. I wanted to trust the other Grisha. I wanted to believe anything so that I wouldn’t have to face the future alone. *The problem with wanting is that it makes us weak.* A laugh escaped me before I thought better of it.

“We would be equals until the day I dared to disagree with you, until the moment I questioned your judgment or didn’t do as I was bid. Then you would deal with me the way you dealt with Genya and your mother, the way you tried to deal with Mal.”

He leaned against the window, and the gilded frame came into sharp focus.

“Do you think it would be any different with your tracker beside you? With that Lantsov pup?”

“Yes,” I said simply.

“Because you would be the strong one?”

“Because they’re better men than you.”

“You might make me a better man.”

“And you might make me a monster.”

“I’ve never understood this taste for *otkazat’sya*. Is it because you thought you were one of them for so long?”

“I had a taste for you, once.” His head snapped up. He hadn’t expected that. Saints, it was satisfying. “Why haven’t you visited me?” I asked. “In all these long months?”

He stayed silent.

“There was barely a day at the Little Palace when you didn’t come to me,” I continued. “When I didn’t see you in some shadowed corner. I thought I was going mad.”

“Good.”

“I think you’re afraid.”

“How comforting that must be for you.”

“I think you fear this thing that binds us.” It didn’t frighten me. Not anymore. I took a slow step forward. He tensed but did not move away.

“I am ancient, Alina. I know things about power that you can barely guess at.”

“But it’s not just power, is it?” I said quietly, remembering the way he had toyed with me when I’d first arrived at the palace—even before, from the first moment we’d met. I’d been a lonely girl, desperate for attention. I must have given him so little sport.

I took another step. He stilled. Our bodies were almost touching now. I reached up and cupped his cheek with my hand. This time the flash of confusion on his face was impossible to miss. He held himself frozen, his only movement the steady rise and fall of his chest. Then, as if in concession, he let his eyes close. A line appeared between his brows.

“It’s true,” I said softly. “You are stronger, wiser, infinite in experience.” I

leaned forward and whispered, my lips brushing the shell of his ear. “But I am an apt pupil.”

His eyes flew open. I caught the briefest glimpse of rage in his gray gaze before I severed the connection.

I scattered, hurtling back to the White Cathedral, leaving him with nothing but the memory of light.

CHAPTER 4

I SAT UP WITH A GASP, sucking in the damp air of the alabaster chamber. I looked around guiltily. I shouldn't have done it. What had I learned? That he was at the Grand Palace and in disgustingly good health? Paltry information.

But I wasn't sorry. Now I knew what he saw when he visited me, what information he could or couldn't cull from the contact. Now I had practice in one more power that had only belonged to him. And I'd enjoyed it. At the Little Palace, I'd dreaded those visions, thought I might be losing my mind, and worse, I'd wondered what they said about me. No longer. I was done being ashamed. Let him feel what it was to be haunted.

A headache was starting in my right temple. *I sought Morozova's amplifiers* for you, *Alina*. Lies disguised as truth. He'd sought to make me more powerful, but only because he believed he could control me. He still believed it, and that scared me. The Darkling had no way of knowing that Mal and I knew where to start looking for the third amplifier, but he hadn't seemed concerned. He hadn't even mentioned the firebird. He'd seemed confident, strong, as if he belonged in that palace and on that throne. *I know things about power that you can barely guess at.* I gave myself a shake. I might not be a threat, but I could become one. I wouldn't let him beat me before I'd had a chance to give him the fight he deserved.

A quick knock came at the door. It was time. I shoved my feet back into my boots and adjusted my scratchy golden *kefta*. After this, maybe I'd give myself a treat and stuff the thing in a stewpot.

The services were quite a spectacle. It was still a challenge to summon so far

underground, but I threw blazing light over the walls of the White Cathedral, drawing on every reserve to awe the crowd that moaned and swayed below. Vladim stood to my left, his shirt open to display the brand of my palm on his chest. To my right, the Apparat held forth, and whether out of fear or real belief, he did a very convincing job of it. His voice rang through the main cavern, claiming that our mission was guided by divine providence and that I would emerge from my trials more powerful than ever before.

I studied him as he spoke. He looked paler than usual, a bit sweaty though not particularly chastened. I wondered if it was a mistake to leave him alive, but without the rush of fury and power guiding my actions, execution wasn't a step I was prepared to consider seriously.

A hush had fallen. I looked down into the eager faces of the people below. There was something new in their exultation, maybe because they'd gotten a glimpse of my real power. Or maybe because the Apparat had done his work so well. They were waiting for me to say something. I'd had dreams like this. I was an actor in a play, but I'd never learned my lines.

"I will—" My voice cracked. I cleared my throat and tried again. "I will return more powerful than before," I said in my best Saint's voice. "You are my eyes." I needed them to be, to watch the Apparat, to keep each other safe. "You are my fists. You are my swords."

The crowd cheered. As one, they chorused back to me, *Sankta Alina! Sankta Alina! Sankta Alina!*

"Not bad," Mal said as I stepped away from the balcony.

"I've been listening to the Apparat go on for nearly three months. Something had to rub off."

On my orders, the Apparat announced that he would spend three days in isolation, fasting and praying for the success of our mission. The Priestguards would do the same, confined to the archives and guarded by the Soldat Sol.

"Keep them strong in their faith," I told Ruby and the other soldiers. I hoped that three days would give us plenty of time to get well away from the White Cathedral. But knowing the Apparat, he'd probably talk his way out before dinner.

"I knew you," Ruby said, clutching my fingers as I turned to go. "I was in

your regiment. Do you remember?”

Her eyes were wet, and the tattoo on her cheek was so black it seemed to float on top of her skin.

“Of course I do,” I said kindly. We hadn’t been friends. Back then, Ruby had been more interested in Mal than religion. I’d been nearly invisible to her.

Now she released a sob and pressed a kiss to my knuckles. “Sankta,” she whispered fervently. Whenever I thought my life couldn’t get any stranger, it did.

Once I’d disentangled myself from Ruby, I took a final moment to speak to the Apparat in private.

“You know what I’m going after, priest, and you know the power I’ll wield when I return. Nothing happens to the Soldat Sol or to Maxim.” I didn’t like leaving the Healer on his own here, but I wouldn’t command him to join us, not knowing the dangers we might face on the surface.

“We are not enemies, Sankta Alina,” the Apparat said gently. “You must know that all I’ve ever wanted was to see you on Ravka’s throne.”

I almost smiled at that. “I know, priest. On the throne and under your thumb.”

He tilted his head to one side, contemplating me. The fanatical glint was gone from his eyes. He simply looked shrewd.

“You are not what I expected,” he admitted.

“Not quite the Saint you bargained for?”

“A lesser Saint,” he said. “But perhaps a better queen. I will pray for you, Alina Starkov.”

The strange thing was I believed him.

* * *

MAL AND I MET the others at Chetya’s Well, a natural fountain at the crossroads of four of the major tunnels. If the Apparat did decide to send a party after us, we’d be harder to track from there. At least that was the idea, but we hadn’t bargained on so many of the pilgrims turning out to see us off. They’d followed the Grisha from their quarters and crowded around the fountain.

We were all in ordinary travel clothes, our *kefta* stowed in our packs. I’d exchanged my gold robes for a heavy coat, a fur hat, and the comforting weight

of a gun belt at my hip. If it hadn't been for my white hair, I doubted any of the pilgrims would have recognized me.

Now they reached out to touch my sleeve or my hand. Some pressed little gifts on us, the only offerings they had: hoarded bread rolls gone tooth-breakingly hard, polished stones, bits of lace, a clutch of salt lilies. They murmured prayers for our health with tears in their eyes.

I saw Genya's surprise when a woman placed a dark green prayer shawl around her shoulders. "Not black," she said. "For you, not black."

An ache began in my throat. It wasn't just the Apparat who had kept me isolated from these people. I'd distanced myself from them as well. I distrusted their faith, but mostly I feared their hope. The love and care in these tiny gestures was a burden I didn't want.

I kissed cheeks, shook hands, made promises I wasn't sure I could keep, and then we were on our way. I'd been carried into the White Cathedral on a stretcher. At least I was leaving on my feet.

Mal took the lead. Tolya and Tamar brought up the rear, scouting behind us to make sure that no one followed.

Through David's access to the archives and Mal's innate sense of direction, they'd managed to construct a rough map of the tunnel network. They had started plotting a course to Ryevost, but there were gaps in their information. No matter how accurate they'd been, we couldn't be sure of what we might be walking into.

After my escape from Os Alta, the Darkling's men had tried to penetrate the network of tunnels beneath Ravka's churches and holy sites. When their searches turned up empty, they'd begun bombing: closing off exit routes, trying to drive anyone seeking shelter to the surface. The Darkling's Alkemi had created new explosives that collapsed buildings and forced combustible gases belowground. All it took was a single Inferni spark, and whole sections of the ancient network of tunnels collapsed. It was one of the reasons the Apparat had insisted I remain at the White Cathedral.

There were rumors of cave-ins to the west of us, so Mal led us north. It wasn't the most direct route, but we hoped it would be stable.

It was a relief to be moving through the tunnels, to finally be doing something

after so many weeks of confinement. My body was still weak, but I felt stronger than I had in months, and I pushed onward without complaint.

I tried not to think too hard about what it would mean if the smuggling station at Ryevost wasn't active. How were we supposed to find a prince who didn't want to be found, and do it while remaining hidden ourselves? If Nikolai was alive, he might be looking for me, or he might have sought alliance elsewhere. For all he knew, I had died in the battle at the Little Palace.

The tunnels grew darker as we moved farther from the White Cathedral and its strange alabaster glow. Soon our way was lit by nothing but the swaying light of our lanterns. In some places, the caverns were so narrow that we had to remove our packs and wriggle along between the press of walls. Then, without warning, we'd find ourselves in a giant cave wide enough to pasture horses.

Mal had been right: so many people traveling together were noisy and unwieldy. We made frustratingly slow progress, marching in a long column with Zoya, Nadia, and Adrik spread out along the line; in case of a cave-in, the air our Squallers could summon might provide valuable breathing time for anyone trapped.

David and Genya kept falling behind, but he seemed to be the one responsible for the lag. Finally, Tolya hefted the huge pack from David's narrow shoulders.

He groaned. "What do you have in this thing?"

"Three pairs of socks, one pair of trousers, an extra shirt. One canteen. A tin cup and plate. A cylindrical slide rule, a chrondometer, a jar of spruce sap, my collection of anticorrosives—"

"You were only supposed to pack what you need."

David gave an emphatic nod. "Exactly."

"Please tell me you didn't bring all of Morozova's journals," I said.

"Of course I did."

I rolled my eyes. There had to be at least fifteen leather-bound books. "Maybe they'll make good kindling."

"Is she kidding?" David asked, looking concerned. "I can never tell if she's kidding."

I was. Mostly. I'd hoped the journals would give me insight into the firebird and maybe even into how the amplifiers could help me destroy the Fold. But

they'd been a dead end, and if I was honest, they'd frightened me a little too. Baghra had warned me of Morozova's madness, and yet somehow I'd expected to find wisdom in his work. Instead, his journals had provided me with a study in obsession, all of it documented in nearly indecipherable scrawl. Apparently genius didn't require good penmanship.

His early journals chronicled his experiments: the blacked-out formula for liquid fire, a means of preventing organic decay, the trials that had led to the creation of Grisha steel, a method for restoring oxygen to the blood, the endless year he'd spent finding a way to create unbreakable glass. His skills extended beyond those of an ordinary Fabrikator, and he was well aware of it. One of the essential tenets of Grisha theory was "like calls to like," but Morozova seemed to believe that if the world could be broken down to the same small parts, each Grisha should be able to manipulate them. *Are we not all things?* he demanded, underlining the words for emphasis. He was arrogant, audacious—but still sane.

Then his work on the amplifiers had begun, and even I could see the change. The text got denser, messier. The margins were full of diagrams and crazed arrows that referred back to earlier passages. Worse were the descriptions of experiments he'd performed on animals, the illustrations of his dissections. They turned my stomach and made me think Morozova had deserved whatever early martyrdom he'd received. He'd killed animals and then brought them back to life, sometimes repeatedly, delving deeper into *merzost*, creation, the power of life over death, trying to find a way to create amplifiers that might be used together. It was forbidden power, but I knew its temptation, and I shuddered to think that pursuing it might have driven him mad.

If he was led by some noble purpose, I didn't see it in his pages. But I sensed something more in his fevered writings, in his insistence that power was everywhere for the taking. He had lived long before the creation of the Second Army. He was the most powerful Grisha the world had ever known—and that power had isolated him. I remembered the Darkling's words to me: *There are no others like us, Alina. And there never will be.* Maybe Morozova wanted to believe that if there were no others like him, there could be, that he might create Grisha of greater power. Or maybe I was just imagining things, seeing my own loneliness and greed in Morozova's pages. The mess of what I knew and what I

wanted, my desire for the firebird, my own sense of difference had all gotten too hard to untangle.

I was pulled from my thoughts by the sound of rushing water. We were approaching an underground river. Mal slowed our pace and had me walk directly behind him, casting light over the path. It was a good thing too, because the drop came fast, so steep and sudden that I slammed right into his back, nearly knocking him over the edge and into the water below. Here, the roar was deafening, the river rushing past at uncertain depth, plumes of mist rising from the rapids.

We tied a rope around Tolya's waist, and he waded across, then secured it on the other side so we could follow one by one, attached to the line. The water was ice cold and came all the way up to my chest, the force of it pulling me nearly off my feet as I held on to the rope. Harshaw was the last to cross. I had a moment of terror when he lost his footing and the tether nearly snapped free. Then he was up, gasping for breath, Oncat soaked to the skin and spitting mad. By the time Harshaw reached us, his face and neck were a patchwork of tiny scratches.

After that, we were all eager to stop, but Mal insisted we keep going.

"I'm drenched," Zoya groused. "Why can't we stop in *this* dank cave instead of the next dank cave?"

Mal didn't break stride, but hooked a thumb back at the river. "Because of that," he shouted over the din of rushing water. "If we've been followed, it will be too easy for someone to sneak up on us with that noise as cover."

Zoya scowled, but we pushed on, until finally we'd outdistanced the river's clamor. We spent the night in a hollow of damp limestone where there was nothing to hear but our teeth chattering as we shivered in our wet clothes.

* * *

FOR TWO DAYS, we carried on like that, moving through the tunnels, occasionally backtracking when a route proved impassable. I'd lost all sense of what direction we were heading, but when Mal announced that we were turning west, I noticed that the passages were sloping upward, leading us toward the surface.

Mal set an unforgiving pace. To keep contact, he and the twins would whistle to each other from opposite ends of the column, making sure no one had drifted too far behind. Occasionally, he'd fall back to check on everyone.

"I can tell what you're up to," I said once when he returned to the head of the line.

"What's that?"

"You pop back there when someone's lagging, start up a conversation. You ask David about the properties of phosphor or Nadia about her freckles—"

"I have never asked Nadia about her freckles."

"Or *something*. Then gradually you start to pick up the pace so that they're walking faster."

"It seems to work better than jabbing them with a stick," he said.

"Less fun."

"My jabbing arm is tired."

Then he was gone, pressing ahead. It was the most we'd spoken since we'd left the White Cathedral.

No one else seemed to have trouble talking. Tamar had started trying to teach Nadia some Shu ballads. Unfortunately, her memory was terrible, but her brother's was nearly perfect and he'd eagerly taken over. The normally taciturn Tolya could recite entire cycles of epic poetry in Ravkan and Shu—even if no one wanted to hear them.

Though Mal had ordered that we remain in strict formation, Genya frequently escaped to the front of the column to complain to me.

"Every poem is about a brave hero named Kregi," she said. "Every single one. He always has a steed, and we have to hear about the steed and the three different kinds of swords he carried and the color of the scarf he wore tied to his wrist and all the poor monsters he slew and then how he was a gentle man and true. For a mercenary, Tolya is disturbingly maudlin."

I laughed and glanced back, though I couldn't see much. "How is David liking it?"

"David is oblivious. He's been babbling about mineral compounds for the last hour."

"Maybe he and Tolya will just put each other to sleep," Zoya grumbled.

She had no business griping. Though they were all Etherealki, the only thing the Squallers and Inferni seemed to have in common was how much they loved to argue. Stigg didn't want Harshaw near him because he couldn't stand cats. Harshaw was constantly taking offense on Oncat's behalf. Adrik was supposed to stay near the middle of the group, but he wanted to be close to Zoya. Zoya kept slipping away from the head of the column to try to get away from Adrik. I was starting to wish I'd cut the rope and left them all to drown in the river.

And Harshaw didn't just annoy me; he made me nervous. He liked to drag his flint along the cave walls, sending off little sparks, and he was constantly slipping bits of hard cheese out of his pocket to feed Oncat, then chuckling as if the tabby had said something particularly funny. One morning, we woke to find that he'd shaved the sides of his scalp so that his crimson hair ran in a single thick stripe down the center of his head.

"What did you do?" shrieked Zoya. "You look like a deranged rooster!"

Harshaw just shrugged. "Oncat insisted."

Still, the tunnels occasionally surprised us with wonders that rendered even the Etherealki speechless. We'd spend hours with nothing to look at but gray rock and mud-covered lime, then emerge into a pale blue cave so perfectly round and smooth that it was like standing inside a giant enamel egg. We stumbled into a series of little caves glittering with what might well have been real rubies. Genya dubbed it the Jewelbox, and after that, we took to naming all of them to pass the time. There was the Orchard—a cavern full of stalactites and stalagmites that had fused together into slender columns. And less than a day later, we came across the Dancehall, a long cave of pink quartz with a floor so slippery we had to crawl over it, occasionally sliding to our bellies. Then there was the eerie, partially submerged iron portcullis we called the Angelgate. It was flanked by two winged stone figures, their heads bent, their hands resting on marble broadswords. The winch worked and we passed through it without incident, but why had it been put there? And by whom?

On the fourth day, we came upon a cavern with a perfectly still pool that gave the illusion of a night sky, its depths sparkling with tiny luminescent fish.

Mal and I were slightly ahead of the others. He dipped his hand in, then yelped and drew back. "They bite."

“Serves you right,” I said. “‘Oh, look, a dark lake full of something shiny. Let me put my hand in it.’”

“I can’t help being delicious,” he said, that familiar cocky grin flashing across his face like light over water. Then he seemed to catch himself. He shouldered his pack, and I knew he was about to move away from me.

I wasn’t sure where the words came from: “You didn’t fail me, Mal.”

He wiped his damp hand on his thigh. “We both know better.”

“We’re going to be traveling together for who knows how long. Eventually, you’re going to have to talk to me.”

“I’m talking to you right now.”

“See? Is this so terrible?”

“It wouldn’t be,” he said, gazing at me steadily, “if all I wanted to do was talk.”

My cheeks heated. *You don’t want this,* I told myself. But I felt my edges curl like a piece of paper held too close to fire. “Mal—”

“I need to keep you safe, Alina, to stay focused on what matters. I can’t do that if…” He let out a long breath. “You were meant for more than me, and I’ll die fighting to give it to you. But please don’t ask me to pretend it’s easy.”

He plunged ahead into the next cave.

I looked down at the glittering pond, the whorls of light in the water still settling after Mal’s brief touch. I could hear the others making their noisy way through the cavern.

“Oncat scratches me all the time,” said Harshaw as he ambled up beside me.

“Oh?” I asked hollowly.

“Funny thing is, she likes to stay close.”

“Are you being profound, Harshaw?”

“Actually, I was wondering, if I ate enough of those fish, would I start to glow?”

I shook my head. Of course one of the last living Inferni would have to be insane. I fell in step with the others and headed into the next tunnel.

“Come on, Harshaw,” I called over my shoulder.

Then the first explosion hit.

CHAPTER 5

THE WHOLE CAVERN SHOOK. Little rivulets of pebbles clattered down on us.

Mal was beside me in an instant. He yanked me away from the falling rock as Zoya bracketed my other side.

“Lights out!” Mal shouted. “Packs off.”

We shoved our packs against the walls as a kind of buttress, then doused the lanterns in case the sparks set off another explosion.

Boom. Above us? North of us? It was hard to tell.

Long seconds passed. *Boom*. This one was closer, louder. Rocks and soil rained down on our bent heads.

“He found us,” moaned Sergei, his voice ragged with fear.

“He couldn’t have,” Zoya protested. “Even the Apparat didn’t know where we were headed.”

Mal shifted slightly. I heard the smatter of pebbles. “It’s a random attack,” he said.

Genya’s voice trembled when she whispered, “That cat is bad luck.”

Boom. Loud enough to rattle my jaw.

“*Metan yez,*” said David. Marsh gas.

I smelled it a second later, peaty and foul. If there were Inferni above us, a spark would follow and blow us all to bits. Someone started crying.

“Squallers,” commanded Mal, “send it east.” How could he sound so calm?

I felt Zoya move, then the rush of air as she and the others drove the gas away from us.

Boom. It was hard to breathe. The space seemed too small.

“Oh, Saints,” Sergei quavered.

“I see flame!” Tolya shouted.

“Send it east,” repeated Mal, voice steady. The *whoosh* of Squaller wind followed. Mal’s body was braced next to mine. My hand snaked out, seeking his. Our fingers twined together. I heard a small sob from my other side, and I reached for Zoya’s free hand, taking it in mine.

BOOM. This time the whole tunnel roared with the sound of falling rock. I heard people shouting in the dark. Dust filled my lungs.

When the noise stopped, Mal said, “No lanterns. Alina, we need light.” It was a struggle, but I found a thread of sunlight and let it blossom through the tunnel. We were all covered in dust, eyes wide and frightened. I did a quick tally: Mal, Genya, David, Zoya, Nadia, and Harshaw—Oncat tucked into his shirt.

“Tolya?” shouted Mal.

Nothing. Then, “We’re all right.”

Tolya’s voice came from behind the wall of fallen rock blocking the tunnel, but it was strong and clear. I pressed my head to my knees in relief.

“Where’s my brother?” yelled Nadia.

“He’s here with me and Tamar,” Tolya replied.

“Sergei and Stigg?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

Saints.

We waited for another *boom,* for the rest of the tunnel to come down on top of us. When nothing happened, we started scrabbling toward Tolya’s voice as he and Tamar dug from the other side. In a matter of moments, we saw their hands, then their dirty faces staring back at us. They scooted into our section of the tunnel. As soon as Adrik dropped his hands, the ceiling above where he and the twins had been standing collapsed in a billow of dust and rock. He was shaking badly.

“You held the cave?” Zoya asked.

Tolya nodded. “He made a bubble as soon as we heard that last boom.”

“Huh,” Zoya said to Adrik. “I’m impressed.”

At the elation that burst over his face, she groaned. “Never mind. I’m downgrading that to grudging approval.”

“Sergei?” I called. “Stigg?”

Silence, the shift of gravel.

“Let me try something,” said Zoya. She raised her hands. I heard a crackling in my ears, and the air seemed to grow damp. “Sergei?” she said. Her voice sounded weirdly distant.

Then I heard Sergei’s voice, weak and trembling, but clear, as if he were speaking right beside me. “Here,” he panted.

Zoya flexed her fingers, making adjustments, and called to Sergei again.

This time, when he replied, David said, “It sounds like it’s coming from below us.”

“Maybe not,” Zoya replied. “The acoustics can be misleading.”

Mal moved farther down the passage. “No, he’s right. The floor in their segment of the tunnel must have collapsed.”

It took us nearly two hours to find them and dig them out—Tolya hefting soil, Mal calling directions, the Squallers stabilizing the sides of the tunnel with air as I maintained a dim illumination, the others forming a line to move rocks and sand.

When we found Stigg and Sergei, they were covered in mud and nearly comatose.

“Lowered our pulses,” Sergei mumbled groggily. “Slow respiration. Use less air.”

Tolya and Tamar brought them back, raising their heart rates and flushing their lungs with oxygen.

“Didn’t think you’d come,” slurred a still-bleary Stigg.

“Why?” cried Genya, gently brushing the dirt from around his eyes.

“He wasn’t sure that you’d care,” said Harshaw from behind me.

There were mumbled protests and some guilty looks. I did think of Stigg and Harshaw as outsiders. And Sergei … well … Sergei had been lost for a while now. None of us had done a very good job of reaching out to them.

When Sergei and Stigg could walk, we headed back to the more intact part of the tunnel. One by one, the Squallers released their power, as we waited to see if the ceiling would hold so they could rest. We brushed the dust and grime off one another’s faces and clothes as best we could, then passed a flask of *kvas* around.

Stigg clung to it like a baby with a bottle.

"Everyone okay?" Mal asked.

"Never better," said Genya shakily.

David raised his hand. "I've been better."

We all started laughing.

"What?" he said.

"How did you even do that?" Nadia asked Zoya. "That trick with the sound?"

"It's just a way of creating an acoustical anomaly. We used to play with it back in school so we could eavesdrop on people in other rooms."

Genya snorted. "Of course you did."

"Could you show us how to do it?" asked Adrik.

"If I'm ever bored enough."

"Squallers," Mal said, "are you ready to move again?"

They all nodded. Their faces had the gleam that came with using Grisha power, but I knew they must already be approaching their limits. They'd been keeping tons of rock off us for half a mile, and they'd need more than a few minutes of rest to restore themselves.

"Then let's get the hell out of here," Mal said.

I lit the way, still wary of what surprises might be waiting for us. We moved cautiously, Squallers on alert, twisting through tunnels and passages until I had no sense of which way we'd gone. We were well off the map that David and Mal had created.

Every sound seemed magnified. Every fall of pebbles made us pause, frozen, waiting for the worst. I tried to think of anything but the weight of the soil above us. If the earth came down and the Squallers' power failed, we would be crushed and no one would ever know, wildflowers pressed between the pages of a book and forgotten.

Eventually, I became aware that my legs were working harder and realized the grade of the floor had turned steep. I heard relieved sighs, a few quiet cheers, and less than an hour later, we found ourselves crowded into some kind of basement room, looking up at the bottom of a trapdoor.

The ground was wet here, pocked by little puddles—signs that we must be close to the river cities. By the light from my palms, I could see that the stone

walls were cracked, but whether the damage was old or the result of the recent explosions, I couldn't tell.

"How did you do it?" I asked Mal.

He shrugged. "Same as always. There's game on the surface. I just treated it like a hunt."

Tolya pulled David's old watch from the pocket of his coat. I wasn't sure when he'd acquired it. "If this thing is keeping time right, we're well past sunset."

"You have to wind it every day," said David.

"I know that."

"Well, did you?"

"Yes."

"Then it's keeping time right."

I wondered if I should remind David that Tolya's fist was roughly the circumference of his head.

Zoya sniffed. "With our luck, someone will be setting up for midnight mass."

Many of the entrances and exits to the tunnels were found in holy places—but not all of them. We might emerge in the apse of a church or the courtyard of a monastery or we might poke our heads out of the floor of a brothel. *And good day to you, sir.* I pushed down a crazed giggle. Exhaustion and fear were making me giddy.

What if someone was waiting for us up there? What if the Apparat had switched sides yet again and set the Darkling on our trail? I wasn't thinking straight. Mal believed the explosions had been a random attack on the tunnels, and that was the only thing that made sense. The Apparat couldn't know where we'd be or when. And even if the Darkling had somehow found out that we were headed for Ryevost, why bother using bombs to drive us to the surface? He could just wait for us to turn up there.

"Let's go," I said. "I feel like I'm suffocating."

Mal signaled for Tolya and Tamar to flank me.

"Be ready," he said to them. "Any sign of trouble, you get her out of here. Take the tunnels due west as far as you can."

It was only after he'd started climbing the ladder that I realized we'd all hung

back, waiting for him to go first. Tolya and Tamar were both more experienced fighters, and Mal was the only *otkazat'sya* among us. So why was he the one taking the brunt of the risk? I wanted to call him back, tell him to be careful, but it would just sound absurd. "Careful" wasn't something we did anymore.

At the top of the ladder, he gestured down at me, and I released the light, pitching us into darkness. I heard a thump, the sound of hinges straining, then a soft grunt and a creak as the trapdoor opened. No light flooded down, no shouts, no gunfire.

My heart was pounding in my chest. I followed the sounds of Mal levering himself up, his footfalls above us. Finally, I heard the scrape of a match, and light bloomed through the trapdoor. Mal whistled twice—the all clear.

One by one, we ascended the ladder. When I stuck my head through the trapdoor, a chill slid over my spine. The room was hexagonal, its walls carved from what looked like blue lapis, each studded with wooden panels painted with a different Saint, their golden halos glinting in the lamplight. The corners were thick with milky cobwebs. Mal's lantern rested on a stone sarcophagus. We were in a crypt.

"Perfect," said Zoya. "From a tunnel to a tomb. What's next, an outing to a slaughterhouse?"

"Mezle," David said, pointing to one of the names carved into the wall. "They were an old Grisha family. There was even one of them at the Little Palace before—"

"Before everyone died?" put in Genya helpfully.

"Ziva Mezle," Nadia said quietly. "She was a Squaller."

"Can we host this salon somewhere else?" Zoya asked. "I want to get out of here."

I rubbed my arms. She had a point.

The door looked like heavy iron. Tolya and Mal braced their shoulders against it as we arrayed ourselves behind them, hands raised, Inferni with their flints ready. I took my position in back, prepared to wield the Cut, if necessary.

"On three," Mal said.

A burble of laughter escaped me. Everyone turned.

I flushed. "Well, we're probably in a graveyard, and we're about to come

charging out of a tomb."

Genya giggled. "If anyone's out there, we're going to scare the sneeze out of him."

With the barest hint of a grin, Mal said, "Good point. Let's lead with *oooooooo*." Then the grin disappeared. He nodded at Tolya. "Stay low."

He counted down, and they shoved. The bolts shrieked, and the tomb doors flew open. We waited, but there were no sounds of alarm to greet us.

Slowly, we filed out into the deserted cemetery. This close to the river, people buried their dead aboveground in case of flooding. The tombs, arrayed in tidy rows like stone houses, gave the whole place the feel of an abandoned city. A wind blew through, shaking leaves free from the trees and stirring the grasses that grew up around the smaller grave sites. It was eerie, but I didn't care. The air was almost warm after the chill of the caves. We were outside at last.

I tilted my head back, breathing deeply. It was a clear, moonless night, and after those long months underground, the sight of all that sky was dizzying. And so many stars—a glittering, tangled mass that seemed close enough to touch. I let their light fall over me like a balm, grateful for the air in my lungs, the night all around me.

"Alina," Mal said softly.

I opened my eyes. The Grisha were staring. "What?"

He took my hands and held them out in front of me, as if we were about to start a dance. "You're glowing."

"Oh," I breathed. My skin was silver, cocooned in starlight. I hadn't even realized I was summoning. "Oops."

He ran a finger down my forearm where the sleeve had ridden up, watching the play of light over my skin, a smile curling his lips. Abruptly, he stepped back. He dropped my hands as if they were hot.

"Be more careful," he said tightly. He gestured to Adrik to help Tolya reseal the crypt, then spoke to the group. "Stay close and keep quiet. We need to find cover before dawn."

The others fell into step behind him, letting him lead yet again. I hung back, actively brushing the light from my skin. It clung to me, as if my body was thirsty for it.

When Zoya drew level with me, she said, “You know, Starkov, I’m beginning to think you turned your hair white on purpose.”

I flicked a speck of starlight from my wrist, watching it fade. “Yes, Zoya, courting death is an integral part of my beauty regimen.”

She shrugged and cast a glance at Mal. “Well, it’s a little obvious for my taste, but I’d say the whole moon maiden look is working.”

The last person I wanted to talk to about Mal was Zoya, but that had sounded suspiciously like a compliment. I remembered her gripping my hand during the cave-in and how strong she’d stayed throughout it all.

“Thanks,” I said. “For keeping us safe down there. For helping save Sergei and Stigg.”

Even if I hadn’t meant a word of it, the look of shock on her face would have been worth it.

“You’re welcome,” she managed. Then she stuck her perfect nose in the air and added, “But I won’t always be around to save your ass, Sun Summoner.”

I grinned and followed her down the aisle of graves. At least she was predictable.

* * *

IT TOOK US far too long to get out of the cemetery. The rows of crypts stretched on and on, cold testimony to the generations Ravka had been at war. The paths were raked clean, the graves marked with flowers, painted icons, gifts of candy, little piles of precious ammunition—small kindnesses, even for the dead. I thought of the men and women bidding us goodbye at the White Cathedral, pressing their offerings into our hands. I was grateful when we finally cleared the gates.

The terror of the cave-in and long hours on our feet had taken their toll, but Mal was determined to get us as close to Ryevost as he could before dawn. We trudged onward, marching parallel to the main road, keeping to the starlit fields. Occasionally we glimpsed a lone house, a lantern glowing in the window. It was a relief, somehow, to see these signs of life, to think of a farmer rising in the night to fill his cup with water, his head turning briefly to the window and the darkness beyond.

The sky had just started to lighten when we heard the sounds of someone approaching on the road. We barely had time to scurry into the woods and take shelter in the brush before we glimpsed the first wagon.

There were about fifteen people in the convoy, mostly men, a few women, all bristling with weapons. I glimpsed bits and pieces of First Army uniforms—standard-issue trousers shoved into decidedly nonregulation cowhide boots, an infantry coat shorn of its brass buttons.

It was impossible to tell what they were transporting. Their cargo had been covered by horse blankets and tightly secured to the wagon beds with rope.

"Militia?" Tamar whispered.

"Could be," said Mal. "Not sure where a militia would get repeating rifles."

"If they're smugglers, I don't know any of them."

"I could follow," said Tolya.

"Why don't I just go do a waltz in the middle of the road?" Tamar taunted. Tolya was hardly quiet on his feet.

"I'm getting better," Tolya said defensively. "Besides—"

Mal silenced them with a look. "Do not pursue, do not engage."

As Mal led us deeper into the trees, Tolya grumbled, "You don't even know how to waltz."

* * *

WE MADE CAMP in a clearing close to a slender tributary of the Sokol, the river fed by the glaciers in the Petrazoi and the heart of commerce in the port cities. We hoped we were far enough from town and the main roads that we wouldn't have to worry about anyone stumbling upon us.

According to the twins, the smugglers' meeting place was in a busy square that overlooked the river in Ryevost. Tamar already had a compass and map in hand. Though she must have been as tired as the rest of us, she would have to leave immediately to make it to town before noon.

I hated letting her walk into what might be a trap, but we'd agreed that she would have to be the one to go. Tolya's size made him far too conspicuous and none of the rest of us knew the way the smugglers worked or how to recognize them. Still, my nerves were jangling. I had never understood the twins' faith and

what they were willing to risk for it. But when the time had come to choose between me and the Apparat, they'd shown their loyalty in no uncertain terms.

I gave Tamar's hand a quick squeeze. "Don't do anything reckless."

Nadia had been hovering nearby. Now she cleared her throat and kissed Tamar once on each cheek. "Be safe," she said.

Tamar flashed her Heartrender's grin. "If anyone wants trouble," she said, flicking back her coat to reveal the handles of her axes, "I've a fresh supply."

I glanced at Nadia. I had the distinct impression Tamar was showing off.

She pulled up her hood and set out at a jog through the trees.

"*Yuyeh sesh,*" Tolya called after her in Shu.

"*Ni weh sesh,*" she shouted over her shoulder. And then she was gone.

"What does that mean?"

"It's something our father taught us," Tolya replied. "*Yuyeh sesh*: 'despise your heart.' But that's the direct translation. The real meaning is more like 'do what needs to be done—be cruel if you have to.'"

"What's the other part?"

"*Ni weh sesh*? 'I have no heart.'"

Mal raised a brow. "Your dad sounds like fun."

Tolya smiled the slightly mad grin that made him look just like his sister. "He was."

I looked back the way Tamar had gone. Somewhere beyond the trees and the fields beyond that lay Ryevost. I sent my own prayers with her: *Bring back news of a prince, Tamar. I don't think I can do this alone.*

* * *

WE LAID OUT BEDROLLS and divvied up food. Adrik and Nadia started raising a tent while Tolya and Mal scouted the perimeter, setting up stands where guards would be posted. I saw Stigg trying to get Sergei to eat. I'd hoped that being aboveground might bring him around, but though Sergei seemed less panicked, I could still feel tension coming off him in waves.

In truth, we were all jumpy. As lovely as it was to lie beneath the trees and see the sky again, it was also overwhelming. Life in the White Cathedral had been miserable, but manageable. Up here, things felt wilder, beyond my control.

Militias and the Darkling's men roamed these lands. Whether we found Nikolai or not, we were back in this war, and that meant more battles, more lives lost. The world seemed suddenly large again. I wasn't sure I liked it.

I looked at our camp: Harshaw already curled up and snoozing with Oncat on his chest; Sergei, pale and watchful; David, back propped against a tree, a book in his hands as Genya fell asleep with her head in his lap; Nadia and Adrik struggling with poles and canvas while Zoya looked on and didn't bother to help.

Despise your heart. I wanted to. I didn't want to grieve anymore, to feel loss or guilt, or worry. I wanted to be hard, calculating. I wanted to be fearless. Underground, that had seemed possible. Here, in this wood, with these people, I was less sure.

Eventually, I must have dozed, because when I woke, it was late afternoon and the sun was slanting through the trees. Tolya was beside me.

"Tamar's back," he said.

I sat upright, fully awake. But the look on Tolya's face was grim.

"No one approached her?"

He shook his head. I straightened my shoulders. I didn't want anyone to see my disappointment. I should be grateful Tamar had made it in and out of the city safely.

"Does Mal know?"

"No," said Tolya. "He's filling canteens at the creek. Harshaw and Stigg are on watch. Should I get them?"

"It can wait."

Tamar was leaning against a tree, gulping down water from a tin cup as the others gathered around to hear her report.

"Any trouble?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"And you're sure you were in the right place?" Tolya said.

"West side of the market square. I got there early, stayed late, checked in with the shopkeeper, watched the same damn puppet show four times. If the post is active, someone should have spoken to me."

"We could try again tomorrow," suggested Adrik.

"I should go," said Tolya. "You were there a long time. If you show up again,

people may notice."

Tamar wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "If I stab the puppeteer, will that draw too much attention?"

"Not if you're quiet about it," replied Nadia.

Her cheeks pinked as we all turned to look at her. I'd never heard Nadia crack a joke. She'd mostly been an audience to Marie.

Tamar slipped a dagger from her wrist and twirled it, balancing its point on one fingertip. "I can be quiet," she said, "and merciful. I may let the puppets live." She took another gulp of water. "I heard some news too. Big news. West Ravka has declared for Nikolai."

That got our attention.

"They're blocking off the western shore of the Fold," she continued. "So if the Darkling wants weapons or ammunition—"

"He'll have to go through Fjerda," finished Zoya.

But it was bigger than that. This meant the Darkling had lost West Ravka's coastline, its navy, the already tenuous access Ravka had to trade.

"West Ravka now," Tolya said. "Maybe the Shu Han next."

"Or Kerch," put in Zoya.

"Or both!" crowed Adrik.

I could almost see the tendril of hope twisting its way through our ranks.

"So now what?" Sergei asked, tugging anxiously at his sleeve.

"Let's wait one more day," Nadia said.

"I don't know," said Tamar. "I don't mind going back. But there were *oprichniki* in the square today."

Not a good sign. The *oprichniki* were the Darkling's personal soldiers. If they were prowling the area, we had good reason to move on as soon as possible.

"I'm going to go talk to Mal," I said. "Don't get too comfortable. We may need to be ready to leave in the morning."

The others dispersed while Tamar and Nadia walked off to dig through the rations. Tamar kept bouncing and spinning her knife—definitely showing off, but Nadia didn't seem to mind.

I picked my way toward the sound of the water, trying to sort through my thoughts. If West Ravka had declared for Nikolai, that was a very good sign that

he was alive and well and making more trouble for the Darkling than anyone in the White Cathedral had realized. I was relieved, but I wasn't certain what our next move should be.

When I reached the creek, Mal was crouching in the shallows, barefoot and bare-chested, his trousers rolled up to his knees. He was watching the water, his expression focused, but at the sound of my approach, he shot to his feet, already lunging for his rifle.

"Just me," I said, stepping out of the woods.

He relaxed and dropped back down, eyes returning to the creek. "What are you doing out here?"

For a moment I just watched him. He stayed perfectly still, then suddenly, his hands plunged into the stream and emerged with a wriggling fish. He tossed it back. No point holding on to it when we couldn't risk making a fire to cook it.

I'd seen him catch fish this way at Keramzin, even in winter, when Trivka's pond froze over. He knew just where to break the ice, just where to drop his line or the moment to make his grab. I'd waited on the banks, keeping him company, trying to spot places in the trees where the birds made their nests.

It was different now, the water reflecting spangles of light over the planes of his face, the smooth play of muscle beneath his skin. I realized I was staring and gave myself a little shake. I'd seen him without a shirt before. There was no reason to be an idiot about it.

"Tamar's back," I said.

He stood, all interest in the fish lost. "And?"

"No sign of Nikolai's men."

Mal sighed and scrubbed a hand through his hair. "Damn it."

"We could wait another day," I offered, though I already knew what he would say.

"We've wasted enough time. I don't know how long it will take us to get south or to find the firebird. All we need is to get stuck in the mountains when the snow comes. And we have to find a safe house for the others."

"Tamar says West Ravka has declared for Nikolai. What if we took them there?"

He considered. "That's a long journey, Alina. We'd lose a lot of time."

“I know, but it’s safer than anywhere this side of the Fold. And it’s another chance to find Nikolai.”

“Might be less dangerous trekking south on that side too.” He nodded. “All right. We need to get the others ready. I want to leave tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“No point waiting around.” He waded out of the water, bare toes curling on the rocks.

He didn’t actually say “dismissed,” but he might as well have. What else was there to talk about?

I started toward camp, then remembered I hadn’t told him about the *oprichniki*. I stomped back to the creek. “Mal…,” I began, but the words died on my lips.

He had bent to pick up the canteens. His back was to me.

“What is that?” I said angrily.

He whirled, twisting himself around, but it was too late. He opened his mouth.

Before he could get a word out, I snapped, “If you say ‘nothing,’ I will knock you senseless.”

His mouth clamped shut.

“Turn around,” I ordered.

For a moment, he just stood there. Then he sighed and turned.

A tattoo stretched across his broad back—something like a compass rose, but much more like a sun, the points reaching from shoulder to shoulder and down his spine.

“Why?” I asked. “Why would you do this?”

He shrugged and his muscles flexed beneath the intricate design.

“Mal, why would you mark yourself this way?”

“I have a lot of scars,” he said finally. “This is one I chose.”

I looked closer. There were letters worked into the design. *E’ya sta rezku.* I frowned. It looked like ancient Ravkan.

“What does this mean?”

He said nothing.

“Mal—”

“It’s embarrassing.”

And sure enough, I could see a flush spreading over his neck.

“Tell me.”

He hesitated, then cleared his throat and muttered, “I am become a blade.”

I am become a blade. Was that what he was? This boy whom the Grisha had followed without argument, whose voice stayed steady when the earth caved in around us, who’d told me I would be a queen? I wasn’t sure I recognized him anymore.

I brushed my fingertips over the letters. He tensed. His skin was still damp from the river.

“Could be worse,” I said. “I mean, if it said ‘Let’s cuddle’ or ‘I am become ginger pudding,’ *that* would be embarrassing.”

He released a surprised bark of laughter, then hissed in a breath as I let my fingertips trail the length of his spine. His fists clenched at his sides. I knew I should step away, but I didn’t want to.

“Who did it?”

“Tolya,” he rasped.

“Did it hurt?”

“Less than it should have.”

I reached the farthest point of the sunburst, right at the base of his spine. I paused, then dragged my fingers back up. He snapped around, capturing my hand in a hard grip.

“Don’t,” he said fiercely.

“I—”

“I can’t do this. Not if you make me laugh, not if you touch me like that.”

“Mal—”

Suddenly his head jerked up and he put a finger to his lips.

“Hands above your heads.” The voice came from the shadows of the trees. Mal dove for his rifle and had it at his shoulder in seconds, but three people were already emerging from the woods—two men and a woman with her hair in a topknot—the muzzles of their weapons trained on us. I thought I recognized them from the convoy we’d seen on the road.

“Put that down,” said a man with a short goatee. “Unless you want to see your

girl plugged full of bullets."

Mal set his rifle back on the rock.

"Come on over," said the man. "Nice and slow." He wore a First Army coat, but he looked like no soldier I had ever seen. His hair was long and tangled, kept from his eyes by two messy plaits. He wore belts of bullets across his chest and a stained waistcoat that might have once been red but was now fading to a color somewhere between plum and brown.

"I need my boots," said Mal.

"Less chance of you running without them."

"What do you want?"

"You can start with answers," the man said. "Town nearby, plenty more comfortable places to hole up. So what are a dozen people doing hiding out in the forest?" He must have seen my reaction, because he said, "That's right. I found your camp. You deserters?"

"Yes," said Mal smoothly. "Out of Kerskii."

The man scratched his cheek. "Kerskii? Maybe," he said. "But—" He took a step forward. "Oretsev?"

Mal stiffened, then said, "Luchenko?"

"All Saints, I haven't seen you since your unit trained with me in Poliznaya." He turned to the other men. "This little pissant was the best tracker in ten regiments. Never seen anything like it." He was grinning, but he didn't lower his rifle. "And now you're the most famous deserter in all of Ravka."

"Just trying to survive."

"You and me both, brother." He gestured to me. "This isn't your usual."

If I hadn't had a rifle in my face, the comment might have stung.

"One more First Army grunt like us."

"Like us, huh?" Luchenko jabbed at me with his gun. "Take off the scarf."

"Bit of a chill in the air," I said.

Luchenko gave me another poke. "Go on, girl."

I glanced at Mal. I could see him weighing the options. We were at close range. I could do some serious damage with the Cut, but not before the militiamen got off a few rounds. I could blind them, but if we started a firefight, what might happen to the people back at camp?

I shrugged and pulled the scarf from my neck with a rough tug. Luchenko gave a low whistle.

“Heard you were keeping hallowed company, Oretsev. Looks like we caught ourselves a Saint.” He cocked his head to one side. “Thought she’d be taller. Bind them both.”

Again, I locked gazes with Mal. He wanted me to act, I could feel it. As long as my hands weren’t bound together, I could summon and control the light. But what about the other Grisha?

I held out my hands and let the woman secure my wrists with rope.

Mal sighed and did the same. “Can I at least put my shirt on?” he asked.

“No,” she said with a leer. “I like the view.”

Luchenko laughed. “Life’s a funny thing, isn’t it?” he said philosophically as they marched us into the woods at gunpoint. “All I ever wanted was a drop of luck to flavor my tea. Now I’m drowning in it. The Darkling will empty his coffers to have the two of you delivered to his door.”

“You’re going to hand me over that easily?” I said. “Foolish.”

“Big talk from a girl with a rifle at her back.”

“It’s just good business,” I said. “You think Fjerda or the Shu Han won’t pay a small fortune—maybe even a large fortune—to get their hands on the Sun Summoner? How many men do you have?”

Luchenko glanced over his shoulder and wagged his finger at me like a schoolteacher. Well, it had been worth a try.

“All I meant,” I continued innocently, “was that you could auction me off to the highest bidder and keep all your men fat and happy for the rest of their days.”

“I like the way she thinks,” said the woman with the topknot.

“Don’t get greedy, Ekaterina,” Luchenko said. “We aren’t ambassadors or diplomats. The bounty on that girl’s head will buy us all passage through the border. Maybe I’ll catch a ship out of Djerholm. Or maybe I’ll just bury myself in blondes for the rest of my days.”

The unsavory image of Luchenko cavorting with a bunch of curvy Fjerdans was driven from my mind as we entered the clearing. The Grisha had been rounded up at its center and were surrounded by a circle of nearly thirty armed

militiamen. Tolya was bleeding heavily from what looked like a bad blow to the head. Harshaw had been on watch, and one glance at him told me he'd been shot. He was pale, swaying on his feet, clutching the wound at his side and panting as Oncat yowled.

"See?" said Luchenko. "With this windfall, I don't need to worry about the highest bidder."

I stepped in front of him, keeping my voice as low as I could. "Let them go," I said. "If you turn them over to the Darkling, they'll be tortured."

"And?"

I swallowed the bolt of rage that coursed through me. Threats would get me nowhere. "A living prisoner is more valuable than a corpse," I said meekly. "At least untie me so I can see to my friend's injury." *And so I can mow down your militia with a flick of my wrist.*

Ekaterina narrowed her eyes. "Don't do it," she said. "Have one of her bloodletters take care of him." She gave me a jab in the back and steered us into the group with the others.

"Spy that collar?" Luchenko asked of the crowd. "We have the Sun Summoner!"

There were exclamations and a few whoops from the rest of the militia. "So start thinking about how you're going to spend all of the Darkling's money."

They cheered.

"Why not ransom her to Nikolai Lantsov?" said a soldier from somewhere near the back of the circle. Now that I was in the middle of the clearing, there seemed to be even more of them.

"Lantsov?" Luchenko said. "If he has a brain in his head, he's rusticating somewhere warm with a pretty girl on his knee. If he's even alive."

"He's alive," said someone.

Luchenko spat. "Makes no matter to me."

"And your country?" I asked.

"What has my country ever done for me, little girl? No land, no life, just a uniform and a gun. Doesn't matter if it's the Darkling on the throne or some useless Lantsov."

"I saw the prince when I was in Os Alta," said Ekaterina. "He's not bad

looking.”

“Not bad looking?” said another voice. “He’s damnably handsome.”

Luchenko scowled. “Since when—”

“Brave in battle, smart as a whip.” Now the voice seemed to be coming from above us. Luchenko craned his neck, peering into the trees. “An excellent dancer,” said the voice. “Oh, and an even better shot.”

“Who—” Luchenko never got to finish. A blast rang out, and a tiny black hole appeared between his eyes.

I gasped. “Imposs—”

“Don’t say it,” muttered Mal.

Then chaos erupted.

CHAPTER 6

GUNFIRE SHATTERED the air around us, and Mal knocked me from my feet. I landed with my face in the mulch of the forest floor and felt his body shielding mine.

"Stay down!" he yelled.

I twisted my head to the side and saw the Grisha forming a ring around us. Harshaw was on the ground, but Stigg had his flint in hand, and flames shot through the air. Tamar and Tolya had charged into the fray. Zoya, Nadia, and Adrik had their hands up, and leaves lifted in gusts from the forest floor, but it was hard to tell friend from foe in the tangle of armed men.

There was a sudden thump beside us as someone swung down from the treetops. "What are you two doing barefoot and half naked in the mud?" asked a familiar voice. "Looking for truffles, I hope?"

Nikolai slashed through the bonds on our wrists and yanked me to my feet. "Next time *I'll* try getting captured. Just to keep things interesting." He tossed Mal a rifle. "Shall we?"

"I can't tell who's who!" I protested.

"We're the side that's hopelessly outnumbered."

Unfortunately, I didn't think he was kidding. As the ranks shifted and I got my wits about me, it was easier to distinguish Nikolai's men by their pale blue armbands. They'd cut a swath through Luchenko's militia, but even without their leader, the enemy was rallying.

I heard a shout. Nikolai's men moved forward, driving the Grisha ahead of them. We were being herded.

“What’s happening?” I asked.

“This is the part where we run,” Nikolai said pleasantly, but I could see the strain on his dirt-smudged face.

We took off through the trees, trying to keep pace as Nikolai darted through the woods. I couldn’t tell where we were headed. Toward the creek? The road? I’d lost all sense of direction.

I looked behind me, counting the others, making sure we were together. The Squallers were summoning in tandem, knocking trees into the militia’s path. Stigg trailed them, sending up spurts of flame. David had somehow managed to retrieve his pack and staggered beneath its bulk as he ran beside Genya.

“Leave it!” I yelled, but if he heard, he ignored me.

Tolya had Harshaw thrown over his shoulder, and the weight of the big Inferni was slowing his stride. A soldier was gaining on him, saber drawn. Tamar vaulted onto a fallen trunk, took aim with her pistol, and fired. A second later, the militiaman clutched his chest and crumpled midstride. Oncat darted past the body, fast on Tolya’s heels.

“Where’s Sergei?” I shouted, just as I glimpsed him lagging behind, his expression dazed. Tamar backtracked, dodging falling trees and fire, and forcibly pulled him along. I couldn’t hear what she was yelling, but I didn’t think it was gentle encouragement.

I stumbled. Mal caught my elbow and shoved me forward, turning to squeeze off two shots from his rifle. Then we were pouring into a barley field.

Despite the heat of the late afternoon sun, the field was shrouded in mist. We pelted over the marshy soil until Nikolai shouted, “Here!”

We skidded to a halt, sending up sprays of dirt. *Here?* We were in the middle of an empty field with nothing but fog for cover and a throng of militiamen hungry for revenge and fortune on our heels.

I heard two shrill whistle blasts. The ground rocked beneath me.

“Hold on tight!” Nikolai said.

“To what?” I yelped.

And then we were rising. Cables snapped into place beside us as the field itself seemed to lift. I looked up—the mist was parting, and a massive craft hovered directly over our heads, its cargo hold open. It was some kind of

shallow barge, equipped with sails at one end and suspended beneath a huge, oblong bladder.

"What the hell is that?" Mal said.

"The *Pelican*," said Nikolai. "Well, a prototype of the *Pelican*. Trick seems to be getting the balloon not to collapse."

"And did you solve that little problem?"

"For the most part."

The soil beneath us fell away, and I saw we were standing on a swaying platform made of some kind of metal mesh. We rose higher—ten, then fifteen feet above the ground. A bullet pinged against the metal.

We took up spots at the edge of the platform, clutching the cables while trying to take aim at the mob firing up at us.

"Let's go!" I shouted. "Why aren't we getting out of range?"

Nikolai and Mal exchanged a glance.

"They know we have the Sun Saint," Nikolai said. Mal nodded, snatched up a pistol, and gave Tolya and Tamar a swift nudge.

"What are you doing?" I asked, suddenly panicked.

"We can't leave survivors," Mal said. Then he dove from the edge. I screamed, but he tucked into a roll and came up firing.

Tolya and Tamar followed, cutting through the remaining ranks of militia while Nikolai and his crew tried to lend cover from above. I saw one of the militiamen break free and run for the woods. Tolya put a bullet through his victim's back, and before the body had even hit the ground, the giant was turning, his hand forming a fist as he crushed the heart of another knife-wielding soldier looming up behind him.

Tamar charged directly into Ekaterina. Her axes flashed twice, and the militiawoman fell, her topknot drifting down beside her lifeless form, attached to a piece of scalp. Another man lifted his pistol, taking aim at Tamar, but Mal was on him, knife slicing mercilessly across his throat. *I am become a blade.* And then there was no one left, only bodies in a field.

"Come on!" Nikolai called as the platform drifted higher. He tossed down a cable. Mal braced his feet against the ground, holding the rope taut so Tamar and Tolya could shinny up. As soon as the twins were on the platform, Mal hooked

his ankle and wrist in the cable and they bent to haul him in.

That was when I saw movement behind him. A man had risen from the dirt, covered in mud and blood, saber held out before him.

“Mal!” I cried. But it was too late, his limbs were tangled in the rope.

The soldier released a roar and slashed out. Mal put up a useless hand to defend himself.

Light flashed off the soldier’s blade. His arm stopped midswing, and the saber dropped from his fingertips. Then his body came apart, splitting down the middle as if someone had drawn a near perfect line from the top of his head all the way to his groin, a line that gleamed bright as he fell in pieces.

Mal looked up. I stood at the edge of the platform, my hands still glowing with the power of the Cut. I swayed. Nikolai yanked me back before I could tip over the edge. I broke free of him, scooting to the far end of the platform and vomiting off the other side.

I clung to the cool metal, feeling like a coward. Mal and the twins had leapt into that battle to make sure the Darkling wouldn’t learn our location. They hadn’t hesitated. They’d killed with ruthless efficiency. I’d taken one life, and I was curled up like a child, wiping sick from my lip.

Stigg sent fire licking over the bodies in the field. I hadn’t stopped to think that a body sliced in half would give away my presence just as surely as an informant.

Moments later, the platform was hauled up into the *Pelican*’s cargo hold, and we were under way. When we emerged above deck, the sun was shining off the port side as we climbed into the clouds. Nikolai shouted commands. One team of Squallers manned the giant lozenge of a balloon, while another filled the sails with wind. Tidemakers shrouded the base of the craft in mist to keep us from being spotted by anyone on the ground. I recognized some of the rogue Grisha from the days when Nikolai had masqueraded as Sturmhond and Mal and I had been prisoners aboard his ship.

This craft was larger and less graceful than the *Hummingbird* or the *Kingfisher*. I soon learned that it had been built to transport cargo—shipments of Zemeni weapons that Nikolai was smuggling over the northern and southern borders and occasionally through the Fold. It wasn’t constructed of wood but

some lightweight Fabrikator-made substance that sent David into a tizzy. He actually lay down on the deck to get a better view, tapping here and there. “It’s some kind of cured resin, but it’s been reinforced with … carbon fibers?”

“Glass,” said Nikolai, looking thoroughly pleased by David’s enthusiasm.

“More flexible!” David said in near ecstasy.

“What can I say?” asked Genya drily. “He’s a passionate man.”

Genya’s presence worried me a little, but Nikolai had never seen her scarred, and he didn’t seem to recognize her. I circulated with Nadia, whispering a few reminders to our Grisha about not using her real name.

A crewman offered me a cup of fresh water so that I could rinse out my mouth and wash my face and hands. I accepted it with cheeks burning, embarrassed over my display back on the platform.

When I was done, I leaned my elbows on the railing and peered through the mist at the landscape below—fields painted in the red and gold of autumn, the blue-gray glitter of the river cities and their bustling ports. Such was the mad power of Nikolai that I barely thought twice about the fact that we were flying. I’d been aboard his smaller crafts, and I definitely preferred the feel of the *Pelican*. There was something stately about it. It might not get you anywhere quickly, but it wouldn’t capsize on a whim either.

From miles beneath the earth to miles above. I could scarcely believe any of it, that Nikolai had found us, that he was safe, that we were all here. A tide of relief washed over me, making my eyes fill.

“First vomit, then tears,” Nikolai said, coming up beside me. “Don’t tell me I’ve lost my touch.”

“I’m just happy you’re alive,” I said, hastily blinking my eyes clear. “Though I’m sure you can talk me out of it.”

“Glad to see you too. Word was you’d gone underground, but it was more like you’d vanished completely.”

“It did feel like being buried alive.”

“Is the rest of your party there?”

“This is it.”

“You can’t mean—”

“This is all that remains of the Second Army. The Darkling has his Grisha,

and you have yours, but…" I trailed off.

Nikolai surveyed the deck. Mal and Tolya were deep in conversation with a member of Nikolai's crew, helping to tie down ropes and maneuver a sail. Someone had found Mal a jacket, but he was still short a pair of boots. David was running his hands over the deck as if he were trying to disappear into it. The others were clustered into little groups: Genya was huddled with Nadia and the other Etherealki. Stigg had gotten stuck with Sergei, who slumped on the deck, his head buried in his hands. Tamar was seeing to Harshaw's wounds as Oncat dug her claws into his leg, her fur standing on end. The tabby obviously didn't enjoy flying.

"All that remains," Nikolai repeated.

"One Healer chose to stay underground." After a long minute, I asked, "How did you find us?"

"I didn't, really. Militias have been preying on our smuggling routes. We couldn't afford to lose another shipment, so I came after Luchenko. Then Tamar was spotted in the square, and when we realized the camp they were moving on was yours, I thought why not get the girl—"

"And the guns?"

He grinned. "Exactly."

"Thank goodness we had the foresight to be captured."

"Very quick thinking on your part. I commend you."

"How are the King and Queen?"

He snorted and said, "Fine. Bored. There's little for them to do." He adjusted the cuff of his coat. "They took Vasily's loss hard."

"I'm sorry," I said. In truth, I'd spared little thought for Nikolai's older brother.

"He brought it on himself, but I'm surprised to say I'm sorry too."

"I need to know—did you get Baghra out?"

"At great trouble and with little thanks. You might have warned me about her."

"She's a treat, isn't she?"

"Like a fine plague." He reached out and tugged on a lock of my white hair. "Bold choice."

I pushed the loose strands behind my ear self-consciously. “It’s all the fashion underground.”

“Is it?”

“It happened during the battle. I hoped it might turn back, but it seems to be permanent.”

“My cousin Ludovic woke up with a white streak in his hair after he almost died in a house fire. Claimed the ladies found it very dashing. Of course, he also claimed the house fire was set by ghosts, so who can say.”

“Poor cousin Ludovic.”

Nikolai leaned back on the railing and studied the balloon tethered above us. At first, I’d assumed it was canvas, but now I thought it might be silk coated with rubber. “Alina…,” he began. I was so unused to seeing Nikolai ill at ease that it took me a moment to realize he was struggling for words. “Alina, the night the palace was attacked, I did come back.”

Was that what was worrying him? That I thought he’d abandoned me? “I never doubted it. What did you see?”

“The grounds were dark when I flew over. Fires had broken out in a few places. I saw David’s dishes shattered on the roof and the lawn of the Little Palace. The chapel had collapsed. There were *nichevo’ya* crawling all over it. I thought we might be in trouble, but they didn’t spare the *Kingfisher* a second look.”

They wouldn’t, not with their master trapped and dying beneath a heap of rubble.

“I’d hoped there might be some way to retrieve Vasily’s body,” he said. “But it was no good. The whole place was overrun. What happened?”

“The *nichevo’ya* attacked the Little Palace. By the time I arrived, one of the dishes was already down.” I dug my nail into the rail of the ship, scratching a little half-moon. “We never had a chance.” I didn’t want to think about the main hall streaked with blood, the bodies strewn over the roof, the floor, the stairs—broken heaps of blue, red, and purple.

“And the Darkling?”

“I tried to kill him.”

“As one does.”

“By killing myself.”

“I see.”

“I brought the chapel down,” I said.

“You—”

“Well, the *nichevo’ya* did, at my command.”

“You can command them?”

Already, I could see him calculating a possible advantage. Always the strategist.

“Don’t get excited,” I said. “I had to create my own *nichevo’ya* to do it. And I had to be in direct contact with the Darkling.”

“Oh,” he said glumly. “But once you’ve found the firebird?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted, “but…” I hesitated. I’d never spoken this thought aloud. Among Grisha it would be considered heresy. Still, I wanted to say the words, wanted Nikolai to hear them. I hoped he might understand the edge it would give us, even if he couldn’t grasp the hunger that drove me. “I think I may be able to build my own army.”

“Soldiers of light?”

“That’s the idea.”

Nikolai was watching me. I could tell he was choosing his words carefully. “You once told me that *merzost* isn’t like the Small Science, that it carries a high price.” I nodded. “How high, Alina?”

I thought of a girl’s body crushed beneath a mirrored dish, her goggles askew, of Marie torn open in Sergei’s arms, of Genya huddling in her shawl. I thought of church walls, like pieces of bloody parchment, crowded with the names of the dead. It wasn’t just righteous fury that guided me, though. It was my need for the firebird—banked, but always burning.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said firmly. “I’ll pay it.”

Nikolai considered this, then said, “Very well.”

“That’s it? No sage words? No dire warnings?”

“Saints, Alina. I hope you weren’t looking to me to be the voice of reason. I keep to a strict diet of ill-advised enthusiasm and heartfelt regret.” He paused, his grin fading. “But I’m truly sorry for the soldiers you lost and that I didn’t do more that night.”

Below us, I could see the beginnings of the white reaches of the permafrost and, far beyond, the shape of mountains in the distance. “What could you have done, Nikolai? You would have just gotten yourself killed. You still might.” It was harsh, but it was also the truth. Against the Darkling’s shadow soldiers, everyone—no matter how brilliant or resourceful—was close to helpless.

“You never know,” said Nikolai. “I’ve been busy. I might have some surprises in store for the Darkling yet.”

“Please tell me you plan to dress up as a volcra and jump out of a cake.”

“Well, now you’ve ruined the surprise.” He pushed off the railing. “I need to pilot us over the border.”

“The border?”

“We’re heading into Fjerda.”

“Oh, good. Enemy territory. And here I was starting to relax.”

“These are my skies,” Nikolai said with a wink. Then he strolled across the deck, whistling a familiar, off-key tune.

I’d missed him. The way he talked. The way he attacked a problem. The way he brought hope with him wherever he went. For the first time in months, I felt the knot in my chest ease.

Once we crossed the border, I’d thought we might head for the coast or even West Ravka, but soon we were tacking toward the mountain range I’d glimpsed. From my days as a mapmaker, I knew they were the northernmost peaks of the Sikurzoi, the range that stretched across most of Ravka’s eastern and southern border. The Fjerdans called them the Elbjen, the Elbows, though as we drew closer, it was hard to tell why. They were massive, snowcapped things, all white ice and gray rock. They would have dwarfed the Petrazoi. If those were elbows, I didn’t want to know what they were attached to.

We climbed higher. The air grew frigid as we drifted into the thick cloud cover that hid the steepest peaks. When we emerged above it, I released an awed gasp. Here, the few mountaintops tall enough to pierce the clouds seemed to float like islands in a white sea. The tallest looked like it was clutched by huge fingers of frost, and as we arced around it, I thought I saw shapes in the ice. A narrow stone staircase zigzagged up the cliff face. What lunatic would make that climb? And for what possible purpose?

We rounded the mountain, drawing closer and closer to the rock. Just as I was about to call out in panic, we rolled hard to the right. Suddenly, we were between two frozen walls. The *Pelican* swerved and we entered an echoing stone hangar.

Nikolai really had been busy. We crowded at the railing, gaping at the hectic bustle around us. Three other crafts were docked in the hangar: a second cargo barge like the *Pelican*, the sleek *Kingfisher*, and a similar vessel that bore the name *Bittern.*

"It's a kind of heron," said Mal, pulling on a pair of borrowed boots. "They're smaller. Sneaky." Like the *Kingfisher*, the *Bittern* had double hulls, though they were flatter and wider at the base, and equipped with what looked like sled runners.

Nikolai's crew threw lines over the *Pelican*'s rail, and workers ran forward to catch them, stretching them taut and tying them to steel hooks secured in the hangar's walls and floor. We touched down with a thud and a deafening screech as hull scraped against stone.

David frowned disapprovingly. "Too much weight."

"Don't look at me," said Tolya.

As soon as we came to a halt, Tolya and Tamar leapt from the railings, already calling out greetings to crewmen and workers they must have recognized from their time aboard the *Volkvolny.* The rest of us waited for the gangway to be lowered, then shuffled off the barge.

"Impressive," Mal said.

I shook my head in wonder. "How does he do it?"

"Want to know my secret?" Nikolai asked from behind us. We both jumped. He leaned in, looked from left to right, and whispered loudly, "I have a lot of money."

I rolled my eyes.

"No, really," he protested. "A *lot* of money."

Nikolai gave orders to the waiting dockworkers for repairs and then led our ragged, wide-eyed band to a doorway in the rock.

"Everybody in," he said. Confused, we crowded into the little rectangular room. The walls looked like they were made of iron. Nikolai pulled a gate closed

across the entry.

“You’re on my foot,” Zoya complained grumpily, but we were all wedged in so tightly it was hard to tell who she was angry at.

“What is this?” I asked.

Nikolai dropped a lever, and we let loose a collective scream as the room shot upward, taking my stomach with it.

We jolted to a halt. My gut slammed back down to my shoes, and the gate slid open. Nikolai stepped out, doubled over with laughter. “I never tire of that.”

We piled out of the box as fast as we could—all except for David, who lingered to fiddle with the lever mechanism.

“Careful there,” Nikolai called. “The trip down is bumpier than the trip up.”

Genya took David’s arm and yanked him clear.

“Saints,” I swore. “I forgot how often I want to stab you.”

“So I *haven’t* lost my touch.” He glanced at Genya and said quietly, “What happened to that girl?”

“Long story,” I hedged. “Please tell me there are stairs. I’d rather set up permanent house here than ever get back in that thing.”

“Of course there are stairs, but they’re less entertaining. And once you’ve dragged yourself up and down four flights of them enough, you’ll find you’re far more open-minded.”

I was about to argue, but as I took a good look around, the words died on my tongue. If the hangar had been impressive, then this was simply miraculous.

It was the biggest room I’d ever been in—twice, maybe three times as wide and as tall as the domed hall in the Little Palace. It wasn’t even a room, I realized. We were standing at the top of a hollowed-out mountain.

Now I understood what I had seen as we approached aboard the *Pelican*. The frost fingers were actually enormous bronze columns cast in the shapes of people and creatures. They towered above us, bracketing huge panels of glass that looked out on the ocean of cloud below. The glass was so clear that it gave the space an eerie sense of openness, as if a wind might blow through and send me tumbling into the nothingness beyond. My heart started to hammer.

“Deep breaths,” Nikolai said. “It can be overwhelming at first.”

The room was teeming with people. Some bunched in groups where drafting

tables and bits of machinery had been set up. Others were marking crates of supplies in a kind of makeshift warehouse. Another area had been set aside for training; soldiers sparred with dulled swords while others summoned Squaller winds or cast Inferni flame. Through the glass, I saw terraces protruding in four directions, giant spikes like compass points—north, south, east, west. Two had been set aside for target practice. It was hard not to compare it to the damp, cloistered caverns of the White Cathedral. Everything here was bursting with life and hope. It all bore Nikolai's stamp.

"What is this place?" I asked as we slowly made our way through.

"It was originally a pilgrimage site, back when Ravka's borders extended farther north," Nikolai replied. "The Monastery of Sankt Demyan."

Sankt Demyan of the Rime. At least that explained the winding staircase we'd glimpsed. Only faith or fear could get anyone to make that climb. I remembered Demyan's page from the *Istorii Sankt'ya.* He'd performed some kind of miracle near the northern border. I was pretty sure he'd been stoned to death.

"A few hundred years ago, it was turned into an observatory," Nikolai continued. He pointed to a hulking brass telescope tucked into one of the glass niches. "It's been abandoned for over a century. I heard about it during the Halmhend campaign, but it took some finding. Now we just call it the Spinning Wheel."

Then it struck me: the bronze columns were constellations—the Hunter with his drawn bow, the Scholar bent in study, the Three Foolish Sons, huddled together, trying to share a single coat. The Bursar, the Bear, the Beggar. The Shorn Maiden wielding her bone needle. Twelve in all: the spokes of the Spinning Wheel.

I had to crane my neck all the way back to get a view of the glass dome high above us. The sun was setting and through it, I could see the sky turning a lush, deep blue. If I squinted, I could just make out a twelve-pointed star at the dome's center.

"So much glass," I whispered, my head reeling.

"But no frost," Mal noted.

"Heated pipes," David said. "They're in the floor. Probably embedded in the columns too."

It *was* hotter in this room. Still cold enough that I wouldn't want to part with my coat or my hat, but my feet were warm through my boots.

"There are boilers beneath us," Nikolai said. "The whole place runs on melted snow and steam heat. The problem is fuel, but I've been stockpiling coal."

"For how long?"

"Two years. We started repairs when I had the lower caverns turned into hangars. It's not an ideal vacation spot, but sometimes you just want to get away."

I was impressed, but also unnerved. Being around Nikolai was always like this, watching him shift and change, revealing secrets as he went. He reminded me of the wooden nesting dolls I'd played with as a child. Except instead of getting smaller, he just kept getting grander and more mysterious. Tomorrow, he'd probably tell me he'd built a pleasure palace on the moon. *Tough to get to, but quite a view.*

"Have a look around," Nikolai said to us. "Get a feel for the place. Nevsky's unloading cargo in the hangar, and I need to take care of repairs to the hull." I remembered Nevsky. He'd been a soldier in Nikolai's old regiment, the Twenty-Second, and not particularly fond of Grisha.

"I'd like to see Baghra," I said.

"You're sure about that?"

"Not remotely."

"I'll take you to her. Good practice should I ever need to walk someone to the gallows. And after you've had your fill of punishment, you and Oretsev can join me for dinner."

"Thank you," Mal said, "but I should look into outfitting our expedition to retrieve the firebird."

There'd been a time, not so long ago, that Mal would have bristled at the thought of leaving me alone with Prince Perfect, but Nikolai had the grace not to register surprise. "Of course. I'll send Nevsky to you when he's done. He can help arrange your accommodations as well." He clapped a hand on Mal's shoulder. "It's good to see you, Oretsev."

The smile Mal returned was genuine. "You too. Thanks for the rescue."

"Everyone needs a hobby."

“I thought yours was preening.”

“Two hobbies.”

They clasped hands briefly, then Mal bowed and moved off with the group.

“Should I be offended that he doesn’t want to dine with us?” Nikolai asked. “I set an excellent table, and I rarely drool.”

I didn’t want to discuss it. “Baghra,” I prodded.

“He was impressive in that barley field,” Nikolai continued, taking my elbow to steer me back the way we’d come. “Better with a sword and gun than I’ve ever seen him.”

I remembered what the Apparat had said: *Men fight for Ravka because the King commands it.* Mal had always been a gifted tracker, but he’d been a soldier because we were all soldiers, because we had no choice. What was he fighting for now? I thought of him diving from the mesh platform, his knife moving across the militiaman’s throat. *I am become a blade.*

I shrugged, eager to change the subject. “There’s not much to do underground besides train.”

“I can think of a few more interesting ways to spend one’s time.”

“Is that supposed to be innuendo?”

“What a filthy mind you have. I was referring to puzzles and the perusal of edifying texts.”

“I’m not getting back in that iron box,” I said as we approached the door in the rock. “So you better be taking me to the stairs.”

“Why does everyone always say that?”

I heaved a sigh of relief as we descended a broad, delightfully stationary set of stone steps. Nikolai led me through a curving passage, and I shrugged off my coat, beginning to sweat. The floor directly below the observatory was considerably warmer, and as we passed a wide doorway, I spotted a maze of steaming boilers that glowed and hissed in the dark. Even the ever-polished Nikolai had a fine mist of perspiration on his elegant features.

We were most definitely headed to Baghra’s lair. The woman never seemed to be able to keep warm. I wondered if it was because she so rarely used her power. I’d certainly never been able to shake the chill of the White Cathedral.

Nikolai stopped at an iron door. “Last chance to run.”

“Go on,” I said. “Save yourself.”

He sighed. “Remember me as a hero.” He knocked lightly on the door, and we entered.

I had the disconcerting sense that we’d stepped right back into Baghra’s hut at the Little Palace. There she sat, huddled by a tile oven, dressed in the same faded *kefta*, her hand resting on the cane she’d taken such pleasure in whacking me with. The same servant boy was reading to her, and I felt a burst of shame when I realized I hadn’t even thought to ask if he’d made it out of Os Alta. The boy left off as Nikolai cleared his throat.

“Baghra,” Nikolai said, “how are you this evening?”

“Still old and blind,” she snarled.

“And charming,” Nikolai drawled. “Never forget charming.”

“Whelp.”

“Hag.”

“What do you want, pest?”

“I’ve brought someone to visit,” Nikolai said, giving me a push.

Why was I so nervous?

“Hello, Baghra,” I managed.

She paused, motionless. “The little Saint,” she murmured, “returned to save us all.”

“Well, she did almost *die* trying to rid us of your cursed spawn,” Nikolai said lightly. I blinked. So Nikolai knew Baghra was the Darkling’s mother.

“Couldn’t even manage martyrdom right, could you?” Baghra waved me in. “Come in and shut the door, girl. You’re letting the heat out.” I grinned at this familiar refrain. “And you,” she spat in Nikolai’s direction. “Go somewhere you’re wanted.”

“That’s hardly limiting,” he said. “Alina, I’ll be back to fetch you for dinner, but should you grow restless, do feel free to run screaming from the room or take a dagger to her. Whatever seems most fitting at the time.”

“Are you still here?” snapped Baghra.

“I go but hope to remain in your heart,” he said solemnly. Then he winked and disappeared.

“Wretched boy.”

“You like him,” I said in disbelief.

Baghra scowled. “Greedy. Arrogant. Takes too many risks.”

“You almost sound concerned.”

“You like him too, little Saint,” she said with a leer in her voice.

“I do,” I admitted. “He’s been kind when he might have been cruel. It’s refreshing.”

“He laughs too much.”

“There are worse traits.”

“Like arguing with your elders?” she growled. Then she thumped her stick on the floor. “Boy, go fetch me something sweet.”

The servant hopped to his feet and set down his book. I caught him as he raced past me for the door. “Just a moment,” I said. “What’s your name?”

“Misha,” he replied. He was in desperate need of a haircut, but otherwise looked well enough.

“How old are you?”

“Eight.”

“Seven,” snapped Baghra.

“Almost eight,” he conceded.

He was small for his age. “Do you remember me?”

With a tentative hand he reached out and touched the antlers at my neck, then nodded solemnly. “Sankta Alina,” he breathed. His mother had taught him that I was a Saint, and apparently Baghra’s contempt hadn’t convinced him otherwise. “Do you know where my mother is?” he asked.

“I don’t. I’m sorry.” He didn’t even look surprised. Maybe that was the answer he’d come to expect. “How are you finding it here?”

His eyes slid to Baghra, then back to me.

“It’s all right,” I said. “Be honest.”

“There’s no one to play with.”

I felt a little pang, remembering the lonely days at Keramzin before Mal had arrived, the older orphans who’d had little interest in another scrawny refugee. “That may change soon. Until then, would you like to learn to fight?”

“Servants aren’t allowed to fight,” he said, but I could see he liked the idea.

“I’m the Sun Summoner, and you have my permission.” I ignored Baghra’s

snort. “If you go find Malyen Oretsev, he’ll see about getting you a practice sword.”

Before I could blink, the boy was tearing out of the room, practically tripping over his own feet in his excitement.

When he was gone, I said, “His mother?”

“A servant at the Little Palace.” Baghra gathered her shawl closer around her. “It’s possible she survived. There’s no way of knowing.”

“How is he taking it?”

“How do you think? Nikolai had to drag him screaming onto that accursed craft. Though that may just have been good sense. At least he cries less now.”

As I moved the book to sit beside her, I glanced at the title. Religious parables. Poor kid. Then I turned my attention to Baghra. She’d put on a bit of weight, sat straighter in her chair. Getting out of the Little Palace had done her good, even if she’d just found another hot cave to hide in.

“You look well.”

“I wouldn’t know,” she said sourly. “Did you mean what you said to Misha? Are you thinking of bringing the students here?” The children from the Grisha school at Os Alta had been evacuated to Keramzin, along with their teachers and Botkin, my old combat instructor. Their safety had been nagging at me for months, and now I was in a position to do something about it.

“If Nikolai agrees to house them at the Spinning Wheel, would you consider teaching them?”

“Hmph,” she said with a scowl. “Someone has to. Who knows what garbage they’ve been learning with that bunch.”

I smiled. Progress, indeed. But my smile vanished when Baghra rapped me on the knee with her stick. “Ow!” I yelped. The woman’s aim was uncanny.

“Give me your wrists.”

“I don’t have the firebird.”

She lifted her stick again, but I flinched out of the way. “All right, all right.” I took her hand and laid it on my bare wrist. As she groped nearly up to my elbow, I asked, “How does Nikolai know you’re the Darkling’s mother?”

“He asked. He’s more observant than the rest of you fools.” She must have been satisfied that I wasn’t somehow hiding the third amplifier, because she

dropped my wrist with a grunt.

"And you just told him?"

Baghra sighed. "These are my son's secrets," she said wearily. "It's not my job to keep them any longer." Then she leaned back. "So you failed to kill him once more."

"Yes."

"I cannot say I'm sorry. In the end, I'm even weaker than you, little Saint."

I hesitated, then blurted, "I used *merzost*."

Her shadow eyes flew open. "You *what*?"

"I … I didn't do it myself. I used the connection between us, the one created by the collar, to control the Darkling's power. I created *nichevo'ya*."

Baghra's hands scrambled for mine. She seized my wrists in a painful grip. "You must not do this, girl. You must not trifle with this kind of power. This is what created the Fold. Only misery can come of it."

"I may not have a choice, Baghra. We know the location of the firebird, or at least we think we do. Once we find it—"

"You'll sacrifice another ancient life for the sake of your own power."

"Maybe not," I protested weakly. "I showed the stag mercy. Maybe the firebird doesn't have to die."

"Listen to you. This is not some children's story. The stag had to die for you to claim its power. The firebird is no different, and this time the blood will be on your hands." Then she laughed her low, mirthless chuckle. "The thought doesn't bother you as much as it should, does it, girl?"

"No," I admitted.

"Have you no care for what there is to lose? For the damage you may cause?"

"I do," I said miserably. "*I do.* But I'm out of options, and even if I weren't —"

She dropped my hands. "You would seek it just the same."

"I won't deny it. I want the firebird. I want the amplifiers' combined power. But it doesn't change the fact that no human army can stand against the Darkling's shadow soldiers."

"Abomination against abomination."

If that was what it took. Too much had been lost for me to turn away from

any weapon that might make me strong enough to win this fight. With or without Baghra's help, I would have to find a way to wield *merzost.*

I hesitated. "Baghra, I've read Morozova's journals."

"Have you, now? Did you find them stimulating reading?"

"No, I found them infuriating."

To my surprise, she laughed. "My son pored over those pages as if they were holy writ. He must have read through them a thousand times, questioning every word. He began to think there were codes hidden in the text. He held the pages over flame searching for invisible ink. In the end, he cursed Morozova's name."

As had I. Only David's obsession persisted. It had nearly gotten him killed today when he'd insisted on dragging that pack with him.

I hated to ask it, hated to even put the possibility into words, but I forced myself to. "Is there … is there any chance Morozova left the cycle unfinished? Is there a chance he never created the third amplifier?"

For a while, she was silent, her expression distant, her blind gaze locked on something I couldn't see. "Morozova never could have left that undone," she said softly. "It wasn't his way."

Something in her words lifted the hairs on my arms. A memory came to me: Baghra putting her hands to the collar on my neck at the Little Palace. *I would have liked to see his stag.*

"Baghra—"

A voice came from the doorway: "*Moi sovereny*i." I looked up at Mal, annoyed at being interrupted.

"What is it?" I asked, recognizing the edge that came into my voice whenever the firebird was concerned.

"There's a problem with Genya," he said. "And the King."

CHAPTER 7

I SHOT TO MY FEET. “What happened?”

“Sergei let her real name slip. He seems to be taking to heights about as well as he took to caves.”

I released a growl of frustration. Genya had played a key role in the Darkling’s plot to depose the King. I’d tried to be patient with Sergei, but now he’d put her in danger and jeopardized our position with Nikolai.

Baghra reached out and snagged the fabric of my trousers, gesturing to Mal. “Who is that?”

“The captain of my guard.”

“Grisha?”

I frowned. “No, *otkazat’sya*.”

“He sounds—”

“Alina,” Mal said. “They’re coming to take her right now.”

I pried Baghra’s fingers away. “I have to go. I’ll send Misha back to you.”

I hurried from the room, closing the door behind me, and Mal and I raced for the stairs, taking them two at a time.

The sun had long since set, and the lanterns of the Spinning Wheel had been lit. Outside, I glimpsed stars emerging above the cloud bank. A group of soldiers with blue armbands had gathered by the training area and looked about two seconds from drawing their guns on Tolya and Tamar. I felt a surge of pride to see my Etherealki arrayed behind the twins, shielding Genya and David. Sergei was nowhere to be found. Probably a good thing, since I didn’t have time to give him the pummeling he deserved.

“She’s here!” called Nadia when she caught sight of us. I went straight to Genya.

“The King is waiting,” said one of the guards. I was surprised to hear Zoya snap back, “Let him wait.”

I put my arm around Genya’s shoulders, leading her a little way off. She was shaking.

“Listen to me,” I said, smoothing her hair back. “No one will hurt you. Do you understand?”

“He’s the *King*, Alina.” I heard the terror in her voice.

“He’s not the king of anything anymore,” I reminded her. I spoke with a confidence I didn’t feel. This could get very bad, very fast, but there was no way around it. “You must face him.”

“For him to see me … brought low like this—”

I made her meet my gaze. “You are not *low*. You defied the Darkling to give me freedom. I won’t let yours be taken.”

Mal approached us. “The guards are getting antsy.”

“I can’t do this,” said Genya.

“You can.”

Gently, Mal laid a hand on her shoulder. “We’ve got you.”

A tear rolled down her cheek. “Why? Back at the Little Palace, I reported on Alina. I burned her letters to you. I let her believe—”

“You stood between us and the Darkling on Sturmhond’s ship,” Mal said in that same steady voice I recognized from the cave-in. “I don’t reserve my friendship for perfect people. And, thank the Saints, neither does Alina.”

“Can you trust us?” I asked.

Genya swallowed, then took a breath, mustering the poise that had once come so easily to her. She pulled up her shawl. “All right,” she said.

We returned to the group. David looked questioningly at her, and she reached out to take his hand.

“We’re ready,” I said to the soldiers.

Mal and the twins fell into step beside us, but I held up a warning hand to the other Grisha. “Stay here,” I said, then added quietly, “and keep alert.” On the Darkling’s orders, Genya had come close to committing regicide, and Nikolai

knew it. If it came to a fight, I had no idea how we would get off this mountaintop.

We followed the guards across the observatory and through a corridor that led down a short set of stairs. As we rounded a bend, I heard the King's voice. I couldn't make out everything he was saying, but I didn't miss the word *treason.*

We paused in a doorway formed by the spear arms of two bronze statues—Alyosha and Arkady, the Horsemen of Ivets, their armor studded with iron stars. Whatever the chamber had once been, it was now Nikolai's war room. The walls were covered in maps and blueprints, and a huge drafting table was littered with clutter. Nikolai leaned against his desk, arms and ankles crossed, his expression troubled.

I almost didn't recognize the King and Queen of Ravka. The last time I'd seen the Queen, she'd been swathed in rose silk and dripping with diamonds. Now she wore a wool *sarafan* over a simple peasant blouse. Her blond hair, dull and strawlike without the polish of Genya's skill, had been twisted into a messy bun. The King was apparently still partial to military attire. The gold braid and satin sash of his dress uniform were gone, replaced by First Army drab that seemed incongruous with his weak build and graying mustache. He looked frail leaning on his wife's chair, the damning evidence of whatever Genya had done to him clear in his stooped shoulders and loose skin.

As I entered, the King's eyes bugged out almost comically. "I didn't ask to see this witch."

I forced myself to bow, hoping some of the diplomacy I'd learned from Nikolai might serve me. "*Moi tsar.*"

"Where is the traitor?" he bayed, spittle flying from his lower lip.

So much for diplomacy.

Genya took a small step forward. Her hands shook as she lowered her shawl. The King gasped. The Queen covered her mouth.

The silence in the room was the quiet after a cannon blast. I saw realization strike Nikolai. He glanced at me, his jaw set. I hadn't exactly lied to him, but I might as well have.

"What is this?" muttered the King.

"This is the price she paid for saving me," I said, "for defying the Darkling."

The King scowled. “She is a traitor to the crown. I want her head.”

To my surprise, Genya said to Nikolai, “I will take my punishment if he takes his.”

The King’s face flushed purple. Maybe he’d have a heart attack and save us all a lot of bother. “You will stay silent among your betters!”

Genya lifted her chin. “I have no betters here.” She wasn’t making this any easier, but I still wanted to cheer.

The Queen sputtered. “If you think that—”

Genya was trembling, but her voice stayed strong as she said, “If he cannot be tried for his failures as a king, let him be tried for his failures as a man.”

“You ungrateful whore,” sneered the King.

“That’s enough,” Nikolai said. “Both of you.”

“I am Ravka’s King. I will not—”

“You are a King without a throne,” said Nikolai quietly. “And I respectfully ask that you hold your tongue.”

The King shut his mouth, a vein pulsing at his temple.

Nikolai tucked his hands behind his back. “Genya Safin, you are accused of treason and attempted murder.”

“If I’d wanted him dead, he’d be dead.”

Nikolai gave her a warning look.

“I didn’t try to kill him,” she said.

“But you did something to the King, something from which the court doctors said he’d never recover. What was it?”

“Poison.”

“Surely it could have been traced.”

“Not this. I designed it myself. If given in small enough doses over a long enough time, the symptoms are mild.”

“A vegetable alkaloid?” asked David.

She nodded. “Once it builds up in the victim’s system, a threshold is reached, the organs begin to fail, and the degeneration is irreversible. It’s not a killer. It’s a thief. It steals years. And he will never get them back.”

I felt a little chill at the satisfaction in her voice. What she described was no mundane poison, but the craft of a girl somewhere between Corporalnik and

Fabrikator. A girl who had spent plenty of time in the Materialki workshops.

The Queen was shaking her head. “Small amounts over time? She didn’t have that kind of access to our meals—”

“I poisoned my *skin*,” Genya said harshly, “my lips. So that every time he touched me—” She shuddered slightly and glanced at David. “Every time he kissed me, he took sickness into his body.” She clenched her fists. “He brought this on himself.”

“But the poison would have affected you too,” Nikolai said.

“I had to purge it from my skin, then heal the burns the lye would leave. Every single time.” Her fists clenched. “It was well worth it.”

Nikolai rubbed a hand over his mouth. “Did he force you?”

Genya nodded once. A muscle in Nikolai’s jaw ticked.

“Father?” he asked. “Did you?”

“She is a servant, Nikolai. I didn’t have to force her.”

After a long moment, Nikolai said, “Genya Safin, when this war is over, you will stand trial for high treason against this kingdom and for colluding with the Darkling against the crown.”

The King broke into a smug grin. But Nikolai wasn’t done.

“Father, you are ill. You have served the crown and the people of Ravka, and now it is time for you to take the rest you deserve. Tonight, you will write out a letter of abdication.”

The King blinked in confusion, eyelids stuttering as if he couldn’t quite comprehend what he was hearing. “I will do no such—”

“You will write the letter, and tomorrow you will leave on the *Kingfisher*. It will take you to Os Kervo, where you’ll be seen safely aboard the *Volkvolny* and across the True Sea. You can go someplace warm, maybe the Southern Colonies.”

“The *Colonies*?” the Queen gasped.

“You will have every luxury. You will be far from the fighting and the reach of the Darkling. You will be safe.”

“I am the King of Ravka! This … this traitor, this—”

“If you remain, I will see you tried for rape.”

The Queen clutched a hand to her heart. “Nikolai, you cannot mean to do

this.”

“She was under your protection, Mother.”

“She is a servant!”

“And you are a queen. Your subjects are your children. All of them.”

The King advanced on Nikolai. “You would send me from my own country on so slight a charge—”

At this Tamar broke her silence. “Slight? Would it be slight if she had been born noble?”

Mal crossed his arms. “If she’d been born noble, he never would have dared.”

“This is the best solution,” said Nikolai.

“It is not a solution at all!” barked the King. “It is cowardice!”

“I cannot put this crime aside.”

“You have no right, no authority. Who are you to sit in judgment on your King?”

Nikolai stood up straighter. “These are Ravka’s laws, not mine. They should not bow to rank or status.” He tempered his tone. “You know this is for the best. Your health is failing. You need rest, and you’re too weak to lead our forces against the Darkling.”

“Watch me!” the King roared.

“Father,” Nikolai said gently, “the men will not follow you.”

The King’s eyes narrowed. “Vasily was twice the man you are. You are a weakling and a fool, full of common sentiment and common blood.”

Nikolai flinched. “Maybe so,” he said. “But you will write that letter, and you will board the *Kingfisher* without protest. You will leave this place, or you will face trial, and if you are found guilty, then I will see you hang.”

The Queen let out a small sob.

“It is my word against hers,” the King said, waving his finger at Genya. “I am a King—”

I stepped between them. “And I am a Saint. Shall we see whose word carries more weight?”

“You shut your mouth, you grotesque little witch. I should have had you killed when I had the chance.”

“That is *enough*,” Nikolai snapped, his patience fraying. He gestured to the

guards at the door. “Escort my father and mother to their rooms. Keep them under watch and ensure that they speak to no one. I will have your abdication by morning, Father, or I will have you in irons.”

The King looked from Nikolai to the guards who now flanked him. The Queen clutched at his arm, her blue eyes panicked.

“You are no Lantsov,” snarled the King.

Nikolai merely bowed. “I find I can live with that fact.”

He signaled the guards. They took hold of the King, but he pulled free of their grip. He walked to the door, bristling with rage, trying to summon the scraps of his dignity.

He paused before Genya, his eyes roving over her face. “At least now you look like what you truly are,” he said. “Ruined.”

I could see the word hit her like a slap. *Razrusha’ya.* The Ruined. The name the pilgrims had whispered when she’d first come among them. Mal moved forward. Tamar’s hands went to her axes, and I heard Tolya growl. But Genya halted them with a hand. Her spine stiffened, and her remaining eye blazed with conviction.

“Remember me when you board that ship, *moi tsar*. Remember me when you take your last look at Ravka as it slips beneath the horizon.” She leaned in and whispered something to him. The King paled, and I saw real fear in his eyes. Genya drew back and said, “I hope the taste of me was worth it.”

The King and Queen were hustled from the room by the guards. Genya held her chin high until they were gone. Then her shoulders sagged.

David put his arm around her, but she shook him off. “Don’t,” she snarled, brushing away the tears that threatened.

Tamar started forward at the same moment that I said, “Genya—”

She held up her hands, warding us off. “I don’t want your pity,” she said ferociously. Her voice was raw, wild. We stood there helplessly. “You don’t understand.” She covered her face with her hands. “None of you do.”

“Genya—” David tried.

“Don’t you dare,” she said roughly, tears welling up again. “You never looked at me twice before I was like this, before I was broken. Now I’m just something for you to fix.”

I was desperate for words to soothe her, but before I could find any, David bunched up his shoulders and said, “I know metal.”

“What does that have to do with *anything*?” Genya cried.

David furrowed his brow. “I … I don’t understand half of what goes on around me. I don’t get jokes or sunsets or poetry, but I know metal.” His fingers flexed unconsciously as if he were physically grasping for words. “Beauty was your armor. Fragile stuff, all show. But what’s inside you? That’s steel. It’s brave and unbreakable. And it doesn’t need fixing.” He drew in a deep breath then awkwardly stepped forward. He took her face in his hands and kissed her.

Genya went rigid. I thought she’d push him away. But then she threw her arms around him and kissed him back. Emphatically.

Mal cleared his throat, and Tamar gave a low whistle. I had to bite my lip to stifle a nervous laugh.

They broke apart. David was blushing furiously. Genya’s grin was so dazzling it made my heart twist in my chest. “We should get you out of the workshop more often,” she said.

This time I did laugh. I stopped short when Nikolai said, “Do not think to rest easy, Genya Safin.” His voice was cold and deeply weary. “When this war is over, you will face charges, and I will decide whether or not you are to be pardoned.”

Genya bowed gracefully. “I don’t fear your justice, *moi tsar*.”

“I’m not the King yet.”

“*Moi tsarevich*,” she amended.

“Go,” he said, waving us away. When I hesitated, he simply said, “All of you.”

As the doors closed, I saw him slump at his drafting table, his head in his hands.

I trailed the others back down the hall. David was murmuring to Genya about the properties of vegetable alkaloids and beryllium dust. I wasn’t sure how wise it was for them to be colluding over poisons, but I supposed this was their version of a romantic moment.

My feet dragged at the prospect of returning to the Spinning Wheel. It had been one of the longest days of my life, and though I’d held exhaustion at bay,

now it settled over my shoulders like a sodden coat. I decided that Genya or Tamar could update the rest of the Grisha on what had happened, and I would deal with Sergei tomorrow. But before I could find my bed and sink into it, there was something I needed to know.

At the stairs, I grabbed Genya's hand. "What did you whisper?" I asked quietly. "To the King."

She watched the others move up the steps, then said, "*Na razrusha'ya. E'ya razrushost.*" I am not ruined. I am ruination.

My brows rose. "Remind me to stay on your good side."

"Darling," she said, turning one scarred cheek to me, then the other, "I don't *have* a good side anymore." Her tone was merry, but I heard sadness there too. She winked at me with her remaining eye and disappeared up the stairs.

* * *

MAL HAD WORKED with Nevsky to see to our sleeping arrangements, so he was left to show me to my quarters, a set of rooms on the eastern side of the mountain. The door frame was formed by the clasped hands of two bronze maidens I thought might be meant to embody the Morning and Evening Stars. Inside, the far wall was entirely taken up by a round window, ringed in riveted brass like a sidescuttle on a ship. The lanterns were lit, and though the view would most likely be spectacular in the daytime, right now, there was nothing to see but darkness and my own tired face looking back at me.

"The twins and I will be right next door," Mal said. "And one of us will be posted while you sleep."

A pitcher of hot water was waiting for me by the basin, and I rinsed my face as Mal reported on the accommodations he'd secured for the rest of the Grisha, how long it would take to outfit our expedition into the Sikurzoi, and how he wanted to divide the group. I tried to listen, but at some point, my mind shut down.

I sat on the stone bench of the window seat. "I'm sorry," I said. "I just can't."

He stood there, and I could almost see him wrestling with whether or not to sit down beside me. In the end, he stayed where he was.

"You saved my life today," he said.

I shrugged. “And you saved mine. It’s kind of what we do.”

“I know it isn’t easy, making your first kill.”

“I’ve been responsible for a lot of deaths. This shouldn’t be any different.”

“But it is.”

“He was a soldier like us. He probably has a family somewhere, a girl he loves, maybe even a child. He was there and then he was just … gone.” I knew I should leave it at that, but I needed to let the words out. “And you know the really scary part? It *was* easy.”

Mal was quiet for a long moment. Then he said, “I’m not sure who my first kill was. We were hunting the stag when we ran into a Fjerdan patrol on the northern border. I don’t think the fight lasted more than a few minutes, but I killed three men. They were doing a job, same as I was, trying to get through one day to the next, then they were bleeding in the snow. No way to tell who was the first to fall, and I’m not sure it matters. You keep them at a distance. The faces start to blur.”

“Really?”

“No.”

I hesitated. I couldn’t look at him when I whispered, “It felt good.” He didn’t say anything, so I plunged on. “It doesn’t matter why I’m using the Cut, what I’m doing with the power. It *always* feels good.”

I was afraid to look at him, afraid of the disgust I’d see on his face or, worse, the fear. But when I forced myself to glance up, Mal’s expression was thoughtful.

“You could have struck down the Apparat and all his Priestguards, but you didn’t.”

“I wanted to.”

“But you didn’t. You’ve had plenty of opportunities to be brutal, to be cruel. You’ve never taken them.”

“Not yet. The firebird—”

He shook his head. “The firebird won’t change who you are. You’ll still be the girl who took a beating for me when I was the one who broke Ana Kuya’s ormolu clock.”

I groaned, pointing an accusatory finger at him. “And you let me.”

He laughed. “Of course I did. That woman is terrifying.” Then his expression sobered. “You’ll still be the girl who was willing to sacrifice her life to save us at the Little Palace, the same girl I just saw back a servant over a king.”

“She’s not a servant. She’s—”

“A friend. I know.” He hesitated. “The thing is, Alina, Luchenko was right.”

It took me a moment to place the militia leader’s name. “About what?”

“There’s something wrong with this country. No land. No life. Just a uniform and a gun. That’s how I used to think too.”

He had. He’d been willing to walk away from Ravka without a second glance. “What changed?”

“You. I saw it that night in the chapel. If I hadn’t been so scared, I could have seen it before.”

I thought of the militiaman’s body falling in pieces. “Maybe you were right to be scared of me.”

“I wasn’t afraid of you, Alina. I was afraid of losing you. The girl you were becoming didn’t need me anymore, but she’s who you were always meant to be.”

“Power hungry? Ruthless?”

“Strong.” He looked away. “Luminous. And maybe a little ruthless too. That’s what it takes to rule. Ravka is broken, Alina. I think it always has been. The girl I saw in the chapel could change that.”

“Nikolai—”

“Nikolai’s a born leader. He knows how to fight. Knows how to politic. But he doesn’t know what it is to live without hope. He’s never been nothing. Not like you or Genya. Not like me.”

“He’s a good man,” I protested.

“And he’ll be a good king. But he needs you to be a great one.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I pressed a finger to the window glass, then wiped the smudge away with my sleeve. “I’m going to ask him if I can bring the students here from Keramzin. The orphans too.”

“Take him with you when you go,” Mal said. “He should see where you come from.” He laughed. “You can introduce him to Ana Kuya.”

“I already unleashed Baghra on Nikolai. He’s going to think I stockpile

vicious old women.” I made another fingerprint on the glass. Without looking at him, I said, “Mal, tell me about the tattoo.”

He was silent for a time. Finally, he scrubbed a hand over the back of his neck and said, “It’s an oath in old Ravkan.”

“But why take on that mark?”

This time he didn’t blush or turn away. “It’s a promise to be better than I was,” he said. “It’s a vow that if I can’t be anything else to you, at least I can be a weapon in your hand.” He shrugged. “And I guess it’s a reminder that wanting and deserving aren’t the same thing.”

“What *do* you want, Mal?” The room seemed very quiet.

“Don’t ask me that.”

“Why not?”

“Because it can’t be.”

“I want to hear it anyway.”

He blew out a long breath. “Say goodnight. Tell me to leave, Alina.”

“No.”

“You need an army. You need a crown.”

“I do.”

He laughed then. “I know I’m supposed to say something noble—I want a united Ravka free from the Fold. I want the Darkling in the ground, where he can never hurt you or anyone else again.” He gave a rueful shake of his head. “But I guess I’m the same selfish ass I’ve always been. For all my talk of vows and honor, what I really want is to put you up against that wall and kiss you until you forget you ever knew another man’s name. So tell me to go, Alina. Because I can’t give you a title or an army or any of the things you need.”

He was right. I knew that. Whatever fragile, lovely thing had existed between us belonged to two other people—people who weren’t bound by duty and responsibility—and I wasn’t sure what remained. And still I wanted him to put his arms around me, I wanted to hear him whisper my name in the dark, I wanted to ask him to stay.

“Goodnight, Mal.”

He touched the space over his heart where he wore the golden sunburst I’d given him long ago in a darkened garden.

"*Moi soverenyi*," he said softly. He bowed and was gone.

The door closed behind him. I doused the lanterns and lay down on the bed, pulling the blankets around me. The window wall was like a great round eye, and now that the room was dark, I could see the stars.

I brushed my thumb over the scar on my palm, made years ago by the edge of a broken blue cup, a reminder of the moment when my whole world had shifted, when I'd given up a part of my heart that I would never get back.

We'd made the wise choice, done the right thing. I had to believe that logic would bring comfort in time. Tonight, there was just this too-quiet room, the ache of loss, knowledge deep and final as the tolling of a bell: *Something good has gone.*

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING, I woke to Tolya at my bedside.

"I found Sergei," he said.

"Was he missing?"

"All last night."

I dressed in the clean clothes that had been left for me: tunic, trousers, new boots, and a thick wool *kefta* in Summoner blue, lined with red fox, its cuffs embroidered with gold. Nikolai always came prepared.

I let Tolya lead me down the stairs to the boiler level and to one of the darkened water rooms. Instantly, I regretted my choice of clothing; it was miserably hot. I cast a glow of light inside. Sergei was seated up against the wall near one of the big metal tanks, his knees pressed to his chest.

"Sergei?"

He squinted and turned his head away. Tolya and I exchanged a glance.

I patted his big arm. "Go find your breakfast," I said, my own stomach growling. When Tolya had gone, I dimmed the light and went to sit beside Sergei. "What are you doing down here?"

"Too big up there," he mumbled. "Too high."

There was more to it than that, more to him letting Genya's name slip, and I couldn't ignore it anymore. We'd never had a chance to talk about the disaster at the Little Palace. Or maybe there'd been opportunities and I'd avoided them. I

wanted to apologize for Marie's death, for putting her in danger, for not being there to save her. But what words were there for that kind of failure? What words could fill the hole where a living girl with chestnut curls and a lilting giggle had been?

"I miss Marie too," I said finally. "And the others."

He buried his face in his arms. "I was never afraid before, not really. Now I'm scared all the time. I can't make it stop."

I put my arm around him. "We're all scared. It's not something to be ashamed of."

"I just want to feel safe again."

His shoulders were shaking. I wished I had Nikolai's gift for finding the right words. "Sergei," I said, not sure if I was about to make matters better or worse, "Nikolai has camps on the ground, some in Tsibeya and a little farther south. There are way stations for the smugglers, away from most of the fighting. If he agrees to it, would you prefer to be assigned there? You could work as a Healer. Or maybe just rest for a while?"

He didn't even hesitate. "Yes," he gasped out.

I felt guilty for the rush of relief that came over me. Sergei had slowed us during our fight with the militia. He was unstable. I could apologize, offer useless words, but I didn't know how to help him, and it didn't change the fact that we were at war. Sergei had become a liability.

"I'll see to the arrangements. If there's anything else you need…" I trailed off, unsure of how to finish. Awkwardly, I patted his shoulder, then rose and turned to go.

"Alina?"

I paused in the doorway. I could just make him out in the dark, the light from the hallway glinting off his damp cheeks. "I'm sorry about Genya. About everything."

I remembered the way Marie and Sergei used to jab at each other, thought of them sitting arm in arm, laughing over a shared cup of tea. "Me too," I whispered.

When I emerged into the hall, I was startled to see Baghra waiting with Misha.

“What are you doing out here?”

“We came to find you. What’s the matter with that boy?”

“He’s had a hard time of it,” I said, leading them away from the tank room.

“Who hasn’t?”

“He saw the girl he loved gutted by your son and held her while she died.”

“Suffering is cheap as clay and twice as common. What matters is what each man makes of it. Now,” she said with a rap of her stick, “lessons.”

I was so stunned that it took me a moment to understand her meaning. Lessons? Baghra had refused to teach me since I’d returned to the Little Palace with the second amplifier. I gathered my wits and followed her down the hall. I was probably a fool for asking, but I couldn’t stop myself. “What changed your mind?”

“I had a chat with our new King.”

“Nikolai?”

She grunted.

My steps slowed when I saw where Misha was leading her. “You ride in the iron box?”

“Of course,” she snapped. “I should drag my body up all those stairs?”

I glanced at Misha, who looked placidly back at me, hand resting on the wooden practice sword at his hip. I edged into the horrible contraption.

Misha slammed the grate closed and pulled the lever. I shut my eyes as we hurtled upward, then jolted to a stop.

“What did Nikolai say?” I asked shakily as we stepped out into the Spinning Wheel.

Baghra gave a wave of her hand. “I warned him that once you had the power of the amplifiers, you might be as dangerous as my son.”

“Thanks,” I said drily. She was right and I knew it, but it didn’t mean I wanted Nikolai worrying about it.

“I made him swear that if that happened, he’d put a bullet in you.”

“And?” I asked, even as I dreaded hearing it.

“He gave me his word. Whatever that’s worth.”

I happened to know Nikolai’s word was good. He might mourn me. He might never forgive himself. But Nikolai’s first love was Ravka. He would never

tolerate a threat to his country.

“Why don’t you do it now and save him the trouble?” I muttered.

“I think about it daily,” she snapped back. “Especially when you run your mouth.”

Baghra murmured instructions to Misha, and he led us to the southern terrace. The door was hidden in the hem of the Shorn Maiden’s brass skirts, and there were coats and hats hung on hooks along her boot. Baghra was already so bundled up I could barely see her face, but I grabbed a fur hat for myself and buttoned Misha into a thick wool coat before we stepped out into the biting cold.

The end of the long terrace ended in a point, almost like the prow of a ship, and the cloud bank lay like a frozen sea before us. Occasionally the mist parted, offering glimpses of the snow-covered peaks and gray rock far below. I shuddered. *Too big. Too high*. Sergei wasn’t wrong. Only the tallest peaks of the Elbjen were visible above the clouds, and again I was reminded of an island chain stretching south.

“Tell me what you see,” said Baghra.

“Mostly clouds,” I said, “sky, a few mountain peaks.”

“How far to the closest one?”

I tried to gauge the distance. “At least a mile, maybe two?”

“Good,” she said. “Take its head off.”

“What?”

“You’ve used the Cut before.”

“It’s a *mountain*,” I said. “A really big mountain.”

“And you’re the first Grisha to wear two amplifiers. Do it.”

“It’s miles away!”

“Are you hoping I’ll grow old and die while you complain?”

“What if someone sees—”

“The range is uninhabited this far north. Stop making excuses.”

I heaved a frustrated sigh. I’d worn the amplifiers for months. I had a good sense of the limits of my power.

I held up my gloved hands, and the light came to me in a welcome rush, shimmering over the cloud bank. I focused it, narrowing it to a blade. Then, feeling like an idiot, I struck out in the direction of the nearest peak.

Not even close. The light burned through the clouds at least a few hundred yards short of the mountain, briefly revealing the peaks below and leaving shreds of mist in its wake.

“How did she do?” Baghra asked Misha.

“Badly.”

I scowled at him. Little traitor. Someone snickered behind me.

I turned. We’d drawn a crowd of soldiers and Grisha. It was easy to pick out the red crest of Harshaw’s hair. He had Oncat curled round his neck like an orange scarf, and Zoya was smirking beside him. *Perfect.* Nothing like a little humiliation on an empty stomach.

“Again,” said Baghra.

“It’s too far,” I grumbled. “And it’s huge.” Couldn’t we have started smaller? Say, with a house?

“It is not *too far*,” she sneered. “You are as much there as you are here. The same things that make the mountain make you. It has no lungs, so let it breathe with you. It has no pulse, so give it your heartbeat. That is the essence of the Small Science.” She thumped me with her stick. “Stop huffing like a wild boar. Breathe the way I taught you—contained, even.”

I felt my cheeks redden, and I slowed my breathing.

Snippets of Grisha theory filled my head. *Odinakovost.* Thisness. *Etovost.* Thatness. It was all a muddle. But the words that came back to me most strongly were Morozova’s fevered scrawl: *Are we not all things?*

I closed my eyes. This time, instead of drawing the light to me, I went to it. I felt myself scatter, reflecting off the terrace, the snow, the glass behind me.

I lashed out with the Cut. It struck the side of the mountain, sending a sheet of ice and rock tumbling with a dull roar.

A cheer went up from the crowd at my back.

“Hmph,” said Baghra. “They’d clap for a dancing monkey.”

“All depends on the monkey,” said Nikolai from the edge of the terrace. “And the dance.”

Great. More company.

“Better?” Baghra asked Misha.

“A little,” he said grudgingly.

“A lot!” I protested. “I hit it, didn’t I?”

“I didn’t ask you to hit it,” said Baghra. “I told you to take its head off. Again.”

“Ten coins says she doesn’t make it,” called one of Nikolai’s rogue Grisha.

“Twenty says she does,” shouted Adrik loyally.

I could have hugged him, though I knew for a fact he didn’t have the money.

“Thirty says she can hit the one behind it.”

I whirled. Mal was leaning against the archway, his arms crossed.

“That peak is over five miles away,” I protested.

“More like six,” he said breezily, a challenge in his eyes. It was as if we were back at Keramzin, and he was daring me to steal a bag of sweet almonds or luring me out onto Trivka’s pond before the ice had set. *I can’t,* I’d say. *Of course you can,* he’d reply, gliding away from me on borrowed skates, the toes stuffed with paper, never turning his back, making sure I would follow.

As the crowd hooted and placed wagers, Baghra spoke to me in a low voice. “We say like calls to like, girl. But if the science is small enough, then we are like all things. The light lives in the spaces between. It is there in the soil of that mountain, in the rock and in the snow. The Cut is already made.”

I stared at her. She’d as good as quoted Morozova’s journals that time. She’d said the Darkling had been obsessed with them. Was she telling me something more now?

I pushed up my sleeves and raised my hands. The crowd went silent. I focused on the peak in the distance, so far away I couldn’t make out its details.

I called the light to me and then released it, letting myself go with it. I was in the clouds, above them, and for a brief moment, I was in the dark of the mountain, feeling myself compressed and breathless. I was the spaces between, where light lived even if it could not be seen. When I brought my arm down, the arc I made was infinite, a shining sword that existed in a moment and in every moment beyond it.

There was an echoing *crack,* like thunder from a distance. The sky seemed to vibrate.

Silently, slowly, the top of the far mountain began to move. It didn’t tip, just slid inexorably to the side, snow and rock cascading down its face, leaving a

perfect diagonal line where a peak had once been, a ledge of exposed gray rock, jutting just above the cloud bank.

Behind me, I heard shrieking and whooping. Misha was jumping up and down, crowing, “She did it! She did it!”

I glanced over my shoulder. Mal gave me the barest nod, then started rounding everyone up and back into the Spinning Wheel. I saw him point to one of the rogues and mouth, “Pay up.”

I turned back to the broken mountain, my blood fizzing with power, my mind reeling from the reality, the permanence of what I’d just done. *Again*, clamored a voice inside me, hungry for more. First a man, then a mountain. There and gone. Easy. I shivered in my *kefta*, comforted by the soft brush of the fox fur.

“Took your time,” grumbled Baghra. “At this rate, I’ll lose both my feet to frostbite before you make any progress at all.”

CHAPTER 8

SERGEI LEFT THAT NIGHT on the *Ibis*, the cargo barge that had been pressed into service while the *Pelican* was being repaired. Nikolai had offered him a place at a quiet way station near Duva where he could recuperate and be of some help to the smugglers passing through. He'd even offered to let Sergei wait and take shelter in West Ravka, but Sergei had simply been too anxious to leave.

The next morning, Nikolai and I met with Mal and the twins to figure out the logistics of pursuing the firebird in the southern Sikurzoi. The rest of the Grisha didn't know the location of the third amplifier, and we intended to keep it that way as long as we could.

Nikolai had spent the better part of two nights studying Morozova's journals, and he was just as concerned as I was, convinced that there must be books missing or in the Darkling's possession. He wanted me to pressure Baghra, but I had to be careful how I approached the subject. If I provoked her, we'd have no new information and she'd stop my lessons.

"It's not just that the books are unfinished," Nikolai said. "Does Morozova strike anyone as a little … eccentric?"

"If by eccentric you mean insane, then yes," I admitted. "I'm hoping he can be crazy *and* right."

Nikolai contemplated the map tacked to the wall. "And this is still our only clue?" He tapped a nondescript valley on the southern border. "That's a lot riding on two skinny pieces of rock."

The unmarked valley was Dva Stolba, home to the settlements where Mal and I had been born, and named for the ruins that stood at its southern entrance—

slender, wind-eroded spires that someone had decided were the remnants of two mills. But we believed they were actually the ruins of an ancient arch, a signpost to the firebird, the last of Ilya Morozova's amplifiers.

"There's an abandoned copper mine located at Murin," said Nikolai. "You can land the *Bittern* there and enter the valley on foot."

"Why not fly right into the Sikurzoi?" Mal asked.

Tamar shook her head. "Could be tricky maneuvering. There are fewer landing sites, and the terrain is a lot more dangerous."

"All right," agreed Mal. "Then we set down in Murin and come over the Jidkova Pass."

"We should have good cover," Tolya said. "Nevsky claims a lot of people are traveling through the border cities, trying to get out of Ravka before winter arrives and the mountains become impossible to cross."

"How long will it take you to find the firebird?" Nikolai asked.

Everyone turned to Mal.

"No way of knowing," he said. "It took me months to find the stag. Hunting the sea whip took less than a week." He kept his eyes on the map, but I could feel the memory of those days rising up between us. We'd spent them in the icy waters of the Bone Road with the threat of torture hanging over us. "The Sikurzoi cover a lot of territory. We need to get moving as quickly as possible."

"Have you chosen your crew?" Nikolai asked Tamar.

She had practically broken into a dance when he suggested that she captain the *Bittern* and had immediately set about getting familiar with the ship and its requirements.

"Zoya isn't great at working in a team," Tamar replied, "but we need Squallers, and she and Nadia are our best options. Stigg's not bad with the lines, and it can't hurt to have at least one Inferni on board. We should be able to do a test run tomorrow."

"You'd move faster with an experienced crew."

"I added one of your Tidemakers and a Fabrikator to the roster," she said. "I'd feel better using our people for the rest."

"The rogues are loyal."

"Maybe so," Tamar replied. "But we work well together."

With a start, I realized she was right. *Our people.* When had that happened? In the journey from the White Cathedral? The cave-in? The moment when we'd faced down Nikolai's guards and then a king?

Our little group was splitting up, and I didn't like it. Adrik was furious at being left behind, and I was going to miss him. I'd even miss Harshaw and Oncat. But the hardest part would be saying goodbye to Genya. Between crew and supplies, the *Bittern* was already weighted down, and there was no reason for her to come with us into the Sikurzoi. And though we needed a Materialnik with us to form the second fetter, Nikolai felt David's best use was here, putting his mind to the war effort. Instead, we'd take Irina, the rogue Fabrikator who had forged the cuff of scales around my wrist back on the *Volkvolny*. David was happy with the decision, and Genya had taken the news better than I had.

"You mean I don't get to go tromping through a dusty mountain range with Zoya complaining all the way and Tolya regaling me with the Second Tale of Kregi?" She'd laughed. "I'm crushed."

"Will you be all right here?" I'd asked.

"I think so. I can't believe I'm saying this, but Nikolai is growing on me. He's nothing like his father. And the man can dress."

She was certainly right about that. Even on a mountaintop, Nikolai's boots were always polished, his uniform immaculate.

"If everything goes well," said Tamar, "we should be ready to leave by week's end."

I felt a surge of satisfaction and had to resist the urge to rub the bare spot on my wrist. But then Nikolai cleared his throat. "About that … Alina, I wonder if you might consider a slight detour."

I frowned. "What kind of a detour?"

"The alliance with West Ravka is still new. They're going to be feeling pressure from Fjerda to open the Fold to the Darkling. It would mean a great deal for them to see what a Sun Summoner can do. While the others start scouting the Sikurzoi, I thought we might attend a few state dinners, shear off the top of a mountain range, put their minds at ease. I can take you to join the others in the mountains on the way back from Os Kervo. Like Mal said, they have a lot of territory to cover, and the delay would be negligible."

For a moment, I thought Mal might speak up about the need to get in and out of the Sikurzoi before the first snowfalls came, about the danger of any delay at all. Instead, he rolled up the map on the desk and said, “Seems wise. Tolya can go as Alina’s guard. I need practice on the lines.”

I ignored the twist my heart gave. This was what I wanted. “Of course,” I said.

If Nikolai had been anticipating an argument, he hid it well. “Excellent,” he replied, slapping his hands together. “Let’s talk about your wardrobe.”

* * *

AS IT TURNED OUT, we had more than a few other issues to handle before Nikolai could bury me in silks. He had agreed to send the *Pelican* to Keramzin once it returned, but that was just the first item on the agenda. By the time we were done talking about munitions and storm patterns and wet weather gear, it was well past noon and everyone was ready for a break.

Most of the troops ate together in a makeshift mess hall that had been set up on the western side of the Spinning Wheel, beneath the looming watch of the Three Foolish Sons and the Bear. I didn’t feel much like company, so I grabbed a roll doused in caraway seeds and some hot tea brimming with sugar and walked out to the southern terrace.

It was bitterly cold. The sky was bright blue, and the afternoon sun made deep shadows in the cloud bank. I sipped my tea, listening to the sound of the wind rushing in my ears as it ruffled the fur around my face. To my right and left, I could see the spikes of the eastern and western terraces. In the distance, the stump of the mountaintop I’d severed was already covered in snow.

Given time, I was sure Baghra could teach me to push my power further, but she would never help me master *merzost,* and on my own, I had no idea where to begin. I remembered the feeling I’d had in the chapel, the sense of connection and disintegration, the horror of feeling my life torn from me, the thrill of seeing my creatures come into being. But without the Darkling, I couldn’t find my way into that power, and I couldn’t be sure the firebird would change that. Maybe it was simply easier for him. He’d once told me he had far more practice with eternity. How many lives had the Darkling taken? How many lives had he lived?

Maybe after all this time, life and death looked different to him—small and unmysterious, something to be used.

With one hand, I called the light, letting it slide over my fingers in lazy rays. It burned through the clouds, revealing more of the jagged, ruthless cliffs of the mountain range below. I set my glass down and leaned over the wall to look at the stone steps carved into the side of the mountain beneath us. Tamar claimed that in ancient times, pilgrims had made the climb on their knees.

"If you're going to jump, at least give me time to compose a ballad in your honor," said Nikolai. I turned to see him striding onto the terrace, blond hair shining. He'd thrown on an elegant greatcoat of army drab, marked with the golden double eagle. "Something with lots of sad fiddle and a verse devoted to your love of herring."

"If I wait, I may have to hear you sing it."

"I happen to have a more than passable baritone. And what's the rush? Is it my cologne?"

"You don't wear cologne."

"I have such a naturally delightful scent that it seems like overkill. But if you have a penchant for it, I'll start."

I wrinkled my nose. "No, thank you."

"I shall obey you in all things. Especially after that demonstration," he said with a nod to the lopped-off mountain. "Anytime you want me to take off my hat, please just ask."

"Looks impressive, doesn't it?" I said with a sigh. "But the Darkling learned at Baghra's knee. He's had hundreds of years to master his power. I've had less than one."

"I have a gift for you."

"Is it the firebird?"

"Was that what you wanted? Should have told me sooner." He reached into his pocket and placed something atop the wall.

Light glinted off an emerald ring. The lush green stone at its center was bigger than my thumbnail and surrounded by stars of tiny diamonds.

"Understatement is overrated," I said on a shaky breath.

"I love it when you quote me." Nikolai tapped the ring. "Console yourself

knowing that, should you ever punch me while wearing it, you'll probably take my eye out. And I'd very much like you to. Wear it, that is. Not punch me."

"Where did you get this thing?"

"My mother gave it to me before she left. It's the Lantsov emerald. She was wearing it at my birthday dinner the night we were attacked. Curiously enough, that was not the worst birthday I've had."

"No?"

"When I was ten, my parents hired a *clown.*"

Tentatively, I reached out and picked up the ring. "Heavy," I said.

"A mere boulder, really."

"Did you tell your mother you planned to give it to a common orphan?"

"She did most of the talking," he said. "She wanted to tell me about Magnus Opjer."

"Who?"

"A Fjerdan ambassador, quite a sailor, made his money in shipping." Nikolai looked out at the cloud bank. "Also my father, apparently."

I wasn't sure whether to offer congratulations or condolences. Nikolai talked about the conditions of his birth easily enough, but I knew he felt the sting of it more deeply than he admitted.

"It's strange to actually know," he continued. "I think some part of me always hoped the rumors were just that."

"You'll still make a great king."

"Of course I will," he scoffed. "I'm melancholy, not daft." He brushed an invisible piece of lint from his sleeve. "I don't know if she'll ever forgive me for sending her into exile, especially to the Colonies."

Was it harder to lose a mother or to simply never know one? Either way, I felt for him. He'd lost his family piece by piece—first his brother, now his parents. "I'm sorry, Nikolai."

"What is there to be sorry about? I've finally gotten what I wanted. The King has stepped down, the path to the throne is clear. If there weren't an all-powerful dictator and his monstrous horde to attend to, I'd be opening a bottle of champagne."

Nikolai could be as glib as he wanted. I knew this wasn't how he'd imagined

assuming leadership of Ravka—his brother murdered, his father brought low by the sordid accusations of a servant.

"When will you take the crown?" I asked.

"Not until we've won. I'll be crowned in Os Alta or not at all. And the first step is consolidating our alliance with West Ravka."

"Hence the ring?"

"Hence the ring." He smoothed the edge of his lapel and said, "You know, you could have told me about Genya."

I felt a wash of guilt. "I was trying to protect her. Not enough people have done that."

"I don't want lies between us, Alina." Was he thinking of his father's crimes? His mother's dalliance? Still, he wasn't quite being fair.

"How many lies have you told me, *Sturmhond*?" I gestured to the Spinning Wheel. "How many secrets have you kept until you were ready to share them?"

He tucked his hands behind his back, looking distinctly uncomfortable. "Prince's prerogative?"

"If a mere prince gets a pass, so does a living Saint."

"Are you going to make a habit of winning arguments? It's very unbecoming."

"Was this an argument?"

"Obviously not. I don't lose arguments." Then he peered over the side. "Saints, is he running the ice stairs?"

I squinted through the mist. Sure enough, someone was making his way up the narrow, zigzagging steps along the cliff side, his breath pluming in the icy air. It took me only a moment to realize it was Mal, head bent, pack on his shoulders.

"Looks … bracing. If he keeps this up, I may actually have to start exerting myself." Nikolai's tone was light, but I could feel his clever hazel eyes on me. "Assuming we best the Darkling, as I'm sure we will, does Mal plan to stay on as the captain of your guard?"

I caught myself before I could rub my thumb over the scar on my palm.

"I don't know." Despite everything that had happened, I wanted to keep Mal near. That wouldn't be fair to either of us. I made myself say, "I think it might be

better if he was reassigned. He's good in combat, but he's a better tracker."

"You know he won't take a commission away from the fighting."

"Do what you think is best." The pain was like a slender knife gliding right between my ribs. I was cutting Mal out of my life, but my voice was steady. Nikolai had taught me well. I tried to hand the ring back. "I can't accept this. Not now." Maybe not ever.

"Keep it," he said, curling my fingers over the emerald. "A privateer learns to press any advantage."

"And a prince?"

"Princes get used to the word *yes*."

* * *

WHEN I GOT BACK to my room that evening, Nikolai had more surprises waiting. I hesitated, then turned on my heel and marched down the corridor to where the other girls were lodged. For a long second, I just stood there, feeling shy and foolish, then I forced myself to knock.

Nadia answered. Behind her, I saw Tamar had come to visit and was sharpening her axes by the window. Genya sat at the table, sewing gold thread around another eye patch, and Zoya was lounging on one of the beds, keeping a feather aloft with a gust from her fingertips.

"I need to show you something," I said.

"What is it?" asked Zoya, keeping her eyes on the feather.

"Just come and see."

She rolled herself off the bed with an exasperated sigh. I led them down the hallway to my room, and threw open the door.

Genya dove into the pile of gowns laid out on my bed. "Silk!" she moaned. "Velvet!"

Zoya picked up a *kefta* hanging over the back of my chair. It was gold brocade, the sleeves and hem embroidered lavishly in blue, the cuffs marked with jeweled sunbursts. "Sable," she said to me, stroking the lining. "I have never loathed you more."

"That one's mine," I said. "But the rest are up for grabs. I can't wear all of them in West Ravka."

“Did Nikolai have these made for you?” Nadia asked.

“He’s not a big believer in half measures.”

“Are you sure he wants you giving them away?”

“Lending,” I corrected. “And if he doesn’t like it, he can learn to leave more careful instructions.”

“It’s smart,” Tamar said, tossing a teal cape over her shoulders and looking at herself in the mirror. “He needs to look like a King, and you need to look like a Queen.”

“There’s something else,” I said. Again, I felt that shyness creep over me. I still didn’t quite know how to behave around the other Grisha. Were they friends? Subjects? This was new territory. But I didn’t want to be alone in my room with nothing but my thoughts and a pile of dresses for company.

I took out Nikolai’s ring and set it on the table.

“Saints,” breathed Genya. “That’s the Lantsov emerald.”

It seemed to glow in the lamplight, the tiny diamonds twinkling around it.

“Did he just give it to you? To keep?” asked Nadia.

Genya seized my arm. “Did he propose?”

“Not exactly.”

“He might as well have,” Genya said. “That ring is an heirloom. The Queen wore it everywhere, even to sleep.”

“Toss him over,” Zoya said. “Break his heart cruelly. I will gladly give our poor prince comfort, and I would make a magnificent queen.”

I laughed. “You actually might, Zoya. If you could stop being horrible for a minute.”

“With that kind of incentive, I can manage a minute. Possibly two.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s just a ring.”

Zoya sighed and held the emerald up so it flashed. “I *am* horrible,” she said abruptly. “All these people dead, and I miss pretty things.”

Genya bit her lip, then blurted, “I miss almond *kulich*. And butter, and the cherry jam the cooks used to bring back from the market in Balakirev.”

“I miss the sea,” said Tamar, “and my hammock aboard the *Volkvolny*.”

“I miss sitting by the lake at the Little Palace,” Nadia put in. “Drinking my tea, everything feeling peaceful.”

Zoya looked at her boots and said, “I miss knowing what happens next.”

“Me too,” I confessed.

Zoya set the ring down. “Will you say yes?”

“He didn’t actually propose.”

“But he will.”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

She gave a disgusted snort. “I lied. *Now* I have never loathed you more.”

“It would be something special,” said Tamar, “to have a Grisha on the throne.”

“She’s right,” added Genya. “To be the ones to rule, instead of just to serve.”

They wanted a Grisha queen. Mal wanted a commoner queen. And what did I want? Peace for Ravka. A chance to sleep easy in my bed without fear. An end to the guilt and dread that I woke to every morning. There were old wants too, to be loved for who I was, not what I could do, to lie in a meadow with a boy’s arms around me and watch the wind move the clouds. But those dreams belonged to a girl, not to the Sun Summoner, not to a Saint.

Zoya sniffed, settling a seed pearl *kokochnik* atop her hair. “I still say it should be me.”

Genya tossed a velvet slipper at her. “The day I curtsy to you is the day David performs an opera naked in the middle of the Shadow Fold.”

“Like I’d have you in my court.”

“You should be so lucky. Come here. That headpiece is completely crooked.”

I picked up the ring again, turning it over in my hand. I couldn’t quite bring myself to put it on.

Nadia bumped my shoulder with her own. “There are worse things than a prince.”

“True.”

“Better things too,” Tamar said. She shoved a cobalt lace gown at Nadia. “Try this one on.”

Nadia held it up. “Are you out of your head? The bodice might as well be cut to the navel.”

Tamar grinned. “Exactly.”

“Well, Alina can’t wear it,” said Zoya. “Even she’ll fall right out of it onto

her dessert plate."

"Diplomacy!" shouted Tamar.

Nadia collapsed into giggles. "West Ravka declares for the Sun Summoner's bosom!"

I tried to scowl, but I was laughing too hard. "I hope you're all enjoying yourselves."

Tamar hooked a scarf over Nadia's neck and drew her in for a kiss.

"Oh, for Saints' sake," complained Zoya. "Is everyone pairing up now?"

Genya snickered. "Take heart. I've seen Stigg casting mournful glances your way."

"He's Fjerdan," Zoya said. "That's the only kind of glance he has. And I can arrange my own assignations, thank you very much."

We sorted through the trunks of clothes, choosing the gowns, coats, and jewels best suited to the trip. Nikolai had been strategic, as always. Each dress was wrought in shades of blue and gold. I wouldn't have minded some variety, but this trip was about performance, not pleasure.

The girls stayed until the lamps burned low, and I was grateful for their company. But when they'd claimed the dresses they liked, and the rest of the finery had been wrapped and returned to the trunks, they said their goodnights.

I picked up the ring from the table, feeling the absurd weight of it in my palm.

Soon the *Kingfisher* would return and Nikolai and I would leave for West Ravka. By then, Mal and his team would be on their way to the Sikurzoi. That was the way it should be. I'd hated life at court, but Mal had despised it. He'd be just as miserable standing guard at banquets in Os Kervo.

If I was honest with myself, I could see that he'd flourished since we'd left the Little Palace, even underground. He had become a leader in his own right, found a new sense of purpose. I couldn't say he seemed happy, but maybe that would come in time, with peace, with a chance for a future.

We would find the firebird. We would face the Darkling. Maybe we'd even win. I would put on Nikolai's ring, and Mal would be reassigned. He would have the life he should have had, that he might have had without me. So why did that knife between my ribs keep twisting?

I lay down on my bed, starlight pouring through the window, the emerald

clutched in my hand.

Later, I could never be sure if I'd done it deliberately, or if it was an accident, my bruised heart plucking at that invisible tether. Maybe I was just too tired to resist his pull. I found myself in a blurry room, staring at the Darkling.

CHAPTER 9

HE WAS SITTING on the edge of a table, his shirt crumpled into a ball at his knee, his arms raised above his head as the vague shape of a Corporalnik Healer came in and out of focus, tending to a bloody gash in the Darkling's side. I thought at first we might be in the infirmary at the Little Palace, but the space was too dark and blurry for me to tell.

I tried not to notice the way he looked—his mussed hair, the shadowed ridges of his bare chest. He seemed so human, just a boy wounded in battle, or maybe sparring. *Not a boy*, I reminded myself, *a monster who has lived hundreds of years and taken hundreds of lives.*

His jaw tensed as the Corporalnik finished her work. When the skin had knitted together, the Darkling dismissed her with a wave. She hovered briefly, then slipped away, fading into nothing.

"There's something I've been wondering," he said. No greeting, no preamble.

I waited.

"The night that Baghra told you what I intended, the night you fled the Little Palace, did you hesitate?"

"Yes."

"In the days after you left, did you ever think of coming back?"

"I did," I admitted.

"But you chose not to."

I knew I should go. I should at least have stayed silent, but I was so weary, and it felt so easy to be here with him. "It wasn't just what Baghra said that night. You lied to me. You deceived me. You … drew me in." Seduced me,

made me want you, made me question my own heart.

"I needed your loyalty, Alina. I needed you bound to me by more than duty or fear." His fingers tested the flesh where his wound had been. Only a mild redness remained. "There are rumors that your Lantsov prince has been sighted."

I drifted nearer, trying to keep my voice casual. "Where?"

He glanced up, his lips curling in a slight smile. "Do you like him?"

"Does it matter?"

"It's harder when you like them. You mourn them more." How many had he mourned? Had there been friends? A wife? Had he ever let anyone get that close?

"Tell me, Alina," said the Darkling. "Has he claimed you yet?"

"*Claimed me?* Like a peninsula?"

"No blushes. No averted eyes. How you've changed. What about your faithful tracker? Will he sleep curled at the foot of your throne?"

He was pressing, trying to provoke me. Instead of shying away, I moved closer. "You came to me wearing Mal's face that night in your chambers. Was it because you knew I would turn you away?"

His fingers tightened on the table's edge, but then he shrugged. "He was the one you longed for. Do you still?"

"No."

"An apt pupil, but a terrible liar."

"Why do you have such disdain for *otkazat'sya*?"

"Not disdain. Understanding."

"They're not all fools and weaklings."

"What they are is predictable," he said. "The people would love you for a time. But what would they think when their good king aged and died, while his witch of a wife remained young? When all those who remember your sacrifices are dust in the ground, how long do you think it will take for their children or their grandchildren to turn on you?"

His words sent a chill through me. I still couldn't get my head around the idea of the long life that lay ahead of me, that yawning abyss of eternity.

"You never considered it, did you?" said the Darkling. "You live in a single moment. I live in a thousand." *Are we not all things?*

In a flash, his hand snaked out and seized my wrist. The room came into sudden focus. He yanked me close, wedging me between his knees. His other hand pressed to the small of my back, his strong fingers splayed over the curve of my spine.

“You were meant to be my balance, Alina. You are the only person in the world who might rule with me, who might keep my power in check.”

“And who will balance me?” The words emerged before I thought better of them, giving raw voice to a thought that haunted me even more than the possibility that the firebird didn’t exist. “What if I’m no better than you? What if instead of stopping you, I’m just another avalanche?”

He studied me for a long moment. He had always watched me this way, as if I were an equation that didn’t quite tally.

“I want you to know my name,” he said. “The name I was given, not the title I took for myself. Will you have it, Alina?”

I could feel the weight of Nikolai’s ring in my palm back at the Spinning Wheel. I didn’t have to stand here in the Darkling’s arms. I could vanish from his grip, slide back into consciousness and the safety of a stone room hidden in a mountaintop. But I didn’t want to go. Despite everything, I wanted this whispered confidence.

“Yes,” I breathed.

After a long moment, he said, “Aleksander.”

A little laugh escaped me. He arched a brow, a smile tugging at his lips. “What?”

“It’s just so … common.” Such an ordinary name, held by kings and peasants alike. I’d known two Aleksanders at Keramzin alone, three in the First Army. One of them had died on the Fold.

His smile deepened and he cocked his head to the side. It almost hurt to see him this way. “Will you say it?” he asked.

I hesitated, feeling danger crowd in on me.

“Aleksander,” I whispered.

His grin faded, and his gray eyes seemed to flicker.

“Again,” he said.

“Aleksander.”

He leaned in. I felt his breath against my neck, then the press of his mouth against my skin just above the collar, almost a sigh.

“Don’t,” I said. I drew back, but he held me tighter. His hand went to the nape of my neck, long fingers twining in my hair, easing my head back. I closed my eyes.

“Let me,” he murmured against my throat. His heel hooked around my leg, bringing me closer. I felt the heat of his tongue, the flex of hard muscle beneath bare skin as he guided my hands around his waist. “It isn’t real,” he said. “Let me.”

I felt that rush of hunger, the steady, longing beat of desire that neither of us wanted, but that gripped us anyway. We were alone in the world, unique. We were bound together and always would be.

And it didn’t matter.

I couldn’t forget what he’d done, and I wouldn’t forgive what he was: a murderer. A monster. A man who had tortured my friends and slaughtered the people I’d tried to protect.

I shoved away from him. “It’s real enough.”

His eyes narrowed. “I grow weary of this game, Alina.”

I was surprised at the anger that surged to life in me. “Weary? You’ve toyed with me at every turn. You haven’t tired of the game. You’re just sorry I’m not so easily played.”

“Clever Alina,” he bit out. “The apt pupil. I’m glad you came tonight. I want to share my news.” He yanked his bloody shirt on over his head. “I’m going to enter the Fold.”

“Go ahead,” I said. “The volcra deserve another piece of you.”

“They will not have it.”

“You hope to find their appetites changed? Or is this just more madness?”

“I am not mad. Ask David what secrets he left for me to discover at the palace.”

I stilled.

“Another clever one,” said the Darkling. “I’ll be taking him back too, when this is all over. Such an able mind.”

“You’re bluffing,” I said.

The Darkling smiled, but this time the turn of his lips was cold. He shoved off the table and stalked toward me.

"I will enter the Fold, Alina, and I will show West Ravka what I can do, even without the Sun Summoner. And when I have crushed Lantsov's only ally, I will hunt you like an animal. You will find no sanctuary. You will have no peace." He loomed over me, his gray eyes glinting. "Fly back home to your *otkazat'sya*," he snarled. "Hold him tight. The rules of this game are about to change."

The Darkling raised his hand, and the Cut tore through me. I shattered, and gusted back into my body with an icy jolt.

I clutched at my torso, heart hammering in my chest, still feeling the slice of shadow through it, but I was whole and unmarked. I stumbled out of bed, trying to find the lantern, then gave up and fumbled around until I found my coat and boots.

Tamar was standing guard outside my room.

"Where is David lodged?" I asked.

"Just down the corridor with Adrik and Harshaw."

"Are Mal and Tolya sleeping?"

She nodded.

"Wake them up."

She slipped into the guards' room, and Mal and Tolya were outside with us seconds later, awake instantly in the way of soldiers, and already pulling on their boots. Mal had his pistol.

"You won't need that," I said. "At least, I don't think you will."

I considered sending someone to get Nikolai, but I wanted to know what we were dealing with first.

We strode down the hall, and when we got to David's room, Tamar rapped once at the door before pushing in.

Apparently, Adrik and Harshaw had been evicted for the night. A very bleary Genya and David blinked up at us from beneath the covers of a single narrow cot.

I pointed at David. "Get dressed," I said. "You have two minutes."

"What's—" Genya began.

"Just do it."

We slipped back out the door to wait.

Mal gave a little cough. “Can’t say I’m surprised.”

Tamar snorted. “After his little speech in the war room, even I considered pouncing on him.”

Moments later, the door cracked open and a disheveled, barefoot David ushered us in. Genya was seated cross-legged on the cot, her red curls going every which way.

“What is it?” said David. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ve received information that the Darkling intends to use the Fold against West Ravka.”

“Did Nikolai—” Tamar began.

I held up a hand. “I need to know if it’s possible.”

David shook his head. “He can’t without you. He needs to enter the Unsea to expand it.”

“He claims he can. He claims you left secrets at the Little Palace.”

“Wait a minute,” said Genya. “Where is this information coming from?”

“Sources,” I said curtly. “David, what did he mean?” I didn’t want to believe David would betray us, at least not deliberately.

David frowned. “When we fled Os Alta, I left my old notebooks behind, but they’re hardly dangerous.”

“What was in them?” asked Tamar.

“All kinds of things,” he said, his nimble fingers pleating and unpleating the fabric of his trousers. “The designs for the mirrored dishes, a lens to filter different waves of the spectrum, nothing he could use to enter the Fold. But…” He paled slightly.

“What else?”

“It was just an idea—”

“*What else?*”

“There was a plan for a glass skiff that Nikolai and I came up with.”

I frowned and glanced at Mal, then at the others. They all looked as puzzled as I did. “Why would he want a glass skiff?”

“The frame is made to hold *lumiya*.”

I made an impatient gesture. “What’s *lumiya*?”

“A variation on liquid fire.”

Saints. “Oh, David. You didn’t.” Liquid fire was one of Morozova’s creations. It was sticky, flammable, and created a blaze that was almost impossible to extinguish. It was so dangerous that Morozova had destroyed the formula only hours after he’d created it.

“No!” David held his hands up defensively. “No, no. This is better, safer. The reaction only creates light, not heat. I came up with it when we were trying to find ways to improve the flash bombs for fighting the *nichevo’ya*. It wasn’t applicable, but I liked the idea so I kept it for … for later.” He shrugged helplessly.

“It burns without heat?”

“It’s just a source of artificial sunlight.”

“Enough to keep the volcra at bay?”

“Yes, but it’s useless to the Darkling. It has a limited burn life, and you need sunlight to activate it.”

“How much?”

“Very little, that was the point. It was just another way of magnifying your power, like the dishes. But there isn’t *any* light in the Fold, so—”

I held out my hands and shadows spilled over the walls.

Genya cried out, and David shrank back against the bed. Tolya and Tamar reached for their weapons.

I dropped my arms, and the shadows returned to their ordinary forms. Everyone gaped at me.

“You have his power?” whispered Genya.

“No. Just a scrap of it.” Mal thought I’d taken it from the Darkling. Maybe the Darkling had taken something from me too.

“That’s how you made the shadows jump when we were in the Kettle,” said Tolya.

I nodded.

Tamar jabbed a finger at Mal. “You lied to us.”

“I kept her secrets,” Mal said. “You would have done the same.”

She crossed her arms. Tolya laid a big hand on her shoulder. They all looked upset, but not as scared as they might have.

“You see what this means,” I said. “If the Darkling has even a remnant of my power—”

“Would it be enough to hold off the volcra?” asked Genya.

“No,” I said. “I don’t think so.” I’d needed an amplifier before I was able to command enough light to safely enter the Fold. Of course, there was no guarantee that the Darkling hadn’t taken more of my power when we’d faced each other in the chapel. And yet, if he’d been able to truly wield light, he would have acted before this.

“It doesn’t matter,” said David miserably. “He only needs enough sunlight to activate the *lumiya* once he’s in the Fold.”

“Plenty of light for protection,” said Mal. “A well-armed skiff of Grisha and soldiers…”

Tamar shook her head. “Even for the Darkling, that seems risky.”

But Tolya answered her with my own thoughts. “You’re forgetting the *nichevo’ya*.”

“Shadow soldiers fighting volcra?” Genya said in horror.

“Saints,” swore Tamar. “Who do you root for?”

“The problem was always containment,” said David. “*Lumiya* eats through everything. The only thing that worked was glass, but that presents its own engineering problems. Nikolai and I never resolved them. It was just … just for fun.”

If the Darkling hadn’t solved those problems already, he would.

You will find no sanctuary. You will have no peace.

I put my head in my hands. “He’s going to break West Ravka.”

And after that, no country would dare to stand with me or Nikolai.

CHAPTER 10

A HALF HOUR LATER, we were seated at the end of a table in the galley, empty glasses of tea in front of us. Genya had made herself scarce, but David was there, his head bent over a pile of drafting paper as he tried to re-create the plans for the glass skiff and the formula for *lumiya* from memory. For better or worse, I didn't believe he'd aided the Darkling intentionally. David's crime was hunger for knowledge, not power.

The rest of the Spinning Wheel was empty and silent, most of the soldiers and rogue Grisha still asleep. Despite being hauled out of bed in the middle of the night, Nikolai managed to look put together, even with his olive drab coat thrown over his nightshirt and trousers. It hadn't taken long to update him on all I had learned, and I wasn't surprised by the first question out of his mouth.

"How long have you known this?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"An hour, maybe less. I only waited to confirm the information with David."

"That's impossible—"

"Improbable," I corrected gently. "Nikolai…" My gut clenched. I glanced at Mal. I hadn't forgotten the way he'd reacted when I'd finally told him I was seeing visions of the Darkling. And this was far worse, because I'd gone looking for him. "I heard it from the Darkling's lips himself. He told me."

"Beg your pardon?"

"I can visit him, like a kind of vision. I … I sought him out."

There was a long beat. "You can spy on him?"

"Not exactly." I tried to explain the way the rooms appeared to me, how he appeared. "I can't hear other people or really even see them if they aren't

immediately next to him or in contact with him. It's as if he's the only real, material thing."

Nikolai's fingers were drumming on the tabletop. "But we could try to probe for information," he said, his voice excited, "maybe even feed him false intelligence." I blinked. That quickly, Nikolai was strategizing. I should have been used to it by now. "Can you do this with other Grisha? Maybe try to get in their heads?"

"I don't think so. The Darkling and I are … connected. We probably always will be."

"I have to warn West Ravka," he said. "They'll need to evacuate the area along the shore of the Fold." Nikolai rubbed a hand over his face. It was the first crack I'd seen in his confidence.

"They won't keep to the alliance, will they?" Mal asked.

"I doubt it. The blockade was a gesture West Ravka was willing to make when they thought they were safe from reprisal."

"If they capitulate," said Tamar, "will the Darkling still march?"

"This isn't just about the blockade," I said. "It's about isolating us, making sure we don't have anywhere to turn. And it's about power. He wants to use the Fold. He always has." I restrained the urge to touch my bare wrist. "It's a compulsion."

"What kind of numbers can you raise?" Mal asked Nikolai.

"All told? We could probably rally a force of roughly five thousand. They're spread throughout cells in the northwest, so the problem is mobilizing, but I think it can be done. We also have reason to suspect some of the militias may be loyal to us. There have been massive desertions from the base at Poliznaya and the northern and southern fronts."

"What about the Soldat Sol?" asked Tolya. "They'll fight. I know they would lay down their lives for Alina. They've done it before." I rubbed my arms, thinking of more lives lost, of Ruby's fiercely cheerful face marked by the sunburst tattoo.

Nikolai frowned. "But can we rely on the Apparat?" The priest had been instrumental in the coup that had almost brought down Nikolai's father, and unlike Genya, he hadn't been a vulnerable servant victimized by the King. He'd

been a trusted adviser. “What exactly does he want?”

“I think he wants to survive,” I said. “I doubt he’ll risk a head-on confrontation with the Darkling unless he’s sure of the outcome.”

“We could use the additional numbers,” Nikolai admitted.

A dull ache was forming near my right temple. “I don’t like this,” I said. “Any of it. You’re talking about throwing a lot of bodies at the *nichevo’ya*. The casualties will be unheard of.”

“You know I’ll be right out there with them,” said Nikolai.

“All that means is that I can add your number to the dead.”

“If the Darkling uses the Fold to sever us from any possible allies, then Ravka is his. He’ll only get stronger, consolidate his forces. I won’t just give up.”

“You saw what those monsters did at the Little Palace—”

“You said it yourself—he won’t stop. He needs to use his power, and the more he uses it, the more he’ll crave. This may be our last opportunity to bring him down. Besides, rumor has it Oretsev here is quite the tracker. If he finds the firebird, we may just stand a chance.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

Nikolai shrugged. “We put on our best clothes and die like heroes.”

* * *

DAWN WAS BREAKING by the time we finished hashing out the specifics of what we intended to do next. The *Kingfisher* had returned, and Nikolai sent it right back out again with a refreshed crew and a warning addressed to West Ravka’s merchant council that the Darkling might be planning an attack.

They also carried an invitation to meet with him and the Sun Summoner in neutral Kerch. It was too dangerous for Nikolai and me to risk getting caught in what might soon be enemy territory. The *Pelican* was back in the hangar and would soon depart for Keramzin without us. I wasn’t sure if I was sorry or relieved that I wouldn’t be able to travel with them to the orphanage, but there just wasn’t time for a detour. Mal and his team would leave for the Sikurzoi tomorrow aboard the *Bittern*, and I would meet up with them a week later. We would keep to our plan and hope the Darkling didn’t act before then.

There was more to discuss, but Nikolai had letters to write, and I needed to

talk to Baghra. The time for lessons was over.

I found her in her darkened lair, the fire already stoked, the room unbearably warm. Misha had just brought in her breakfast tray. I waited as she ate her buckwheat kasha and sipped bitter black tea. When she was done, Misha opened the book to begin his reading, but Baghra silenced him quickly.

“Take the tray up,” she said. “The little Saint has something on her mind. If we make her wait any longer, she may jump out of her seat and shake me.”

Horrible woman. Did nothing escape her?

Misha lifted the tray. Then he hesitated, shifting from one foot to the other. “Do I have to come right back down?”

“Stop wriggling like a grub,” Baghra snapped, and Misha froze. She gave a wave. “Go on, you useless thing, but don’t be late with my lunch.”

He raced out the door, dishes rattling, and kicked it shut behind him.

“This is your fault,” Baghra complained. “He can never be still anymore.”

“He’s a little boy. It’s not something they’re known for.” I made a mental note to have someone continue Misha’s fencing lessons while we were gone.

Baghra scowled and leaned closer to the fire, pulling her furs close around her. “Well,” she said, “we’re alone. What is it you want to know? Or would you rather sit there biting your tongue for another hour?”

I wasn’t sure how to proceed. “Baghra—”

“Either spit it out or let me take a nap.”

“The Darkling may have found a way to enter the Fold without me. He’ll be able to use it as a weapon. If there’s anything you can tell us, we need information.”

“Always the same question.”

“When I asked you if Morozova could have left the amplifiers unfinished, you said it wasn’t his way. Did you know him?”

“We’re done here, girl,” she said, turning back to the fire. “You’ve wasted your morning.”

“You told me once that you hoped for redemption for your son. This may be my last chance to stop him.”

“Ah, so you hope to save my son now? How forgiving of you.”

I took a deep breath.

“Aleksander,” I whispered. She stilled. “His true name is Aleksander. And if he takes this step, he’ll be lost forever. We may all be.”

“That name…” Baghra leaned back in her chair. “Only he could have told you. When?”

I’d never spoken of the visions to Baghra, and I didn’t think I wanted to now. Instead, I repeated my question. “Baghra, did you know Morozova?”

She was quiet for a long time, the only sound the crackle of the fire. Finally, she said, “As well as anyone did.”

Though I’d suspected as much, the fact was hard to believe. I’d seen Morozova’s writings, I wore his amplifiers, but he had never seemed real. He was a Saint with a gilded halo, more legend than man to me.

“There’s a bottle of *kvas* on a shelf in the corner,” she said, “out of Misha’s reach. Bring it and a glass.”

It was early for *kvas,* but I wasn’t going to argue. I brought down the bottle and poured for her.

She took a long sip and smacked her lips together. “The new King doesn’t stint, does he?” She sighed and settled back. “All right, little Saint, since you want to know about Morozova and his precious amplifiers, I’ll tell you a story—one I used to tell a little boy with dark hair, a silent boy who rarely laughed, who listened more closely than I realized. A boy who had a name and not a title.”

In the firelight, the shadowy pools of her eyes seemed to flicker and shift.

“Morozova was the Bonesmith, one of the greatest Fabrikators who ever lived, and a man who tested the very boundaries of Grisha power, but he was also just a man with a wife. She was *otkazat’sya*, and though she loved him, she did not understand him.”

I thought of the way the Darkling talked about *otkazat’sya*, the predictions he’d made about Mal and the way I’d be treated by Ravka’s people. Had he learned those lessons from Baghra?

“I should tell you that he loved her too,” she continued. “At least, I think he did. But it was never enough to make him stop his work. It couldn’t temper the need that drove him. This is the curse of Grisha power. You know the way of it, little Saint.

“They spent over a year hunting the stag in Tsibeya, two years sailing the

Bone Road in search of the sea whip. Great successes for the Bonesmith. The first two phases of his grand scheme. But when his wife became pregnant, they settled in a small town, a place where he could continue his experiments and hatch his plans for which creature would become the third amplifier.

"They had little money. When he could be pulled away from his studies, he made his living as a woodworker, and the villagers occasionally came to him with wounds and ailments—"

"He was a Healer?" I asked. "I thought he was a Fabrikator."

"Morozova did not draw those distinctions. Few Grisha did in those days. He believed if the science was small enough, anything was possible. And for him, it often was." *Are we not all things?*

"The townspeople viewed Morozova and his family with a combination of pity and distrust. His wife wore rags, and his child … his child was rarely seen. Her mother kept her to the house and the fields around it. You see, this little girl had started to show her power early, and it was like nothing ever known." Baghra took another sip of *kvas*. "She could summon darkness."

The words hung in the heated air, their meaning settling over me. "You?" I breathed. "Then the Darkling—"

"I am Morozova's daughter, and the Darkling is the last of Morozova's line." She emptied her glass. "My mother was terrified of me. She was sure that my power was some kind of abomination, the result of my father's experiments. And she may well have been right. To dabble in *merzost*, well, the results are never quite what one would hope. She hated to hold me, could hardly bear to be in the same room with me. It was only when her second child was born that she came back to herself at all. Another little girl, this one normal like her, powerless and pretty. How my mother doted on her!"

Years had passed, hundreds, maybe a thousand. But I recognized the hurt in her voice, the sting of always feeling underfoot and unwanted.

"My father was readying to leave to hunt the firebird. I was just a little girl, but I begged him to take me along. I tried to make myself useful, but all I did was annoy him, and eventually he banned me from his workshop."

She tapped the table, and I filled her glass once more.

"And then one day, Morozova had to leave his workbench. He was drawn to

the pasture behind his home by the sound of my mother's screams. I had been playing dolls and my sister had whined and howled and stamped her little feet until my mother insisted that I give over my favorite toy, a wooden swan carved by our father in one of the rare moments that he'd paid me any attention. It had wings so detailed they felt nearly downy and perfect webbed feet that kept it balanced in water. My sister had it in her hand less than a minute before she snapped its slender neck. Remember, if you can, that I was just a child, a lonely child, with so few treasures of my own." She lifted her glass but did not drink. "I lashed out at my sister. With the Cut. I tore her in two."

I tried not to picture it, but the image rose up sharp in my mind, a muddy field, a dark-haired little girl, her favorite toy in pieces. She'd thrown a tantrum, as children do. But she'd been no ordinary child.

"What happened?" I finally whispered.

"The villagers came running. They held my mother back so that she could not get at me. They couldn't make sense of what she was saying. How could a little girl have done such a thing? The priest was already praying over my sister's body when my father arrived. Without a word, Morozova knelt down beside her and began to work. The townspeople didn't understand what was happening, but they sensed power gathering."

"Did he save her?"

"Yes," said Baghra simply. "He was a great Healer, and he used every bit of his skill to bring her back—weak, wheezing, and scarred, but alive."

I'd read countless versions of Sankt Ilya's martyrdom. The details of the story had been distorted over time: He'd healed his child, not a stranger's. A girl, not a boy. But I suspected one thing that hadn't changed was the ending, and I shivered at the thought of what came next.

"It was too much," Baghra said. "The villagers knew what death looked like—that child should have died. And maybe they were resentful too. How many loved ones had they lost to illness or injury since Morozova had come to their town? How many could he have saved? Maybe it was not just horror or righteousness that drove them, but anger as well. They put him in chains—and my sister, a child who should have had the sense to stay dead. There was no one to defend my father, no one to speak on my sister's behalf. We had lived on the

outskirts of their lives and made no friends. They marched him to the river. My sister had to be carried. She had only just learned to walk and couldn't manage it with the chains."

I clenched my fists in my lap. I didn't want to hear the rest.

"As my mother wailed and pleaded, as I cried and fought to get free from some barely known neighbor's arms, they shoved Morozova and his youngest daughter off the bridge, and we watched them disappear beneath the water, dragged under by the weight of their iron chains." Baghra emptied her glass and turned it over on the table. "I never saw my father or my sister again."

We sat in silence as I tried to piece together the implications of what she'd said. I saw no tears on Baghra's cheeks. *Her grief is old*, I reminded myself. And yet I didn't think pain like that ever faded entirely. Grief had its own life, took its own sustenance.

"Baghra," I said, pushing on, ruthless in my own way, "if Morozova died—"

"I never said he died. That was the last I ever saw of him. But he was a Grisha of immense power. He might well have survived the fall."

"In chains?"

"He was the greatest Fabrikator who ever lived. It would take more than *otkazat'sya* steel to hold him."

"And you believe he went on to create the third amplifier?"

"His work was his life," she said, and the bitterness of that neglected child edged her words. "If he'd had breath in his body, he would not have stopped searching for the firebird. Would you?"

"No," I admitted. The firebird had become my own obsession, a thread of compulsion that linked me to Morozova across centuries. Could he have survived? Baghra seemed so certain that he had. And what about her sister? If Morozova had managed to save himself, might he have rescued his child from the grasp of the river and used his skill to revive her once more? The thought shook me. I wanted to clutch it tightly, turn it over in my hands, but there was still more I needed to know. "What did the villagers do to you?"

Her rasping chuckle snaked through the room, lifting the hair on my arms. "If they'd been wise, they would have thrown me in the river too. Instead they drove my mother and me out of town and left us to the mercy of the woods. My mother

was useless. She tore at her hair and wept until she made herself sick. Finally, she just lay down and wouldn't get up, no matter how I cried and called her name. I stayed with her as long as I could. I tried to make a fire to keep her warm, but I didn't know how." She shrugged. "I was so hungry. Eventually, I left her and wandered, delirious and filthy, until I came to a farm. They took me in and put together a search party, but I couldn't find the way back to her. For all I know, she starved to death on the forest floor."

I stayed quiet, waiting. That *kvas* was beginning to look very good.

"Ravka was different then. Grisha had no sanctuary. Power like ours ended in fates like my father's. I kept mine hidden. I followed tales of witches and Saints and found the secret enclaves where Grisha studied their science. I learned everything I could. And when the time came, I taught my son."

"But what about his father?"

Baghra gave another harsh laugh. "You want a love story too? There's none to be had. I wanted a child, so I sought out the most powerful Grisha I could find. He was a Heartrender. I don't even remember his name."

For a brief moment, I glimpsed the ferocious girl she had been, fearless and wild, a Grisha of extraordinary ability. Then she sighed and shifted in her chair, and the illusion was gone, replaced by a tired old woman huddling by a fire.

"My son was not … He began so well. We moved from place to place, we saw the way our people lived, the way they were mistrusted, the lives they were forced to eke out in secrecy and fear. He vowed that we would someday have a safe place, that Grisha power would be something to be valued and coveted, something our country would treasure. We would be Ravkans, not just Grisha. That dream was the seed of the Second Army. A good dream. If I'd known…"

She shook her head. "I gave him his pride. I burdened him with ambition, but the worst thing I did was try to protect him. You must understand, even our own kind shunned us, feared the strangeness of our power."

There are no others like us.

"I never wanted him to feel the way I had as a child," said Baghra. "So I taught him that he had no equal, that he was destined to bow to no man. I wanted him to be hard, to be strong. I taught him the lesson my mother and father taught me: to rely on no one. That love—fragile and fickle and raw—was nothing

compared to power. He was a brilliant boy. He learned too well."

Baghra's hand shot out. With surprising accuracy, she seized my wrist. "Put your hunger aside, Alina. Do what Morozova and my son could not and *give this up*."

My cheeks were wet with tears. I hurt for her. I hurt for her son. But even so, I knew what my answer would be.

"I can't."

"*What is infinite?*" she recited.

I knew that text well. "*The universe and the greed of men*," I quoted back to her.

"You may not be able to survive the sacrifice that *merzost* requires. You've tasted that power once, and it almost killed you."

"I have to try."

Baghra shook her head. "Stupid girl," she said, but her voice was sad, as if she were chastising another girl, from long ago, lost and unwanted, driven by pain and fear.

"The journals—"

"Years later, I returned to the village of my birth. I wasn't sure what I would find. My father's workshop was long gone, but his journals were there, tucked away in the same hidden niche in the old cellar." She released a disbelieving snort. "They'd built a church over it."

I hesitated, then said, "If Morozova survived, what became of him?"

"He probably took his own life. It's the way most Grisha of great power die."

I sat back, stunned. "Why?"

"Do you think I never contemplated it? That my son didn't? Lovers age. Children die. Kingdoms rise and fall, and we go on. Maybe Morozova is still wandering the earth, older and more bitter than I am. Or maybe he used his power on himself and ended it all. It's simple enough. Like calls to like. Otherwise…" She chuckled again, that dry, rattling laugh. "You should warn your prince. If he really thinks a bullet will stop a Grisha with three amplifiers, he is much mistaken."

I shuddered. Would I have the courage to take my own life if it came down to that? If I brought the amplifiers together, I might destroy the Fold, but I might

well make something worse in its place. And when I faced the Darkling, even if I dared to use *merzost* to create an army of light, would it be enough to end him?

"Baghra," I asked cautiously, "what would it take to kill a Grisha with that kind of power?"

Baghra tapped the bare skin of my wrist, the naked spot where the third amplifier might rest in a matter of days. "Little Saint," she whispered. "Little martyr. I expect we'll find out."

* * *

I SPENT THE REST of the afternoon wording a plea for aid to the Apparat. The missive would be left beneath the altar at the Church of Sankt Lukin in Vernost and, hopefully, would make its way to the White Cathedral through the network of the faithful. We'd used a code that Tolya and Tamar knew from their time with the Soldat Sol, so if the message fell into the Darkling's hands, he wouldn't realize that in just over two weeks' time, Mal and I would be waiting for the Apparat's forces in Caryeva. The racing city was all but abandoned after the summer, and it was close to the southern border. Either we would have the firebird or we wouldn't, but we'd be able to march whatever forces we had north under the cover of the Fold and meet with Nikolai's troops south of Kribirsk.

I had two very different sets of luggage. One was nothing but a simple soldier's pack that would be put aboard the *Bittern*. It was stocked with roughspun trousers, an olive drab coat treated to resist the rain, heavy boots, a small reserve of coin for any bribes or purchases I might need to make in Dva Stolba, a fur hat, and a scarf to cover Morozova's collar. The other set was stowed on the *Kingfisher*—a collection of three matching trunks emblazoned with my golden sunburst and stuffed with silks and furs.

When evening came, I descended to the boiler level to say my goodbyes to Baghra and Misha. After her dire warning, I was hardly surprised that Baghra waved me off with a scowl. But I'd really come to see Misha. I reassured him that I had found someone to continue his lessons while we were gone, and I gifted him with one of the golden sunburst pins worn by my personal guard. Mal wouldn't be able to wear it in the south, and the delight on Misha's face was worth all of Baghra's sneering.

I took my time wending my way back through the dark passages. It was quiet down here, and I'd barely had a moment to think since Baghra had told me her story. I knew she'd intended it as a cautionary tale, and yet my thoughts kept returning to the little girl who'd been thrown into the river with Ilya Morozova. Baghra thought she'd died. She'd dismissed her sister as *otkazat'sya*—but what if she simply hadn't shown her power yet? She was Morozova's child too. What if her gift was unique, like Baghra's? If she had survived, her father might have taken her with him in pursuit of the firebird. She might have lived near the Sikurzoi, her power passed down from generation to generation, over hundreds of years. It might have finally shown itself in me.

It was presumption, I knew. Terrible arrogance. And yet, if we found the firebird near Dva Stolba, so close to the place of my birth, could it really be coincidence?

I stopped short. If I was related to Morozova, that meant I was related to the Darkling. And that meant I'd almost … the thought made my skin crawl. No matter how many years and generations might have passed, I still felt like I needed a scalding bath.

My thoughts were interrupted by Nikolai striding down the hall toward me.

"There's something you should see," he said.

"Is everything all right?"

"Rather spectacular, actually." He peered at me. "What did the hag do to you? You look like you ate a particularly slimy bug."

Or possibly exchanged kisses and a bit more than that with my cousin. I shuddered.

Nikolai offered me his arm. "Well, whatever it is, you'll have to cringe about it later. There's a miracle upstairs, and it won't wait."

I looped my arm through his. "Never one to oversell it, are you, Lantsov?"

"It's not overselling if you deliver."

We'd just started up the stairs when Mal came bounding down in the opposite direction. He was beaming, his face alight with excitement. That smile was like a bomb going off in my chest. It belonged to a Mal I'd thought had disappeared beneath the scars of this war.

He caught sight of me and Nikolai, arms entwined. It took the briefest second

for his face to shutter. He bowed and stepped aside for us to pass.

"Headed the wrong way," said Nikolai. "You're going to miss it."

"Be up in a minute," Mal replied. His voice sounded so normal, so pleasant, I almost believed I'd imagined that smile.

Still, it took everything in me to keep climbing those stairs, to keep my hand on Nikolai's arm. *Despise your heart*, I told myself. Do what needs to be done.

When we reached the top of the stairs and entered the Spinning Wheel, my jaw dropped. The lanterns had been extinguished so that the room was dark, but all around us, stars were falling. The windows were lit with streaks of light cascading over the mountaintop, like bright fish in a river.

"Meteor shower," said Nikolai as he led me carefully through the room. People had laid blankets and pillows on the heated floor and were sitting in clusters or lying on their backs, watching the night sky.

All at once, the pain in my chest was so bad it nearly bent me double. Because this was what Mal had been coming to show me. Because that look—that open, eager, happy look—had been for me. Because I would always be the first person he turned to when he saw something lovely, and I would do the same. Whether I was a Saint or a queen or the most powerful Grisha who ever lived, I would always turn to him.

"Beautiful," I managed.

"I told you I had a lot of money."

"So you arrange celestial events now?"

"As a sideline."

We stood at the center of the room, gazing up at the glass dome.

"I could promise to make you forget him," Nikolai offered.

"I'm not sure that's possible."

"You do realize you're playing havoc with my pride."

"Your confidence seems perfectly intact."

"Think about it," he said, leading me through the crowd to a quiet nook near the western terrace. "I'm used to being the center of attention wherever I go. I've been told I could charm the shoes off a racehorse midstride, and yet you seem impervious."

I laughed. "You know damn well I like you, Nikolai."

“Such a tepid sentiment.”

“I don’t hear you making declarations of love.”

“Would they help?”

“No.”

“Flattery? Flowers? A hundred head of cattle?”

I gave him a shove. “No.”

Even now I knew that bringing me up here was less a romantic gesture than it was a display. The mess hall was deserted, and we had this little pocket of the Spinning Wheel to ourselves, but he’d made sure we’d taken the long way through the crowd. He’d wanted us to be seen together: the future King and Queen of Ravka.

Nikolai cleared his throat. “Alina, on the very slim chance that we survive the next few weeks, I’m going to ask you to be my wife.”

My mouth went dry. I’d known this was where we were headed, but it was still strange to hear him say those words.

“Even if Mal wants to stay on,” Nikolai continued, “I’m going to have him reassigned.”

Say goodnight. Tell me to leave, Alina.

“I understand,” I said quietly.

“Do you? I know I said that we could have a marriage in name only, but if we … if we had a child, I wouldn’t want him to have to endure the rumors and the jokes.” He clasped his hands behind his back. “One royal bastard is enough.”

Children. With Nikolai.

“You don’t have to do this, you know,” I said. I wasn’t sure if I was talking to him or myself. “I could lead the Second Army, and you could have pretty much any girl you want.”

“A Shu princess? A Kerch banker’s daughter?”

“Or a Ravkan heiress or a Grisha like Zoya.”

“Zoya? I make it a policy never to seduce anyone prettier than I am.”

I laughed. “I think that was an insult.”

“Alina, *this* is the alliance I want: the First and Second Armies brought together. As for the rest, I’ve always known that whatever marriage I made would be political. It would be about power, not love. But we might get lucky. In

time, we might have both."

"Or the third amplifier will turn me into a power-mad dictator and you'll have to kill me."

"Yes, that would make for an awkward honeymoon." He took my hand, circling my bare wrist with his fingers. I tensed, and realized I was waiting for the rush of surety that came with the Darkling's touch, or a jolt like the one I'd felt that night at the Little Palace when Mal and I had argued by the *banya*. Nothing happened. Nikolai's skin was warm, his grip gentle. I'd wondered if I would ever feel something so simple again or if the power in me would just keep jumping and crackling, seeking connection the way lightning seeks high ground.

"Collar," Nikolai said. "Fetters. I won't have to spend much on jewelry."

"I have expensive taste in tiaras."

"But only one head."

"Thus far." I glanced down at my wrist. "I should warn you, based on the conversation I had today with Baghra, if things do go wrong with the amplifiers, getting rid of me may require more than your usual firepower."

"Like what?"

"Possibly another Sun Summoner." *It's simple enough. Like calls to like.*

"I'm sure there's a spare around somewhere."

I couldn't help but smile.

"See?" he said. "If we're not dead in a month, we might be very happy together."

"Stop that," I said, still grinning.

"What?"

"Saying the right thing."

"I'll try to wean myself of the habit." His smile faltered. He reached out and brushed the hair back from my face. I froze. He rested his hand in the space where the collar met the curve of my neck, and when I didn't bolt, he slid his palm up to cup my cheek.

I wasn't sure I wanted this. "You said … you said you wouldn't kiss me until __"

"Until you were thinking of me instead of trying to forget him?" He moved closer, the light from the meteor shower playing over his features. He leaned in,

giving me time to pull away. I could feel his breath when he said, “I love it when you quote me.”

He brushed his lips over mine once, briefly, then again. It was less a kiss than the promise of one.

“When you’re ready,” he said. Then he tucked my hand in his and we stood together, watching the spill of stars streaking the sky.

We might be happy in time. People fell in love every day. Genya and David. Tamar and Nadia. But were they happy? Would they stay that way? Maybe love was superstition, a prayer we said to keep the truth of loneliness at bay. I tilted my head back. The stars looked like they were close together, when really they were millions of miles apart. In the end, maybe love just meant longing for something impossibly bright and forever out of reach.

CHAPTER 11

THE NEXT MORNING, I found Nikolai on the eastern terrace taking weather readings. Mal's team was set to depart within the hour and was only waiting for the all clear. I pulled up my hood. It wasn't quite snowing, but a few flakes had settled on my cheeks and hair.

"How does everything look?" I asked, handing Nikolai a glass of tea.

"Not bad," he replied. "Gusts are mild, and the pressure's holding steady. They may have it rough through the mountains, but it shouldn't be anything the *Bittern* can't handle."

I heard the door open behind me, and Mal and Tamar stepped out onto the terrace. They were dressed in peasant clothes, fur hats, and sturdy wool coats.

"Are we a go?" Tamar asked. She was trying to seem calm, but I could hear the barely leashed excitement in her voice. Behind her, I saw Nadia with her face pressed against the glass, awaiting the verdict.

Nikolai nodded. "You're a go."

Tamar's grin was blinding. She managed a restrained bow, then turned to Nadia and gave her the signal. Nadia whooped and broke into something between a seizure and a dance.

Nikolai laughed. "If only she'd show a little enthusiasm."

"Be safe," I said as I embraced Tamar.

"Take care of Tolya for me," she replied. Then she whispered, "We left the cobalt lace in your trunk. Wear that tonight."

I rolled my eyes and gave her a shove. I knew I would see them all in a week, but I was surprised at how much I was going to miss them.

There was an awkward pause as I faced Mal. His blue eyes were vibrant in the gray morning light. The scar at my shoulder twinged.

"Safe journey, *moi soverenyi.*" He bowed.

I knew what was expected, but I hugged him anyway. For a moment, he just stood there, then his arms closed hard around me. "Safe journey, Alina," he whispered into my hair, and quickly stepped back.

"We'll be on our way as soon as the *Kingfisher* returns. I expect to see you all safe and whole in one week's time," Nikolai said, "and packing some all-powerful bird bones."

Mal bowed. "Saints' speed, *moi tsarevich*."

Nikolai offered his hand and they shook. "Good luck, Oretsev. Find the firebird, and when this is over, I'll see you well rewarded. A farmhouse in Udova. A dacha near the city. Whatever you want."

"I don't need any of that. Just…" He dropped Nikolai's hand and looked away. "Deserve her."

He hastened back into the Spinning Wheel with Tamar behind him. Through the glass I saw them talking to Nadia and Harshaw.

"Well," said Nikolai, "at least he's learned to make an exit."

I ignored the ache in my throat and said, "How long will it take us to reach Ketterdam?"

"Two to three days, depending on the weather and our Squallers. We'll go north, then over the True Sea. It's safer than traveling over Ravka."

"What's it like?"

"Ketterdam? It's—"

He never finished his sentence. A shadowed blur cut across my vision, and Nikolai was gone. I stood staring at the place where he'd been, then screamed as I felt claws close over my shoulders and my feet lifted from the floor.

I glimpsed Mal bursting through the door to the terrace, Tamar on his heels. He lunged across the distance and seized me around the waist, yanking me back down. I twisted, arms moving in an arc, sending a blaze of light burning through the *nichevo'ya* that had hold of me. It wavered and exploded into nothing. I fell to the terrace in a heap, toppling with Mal, bleeding from where the monster's talons had pierced my skin.

I was on my feet in seconds, horrified by what I saw. The air was full of darting black shapes, winged monsters that moved unlike any natural creature. Behind me, I heard chaos erupting in the hall, the smash of breaking glass as *nichevo'ya* hurled themselves against the windows.

"Get the others out," I yelled to Tamar. "Get them away from here."

"We can't leave you—"

"I won't lose them too!"

"Go!" Mal bellowed at her. He shouldered his rifle, taking aim at the attacking monsters. I lashed out with the Cut, but they were moving so quickly that I couldn't target them. I craned my neck, searching the sky for Nikolai. My heart was pounding. Where was the Darkling? If his monsters were here, then he must be nearby.

He came from above. His creatures moved around him like a living cloak, their wings beating the air in a rippling black wave, forming and re-forming, bearing him aloft, their bodies slipping apart and together, absorbing the bullets from Mal's gun.

"Saints," Mal swore. "How did he find us?"

The answer came quickly. I saw a red shape suspended between two *nichevo'ya*, their black claws sunk deeply into their captive's body. Sergei's face was chalky, his eyes wide and terrified, his lips moving in a silent prayer.

"Shall I spare him, Alina?" said the Darkling.

"Leave him alone!"

"He betrayed you to the first *oprichnik* he could find. I wonder, will you offer him mercy or justice?"

"I don't want him harmed," I shouted.

My mind was reeling. Had Sergei really betrayed us? He'd been on edge since the battle at the Little Palace, but what if he'd been planning this all along? Maybe he'd just been trying to slip away during our fight with the militia, maybe he'd let Genya's name drop deliberately. He'd been so ready to leave the Spinning Wheel.

That was when I realized what Sergei was muttering—not prayers, just one word over and over again: *Safe. Safe. Safe.*

"Give him to me," I said.

“He betrayed me first, Alina. He remained in Os Alta when he should have come to my side. He sat on your council, plotted against me. He told me everything.”

Thank the Saints we’d kept the location of the firebird a secret.

“So,” said the Darkling, “the decision is mine. And I’m afraid that I choose justice.”

In one movement, the *nichevo’ya* ripped Sergei’s limbs from his body and severed his head from his neck. I had the briefest glimpse of the shock on his face, his mouth open in a silent scream, then the pieces disappeared beneath the cloud bank.

“All Saints,” Mal swore.

I gagged, but I had to shove down my terror. Mal and I turned in a slow circle, back to back. We were surrounded by *nichevo’ya*. Behind me, I could hear the sounds of screams and glass shattering in the Spinning Wheel.

“Here we are again, Alina. Your army against mine. Do you think your soldiers will fare any better this time?”

I ignored him and shouted into the misty grayness. “Nikolai!”

“Ah, the pirate prince. I have regretted many of the things I’ve had to do in this war,” said the Darkling. “This is not one of them.”

A shadow soldier swooped down. In horror, I saw it held Nikolai struggling in its arms. Any bit of courage I had evaporated. I couldn’t see Nikolai ripped limb from limb.

“Please!” The word tore from me, without dignity or constraint. “Please don’t!”

The Darkling raised his hand.

I clapped my fingers over my mouth, my legs already buckling.

But the *nichevo’ya* didn’t attack Nikolai. It tossed him onto the terrace. His body hit the stone with a sickening thud and rolled to a stop.

“Alina, don’t!” Mal tried to hold me back, but I broke free of him and ran to where Nikolai lay, falling to my knees beside him. He moaned. His coat was torn where the creature’s claws had shredded the fabric. He tried to push himself up on his elbows and blood dribbled from his mouth.

“This was unexpected,” he said weakly.

“You’re okay,” I said. “It’s okay.”

“I appreciate your optimism.”

I caught movement from the corner of my eye and saw two blots of shadow slip free of the Darkling’s hands. They slithered over the lip of the balcony, undulating like serpents, heading directly toward us. I raised my hands and slashed out with the Cut, obliterating one side of the terrace, but I was too slow. The shadows slithered lightning fast across the stone and darted into Nikolai’s mouth.

His eyes widened. His breath hitched in surprise, drawing whatever the Darkling had released into his lungs. We stared at each other in shock.

“What—what was that?” he choked.

“I—”

He coughed, shuddered. Then his fingers flew to his chest, tearing open the remains of his shirt. We both looked down, and I saw shadow spreading beneath his skin in fragile black lines, splintering like veins in marble.

“No,” I groaned. “No. *No.*”

The cracks traveled across his stomach, down his arms.

“Alina?” he said helplessly. The darkness fractured beneath his skin, climbing his throat. He threw his head back and screamed, the tendons flexing in his neck as his whole body contorted, his back bowing. He shoved up to his knees, chest heaving. I reached for him as he convulsed.

He released another raw scream, and two black shards burst from his back. They unfurled. Like wings.

His head shot up. He looked at me, face beaded in sweat, gaze panicked and desperate. “Alina—”

Then his eyes—his clever, hazel eyes—went black.

“Nikolai?” I whispered.

His lips curled back, revealing teeth of black onyx. They had formed fangs.

He snarled. I stumbled backward. His jaws snapped closed a bare inch from me.

“Hungry?” the Darkling asked. “I wonder which one of your friends you’ll eat first.”

I raised my hands, reluctant to use my power. I didn’t want to hurt him.

“Nikolai,” I begged. “Don’t do this. Stay with me.”

His face spasmed in pain. He was in there, fighting himself, battling the appetite that had taken hold of him. His hands flexed—no, his *claws*. He howled, and the noise that came from him was desperate, shrieking, completely inhuman.

His wings beat the air as he rose from the terrace, monstrous, but still beautiful, still somehow Nikolai. He looked down at the dark veins coursing over his torso, at the razor-sharp talons that had pushed from his blackened fingertips. He held out his hands as if pleading with me for an answer.

“Nikolai,” I cried.

He turned in the air, wrenching himself away, and raced upward, as if he could somehow outpace the need inside him, his black wings carrying him higher as he cut through the *nichevo’ya*. He looked back once, and even from a distance, I felt his anguish and confusion.

Then he was gone, a black speck in the gray sky, while I remained trembling below.

“Eventually,” said the Darkling, “he will feed.”

I’d warned Nikolai of the Darkling’s vengeance, but even I couldn’t have foreseen the elegance of this, the perfect cruelty. Nikolai had made a fool of the Darkling, and now the Darkling had taken my polished, brilliant, noble prince and made him into a monster. Death would have been too kind.

A sound came from me, something guttural, animal, a noise I didn’t recognize. I raised my hands and brought the Cut blazing down in two furious arcs. They struck the whirring shapes that surrounded the Darkling and I saw some burst apart into nothing, only to have others take their place. I didn’t care. I struck him again and again. If I could knock the top off a mountain, surely my power was good for something in this battle.

“Fight me!” I screamed. “Let’s end this now! Here!”

“Fight you, Alina? There is no fight to be had.” He gestured to the *nichevo’ya*. “Seize them.”

They swarmed down from every direction, a seething black mass. Beside me, Mal opened fire. I could smell gunpowder and hear the clink of empty cartridges as bullets hit the ground. I was focusing every bit of power I had, nearly pinwheeling my arms, cutting through five, ten, fifteen shadow soldiers at a

time, but it was no good. There were simply too many of them.

Then suddenly they stopped. The *nichevo'ya* hung in the air, bodies limp, wings moving in silent rhythm.

"Did you do that?" Mal asked.

"I—I don't think so…"

Silence descended on the terrace. I could hear the wail of the wind, the sounds of the battle raging behind us.

"*Abomination*."

We turned. Baghra stood inside the doorway, her hand on Misha's shoulder. The boy was shaking, his eyes so wide I could see more white than iris. Behind them, our soldiers were fighting not just *nichevo'ya* but *oprichniki* and the Darkling's own Grisha in their blue and red *kefta*. He'd had his creatures bring them all to the mountaintop.

"Guide me," Baghra told Misha. What courage it must have taken for him to lead her out onto the terrace, past the *nichevo'ya*, who shifted and bumped up against each other, following her passage like a field of glistening black reeds. Only those closest to the Darkling remained moving, clinging to their master, their wings beating in unison.

The Darkling's face was livid. "I should have known I'd find you cloistered with the enemy. Go back inside," he ordered. "My soldiers will not harm you."

Baghra ignored him. When they reached the end of the terrace, Misha placed her hand on the lip of the remaining wall. She leaned against it, releasing an almost contented sigh, and gave Misha a nudge with her stick. "Go on, boy, run to the scrawny little Saint." He hesitated. Baghra reached out and found his cheek, then patted it none too gently. "Go on," she repeated. "I want to talk to my son."

"Misha," Mal said, and the boy bolted over to us, ducking behind Mal's coat. The *nichevo'ya* showed no interest in him. Their attention focused wholly on Baghra.

"What is it you want?" asked the Darkling. "And do not hope to plead for mercy for these fools."

"Only to meet your monsters," she said. Baghra leaned her stick against the wall and held out her arms. The *nichevo'ya* moved forward, rustling and nudging

against each other. One nuzzled its head against her palm, as if it were sniffing her. Was it curiosity I sensed in them? Or hunger? “They know me, these children. Like calls to like.”

“Stop this,” demanded the Darkling.

Baghra’s palms began to fill with darkness. The sight was jarring. I’d only ever seen her summon once before. She had hidden her power away as I had once stifled mine, but she had done it for the sake of her son’s secrets. I remembered what she’d said about a Grisha turning his power on himself. She shared the Darkling’s blood, his power. Would she act against him now?

“I will not fight you,” the Darkling said.

“Then strike me down.”

“You know I won’t.”

She smiled then and gave a little chuckle, as if she were pleased with a precocious student. “It’s true. That’s why I still have hope.” Her head snapped to me. “Girl,” she said sharply. Her blind eyes were blank, but in that moment, I could have sworn she saw me clearly. “Do not fail me again.”

“She isn’t strong enough to fight me either, old woman. Take up your stick, and I will return you to the Little Palace.”

A terrible suspicion crept into me. Baghra had given me the strength to fight, but she’d never told me to do it. The only thing she’d ever asked of me was to run.

“Baghra—” I began.

“My hut. My fire. That sounds a pleasant thing,” she said. “But I find the dark is the same wherever I am.”

“You earned those eyes,” he said coldly, but I heard the hurt there too.

“I did,” she said with a sigh. “And more.” Then, without warning, she slammed her hands together. Thunder boomed over the mountain and darkness billowed from her palms like banners unfurling, twisting and curling around the *nichevo’ya*. They shrieked and jittered, whirling in confusion.

“Know that I loved you,” she said to the Darkling. “Know that it was not enough.”

In a single movement, she shoved herself up on the wall, and before I could draw breath to scream, she tipped forward and vanished over the ledge, trailing

the *nichevo'ya* behind her in tangled skeins of darkness. They tumbled past us in a rush, a shrieking black wave that rolled over the terrace and plummeted down, drawn by the power she exuded.

"No!" the Darkling roared. He dove after her, the wings of his soldiers beating with his fury.

"Alina, now!" Through the haze of my horror, I heard Mal's words, felt him pushing me through the door, and suddenly, Mal had Misha in his arms and we were running through the observatory. *Nichevo'ya* streamed past us, yanked toward the terrace by Baghra's trailing skeins. Others simply hovered in confusion as their master drew farther away.

Run, Baghra had told me again and again. And now I did.

The heated floor was slippery with melted snow. The massive windows of the Spinning Wheel had been shattered and flurries gusted through the room. I saw fallen bodies, pockets of fighting.

I couldn't seem to think straight. Sergei. Nikolai. Baghra. *Baghra.* Falling through the mists, the rocks rising up to meet her. Would she cry out? Would she close her blind eyes? *Little Saint. Little martyr.*

Tolya was running toward us. I saw two *oprichniki* come at him, swords drawn. Without breaking stride, he threw out his fists and the soldiers collapsed, clutching their chests, their mouths dripping blood.

"Where are the others?" Mal shouted as we came level with Tolya and pelted for the staircase.

"In the hangar, but they're outnumbered. We need to get down there."

Some of the Darkling's blue-robed Squallers had tried to blockade the stairs. They hurled crates and furniture at us in mighty gusts of wind. I slashed out with the Cut, smashing the crates to kindling before they could reach us, sending the Squallers scattering.

The worst was waiting in the hangar below. All semblance of order had broken down in the panic to get away from the Darkling's soldiers.

People were swarming over the *Pelican* and the *Ibis.* The *Pelican* already hovered above the hangar floor, borne aloft by Squaller current. Soldiers were pulling on its cables, trying to drag it back down and climb aboard, unwilling to wait for the other barge.

Someone gave the order, and the *Pelican* surged free, plowing through the crowd as it took flight. It rose into the air, trailing screaming men like strange anchors, and disappeared from view.

Zoya, Nadia, and Harshaw were backed up against one of the hulls of the *Bittern*, using fire and wind to try to keep back a crowd of Grisha and *oprichniki*.

Tamar was on the deck, and I was relieved to see Nevsky at her side, along with a few other soldiers from the Twenty-Second. But behind them, Adrik lay in a pool of blood. His arm hung from his body at a bizarre angle. His face was white with shock. Genya knelt over him, tears streaming down her face as David stood above her with a rifle, firing down at the attacking crowd with precarious aim. Stigg was nowhere to be seen. Had he fled on the *Pelican* or simply been left behind in the Spinning Wheel?

"Stigg—" I said.

"There's no time," replied Mal.

We shoved through the mob, and at a shouted order from her brother, Tamar slid into place and seized the *Bittern*'s wheel. We lay down cover as Zoya and the other Squallers scrambled on deck. Mal stumbled as a bullet struck his thigh, but Harshaw had hold of him, dragging him aboard.

"Get us moving!" shouted Nevsky. He signaled to the other soldiers, and they arrayed themselves along the hull's railing, opening fire on the Darkling's men. I took a place beside them, sending bright light up against the crowd, blinding them so they couldn't take aim.

Mal and Tolya took their positions at the lines as Zoya filled the sails. But her power wasn't enough.

"Nadia, we need you!" bellowed Tamar.

Nadia looked up from where she'd knelt beside her brother. Her face was streaked with tears, but she rose to her feet, swaying, and forced a draft up into the sails. The *Bittern* started to slide forward on its runners.

"We're too heavy!" Zoya cried.

Nevsky grabbed my shoulder. "Survive," he said roughly. "Help him." Did he know what had happened to Nikolai?

"I will," I vowed. "The other barge—"

He didn't stop to listen. Nevsky shouted, "For the Twenty-Second!" He

vaulted over the side, and the other soldiers followed without hesitation. They threw themselves into the mob.

Tamar called the order, and we shot from the hangar. The *Bittern* plunged sickeningly from the ledge, then the sails snapped into place and we were rising.

I looked back and caught one last glimpse of Nevsky, rifle at his shoulder, before he was swallowed by the crowd.

CHAPTER 12

WE BOBBED AND FALTERED, the little craft swinging precariously back and forth beneath the sails as Tamar and the crew tried to get control of the *Bittern.* Snow lashed at our faces in stinging gusts, and when the hull nicked the side of a cliff, the whole deck tilted, sending us all scrambling for purchase.

We had no Tidemakers to keep us cloaked in mist, so we could only hope that Baghra had bought us enough time to get clear of the mountains and the Darkling.

Baghra. My eyes skittered over the deck. Misha had tucked himself against the side of the hull, his arms curled over his head. No one could stop to offer comfort.

I knelt beside Adrik and Genya. A *nichevo'ya* had taken a massive bite from Adrik's shoulder, and Genya was trying to stop the bleeding, but she'd never been trained as a Healer. His lips were pale, his skin ice-cold, and as I watched, his eyes began to roll back in his head.

"Tolya!" I shouted, trying not to sound panicked.

Nadia turned, her eyes wide with terror, and the *Bittern* dipped.

"Keep us steady, Nadia," Tamar demanded over the rush of wind. "Tolya, help him!"

Harshaw came up behind Tolya. He had a deep gash in his forearm, but he gripped the ropes and said, "Ready." I could see Oncat's shape squirming around in his coat.

Tolya's brow was furrowed. Stigg was meant to be with us. Harshaw hadn't been trained to work the lines.

“Just hold her steady,” he cautioned Harshaw. He looked to where Mal stood braced on the opposite side of the hull, hands tight to the ropes, muscles straining as we were buffeted by snow and wind.

“Do it!” Mal shouted. He was bleeding from the bullet wound in his thigh.

They made the switch. The *Bittern* tilted, then righted itself as Harshaw let out a grunt.

“Got it,” he grated through clenched teeth. It wasn’t reassuring.

Tolya leapt down to Adrik’s side and began working. Nadia was sobbing, but she held the draft steady.

“Can you save the arm?” I asked quietly.

Tolya shook his head once. He was a Heartrender, a warrior, and a killer—not a Healer. “I can’t just seal the skin,” he said, “or he’ll bleed internally. I need to close the arteries. Can you warm him?”

I cast light over Adrik, and his trembling calmed slightly.

We drove onward, sails taut with the force of Grisha wind. Tamar bent to the wheel, coat billowing behind her. I knew when we’d cleared the mountains because the *Bittern* ceased its shaking. The air cut cold against my cheeks as we picked up speed, but I kept Adrik cocooned in sunlight.

Time seemed to slow. Neither of them wanted to say it, but I could see Nadia and Zoya beginning to tire. Mal and Harshaw couldn’t be faring well either.

“We need to set down,” I said.

“Where are we?” Harshaw asked. His crest of red hair lay flat on his head, soaked through with snow. I’d thought of him as unpredictable, maybe a little dangerous, but here he was—bloody, tired, and working the lines for hours without complaint.

Tamar consulted her charts. “Just past the permafrost. If we keep heading south, we’ll be above more populated areas soon.”

“We could try to find woods for cover,” panted Nadia.

“We’re too near Chernast,” Mal replied.

Harshaw adjusted his grip. “Does it matter? If we fly through the day, we’re going to be spotted.”

“We could go higher,” suggested Genya.

Nadia shook her head. “We can try, but the air’s thinner up there and we’ll

use a lot of power on a vertical move."

"Where are we headed, anyway?" asked Zoya.

Without thinking twice, I said, "To the copper mine at Murin. To the firebird."

There was a brief silence. Then Harshaw said what I knew a lot of them had to be thinking. "We could run. Every time we face those monsters, more of us die. We could take this ship anywhere. Kerch. Novyi Zem."

"Like hell," muttered Mal.

"This is my home," said Zoya. "I won't be chased out of it."

"What about Adrik?" Nadia asked, her voice hoarse.

"He lost a lot of blood," said Tolya. "All I can do is keep his heart steady, try to give him time to recover."

"He needs a real Healer."

"If the Darkling finds us, a Healer won't do him any good," said Zoya.

I ran a hand over my eyes, trying to think. Adrik might be stable. Or he might slip more deeply into a coma and never come out of it. And if we set down somewhere and were spotted, we'd all be in for death or worse. The Darkling must know we wouldn't land in Fjerda, deep in enemy territory. He might think we'd flee to West Ravka. He'd send scouts everywhere he could. Would he stop to grieve for his mother? Dashed on the rocks, would there be enough of her left to bury? I looked over my shoulder, sure that at any minute I'd see *nichevo'ya* swooping down on us. I couldn't think about Nikolai. I wouldn't.

"We go to Murin," I said. "We'll figure out the rest from there. I won't force anyone to stay. Zoya, Nadia, can you get us there?" They'd been flagging before, but I needed to believe they had some reserve of strength to call on.

"I know I can," Zoya replied.

Nadia's earnest chin lifted. "Try to keep up."

"We can still be seen," I said. "We need a Tidemaker."

David glanced up from bandaging the powder burns on his hand. "What if you tried bending the light?"

I frowned. "Bend it how?"

"The only reason anyone can see the ship is because light is bouncing off it. Just eliminate the reflection."

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“You don’t say,” said Genya.

“Like a rock in a stream,” David explained. “Just bend the light so it never actually hits the ship. There’s nothing to see.”

“So we’d be invisible?” Genya asked.

“Theoretically.”

She yanked off her boot and plunked it down on the deck. “Try it.”

I eyed the boot skeptically. I wasn’t sure how to begin. This was a completely different way of using my power.

“Just … bend the light?”

“Well,” said David, “it might help to remember that you don’t have to concern yourself with the refractive index. You just need to redirect and synchronize both components of light simultaneously. I mean, you can’t just start with the magnetic, that would be ridic—”

I held up a hand. “Let’s stick with the rock in the stream.”

I concentrated, but I didn’t summon or hone the light the way I did with the Cut. Instead, I just tried to give it a nudge.

The toe of the boot grew blurry as the air near it seemed to waver.

I tried to think of the light as water, as wind rushing around the leather, parting then slipping back together as if the boot had never been there. I cupped my fingers. The boot flickered and vanished.

Genya whooped. I shrieked and threw my hands in the air. The boot reappeared. I curled my fingers, and it was gone.

“David, have I ever told you you’re a genius?”

“Yes.”

“I’m telling you again.”

Because the ship was larger and in motion, keeping the curve of light around it was more of a challenge. But I only had to worry about the light reflecting off the bottom of the hull, and after a few tries, I felt comfortable keeping the bend steady.

If anyone happened to be standing in a field, peering straight up, they might see something off, a blur or a flash of light, but they wouldn’t see a winged ship moving through the afternoon sky. At least that was the hope. It reminded me of

something I'd once seen the Darkling do when he'd pulled me through a candlelit ballroom, using his power to render us nearly invisible. Yet another trick he'd mastered long before I had.

Genya dug through the provisions and found a stash of *jurda*, the Zemeni stimulant that soldiers sometimes used on long watches. It made me feel jittery and a little nauseated, but there was no other way to keep us on our feet and focused.

It had to be chewed, and soon we were all spitting the rust-colored juice over the side.

"If this stains my teeth orange—" said Zoya.

"It will," interrupted Genya, "but I promise to put your teeth back whiter than they were before. I may even fix those weird incisors of yours."

"There is nothing wrong with my teeth."

"Not at all," said Genya soothingly. "You're the prettiest walrus I know. I'm just amazed you haven't sawed through your lower lip."

"Keep your hands off me, Tailor," Zoya grumbled, "or I'll poke your other eye out."

By the time dusk came, Zoya didn't have the energy to bicker. She and Nadia were entirely focused on keeping us aloft.

David was able to take over the wheel for brief periods of time so Tamar could see to the wound on Mal's leg. Harshaw, Tolya, and Mal alternated on the lines to give each other a chance to stretch.

Only Nadia and Zoya had no relief as they toiled beneath a crescent moon, though we tried to find ways to help. Genya stood with her back to Nadia's, bracing her so she could rest her knees and feet a bit. Now that the sun had set, we had no need for cover, so for the better part of an hour, I buttressed Zoya's arms while she summoned.

"This is ridiculous," she growled, her muscles shaking beneath my palms.

"Do you want me to let go?"

"If you do, I'll cover you in *jurda* juice."

I was eager to have something to do. The ship was too quiet, and I could feel the day's nightmares waiting to crowd in on me.

Misha hadn't budged from his spot curled into the hull. He was clutching the

wooden practice sword that Mal had found for him. My throat tightened as I realized he'd brought it with him on the terrace when Baghra made him escort her to the *nichevo'ya*. I fished a piece of hardtack out of the provisions and took it to him.

"Hungry?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"Will you try to eat something anyway?"

Another head shake.

I sat beside him, unsure of what to say. I remembered sitting like this with Sergei in the tank room, searching for words of comfort and failing. Had he been scheming then, manipulating me? His fear had certainly seemed real.

But Misha didn't just remind me of Sergei. He was every child whose parents went to war. He was every boy and girl at Keramzin. He was Baghra begging for her father's attention. He was the Darkling learning loneliness at his mother's knee. This was what Ravka did. It made orphans. It made misery. *No land, no life, just a uniform and a gun.* Nikolai had believed in something better.

I took a shaky breath. I had to find a way to shut down my mind. If I thought of Nikolai, I would fall apart. Or Baghra. Or the broken pieces of Sergei's body. Or Stigg, left behind. Or even the Darkling, the look on his face as his mother had disappeared beneath the clouds. How could he be so cruel and still so human?

The night wore on as a sleeping Ravka passed beneath us. I counted stars. I watched over Adrik. I dozed. I moved among the crew, offering sips of water and tufts of dried *jurda* blossoms. When anyone asked about Nikolai or Baghra, I gave them the facts of the battle in the briefest possible terms.

I willed my mind to silence, tried to make it a blank field, white with snow, unmarred by tracks. Sometime around sunrise, I took my place at the railing and began shifting the light to camouflage the ship.

That was when Adrik muttered in his sleep.

Nadia's head whipped around. The *Bittern* bobbled.

"Focus!" snapped Zoya.

But she was smiling. We all were, ready to cling to the barest scrap of hope.

* * *

WE FLEW THROUGH the rest of the day and long into the next night. It was dawn on the second morning when we finally glimpsed the Sikurzoi. At midday, we spotted the deep, jagged crater that marked the abandoned copper mine where Nikolai had suggested we stash the *Bittern*, a murky turquoise pool at its center.

The descent was slow and tricky, and as soon as the hulls scraped the crater floor, both Nadia and Zoya crumpled to the deck. They had pushed the limits of their power, and though their skin was flushed and glowing, they were completely exhausted.

Tugging on the ropes, the rest of us managed to get the *Bittern* out of sight beneath a ledge of rock. Anyone who climbed down into the mine would find it easily enough, but it was hard to imagine who would bother. The crater floor was littered with rusty machinery. An unpleasant smell came from the stagnant pool, and David said the water's opaque turquoise color came from minerals leaching out of the rock. There were no signs of squatters.

While Mal and Harshaw secured the sails, Tolya carried Adrik from the *Bittern.* There was blood seeping from the stump where his arm had been, but he was fairly lucid and even drank a few sips of water.

Misha refused to budge from the hull. I tucked a blanket over his shoulders and left him with a piece of hardtack and a slice of dried apple, hoping he would eat.

We helped Zoya and Nadia off the ship, dragged our bedrolls into a nest beneath the shade of the overhang, and without another word, fell into troubled sleep. We posted no watch. If we'd been followed, we had no fight left to give.

As my eyes slid shut, I glimpsed Tolya sneaking back onto the *Bittern* and forced myself to sit up again. He emerged a moment later with a tightly wrapped bundle. His gaze darted to Adrik, and my stomach dropped as I realized what he was carrying. I let my weary eyes close. I didn't want to know where Tolya planned to bury Adrik's arm.

When I woke, it was late afternoon. Most of the others were still sleeping soundly. Genya was pinning up Adrik's sleeve.

I found Mal coming down the road that led around the side of the crater, carrying a bag full of grouse.

“I thought we’d stay tonight,” he said, “make a fire. We can leave for Dva Stolba in the morning.”

“All right,” I said, though I was eager to get moving.

He must have sensed it because he said, “Adrik could use the rest. We all could. I’m afraid if we keep pushing, one of them will break.”

I nodded. He was right. We were all grieving and frightened and tired. “I’ll bring some kindling down.”

He touched my arm. “Alina—”

“I won’t be long.” I pushed past him. I didn’t want to talk. I didn’t want words of comfort. I wanted the firebird. I wanted to turn my pain into anger and bring it to the Darkling’s door.

I made my way up to the woods that surrounded the mine. This far south, the trees were different, taller and more sparse, their bark red and porous. I was on my way back to the mine, my arms full of the driest branches I could find, when I got the eerie feeling I was being watched. I stopped, the hair rising on the back of my neck.

I peered between the sunlit trunks, waiting. The silence was dense, as if every small creature were holding its breath. Then I heard it—a soft rustling. My head jerked up, following the sound into the trees. My eyes fastened on a flicker of movement, the silent beat of a shadowy wing.

Nikolai was perched in the branches of a tree, his dark gaze fastened on me.

His chest was bare and lined in black as if darkness had shattered beneath his skin. He’d lost his boots somewhere, and his bare feet gripped the bark. His toes had become black talons.

He had dried blood on his hands. And near his mouth.

“Nikolai?” I whispered.

He flinched back.

“Nikolai, wait—”

But he leapt into the air, dark wings shaking the branches as he broke through them to the blue sky beyond.

I wanted to scream, so I did. I tossed my kindling to the ground, pressed my

fist to my mouth, and screamed until my throat was raw. I couldn't stop. I'd managed not to weep on the *Bittern* or at the mine, but now I sank to the forest floor, my screams turning to sobs, silent, racking gasps. They hurt, as if they might crack my ribs open, but emerged soundless from my lips. I kept thinking of Nikolai's torn trousers and had the foolish thought that he'd be mortified to see his clothes in such a state. He'd followed us all the way from the Spinning Wheel. Could he tell the Darkling of our whereabouts? Would he? How much of him was left inside that tortured body?

I felt it then, the vibration along that invisible tether. I pushed away from it. I would not go to the Darkling now. I wouldn't go to him ever again. But still, I knew wherever he was, he was grieving.

* * *

MAL FOUND ME THERE, head buried in my arms, coat covered in green needles. He offered me his hand, but I ignored it.

"I'm all right," I said, though nothing could have been less true.

"It's getting dark. You shouldn't be out here alone."

"I'm the Sun Summoner. It gets dark when I say it does."

He crouched down in front of me and waited for me to meet his eyes. "Don't shut them out, Alina. They need to grieve with you."

"I don't have anything to say."

"Then let them talk."

I had no solace or encouragement to offer. I didn't want to share this hurt. I didn't want them to see how frightened I was. But I made myself get up and brush the needles from my coat. I let Mal lead me back to the mine.

By the time we got all the way down to the crater floor, it was full dark and the others had lit lanterns beneath the overhang.

"Took your time, didn't you?" said Zoya. "Did we have to freeze while you two frolicked around in the woods?"

There was no point to hiding my tearstained face so I just said, "Turned out I needed a good cry."

I braced myself for an insult, but all she said was, "Next time invite me. I could use one too."

Mal dropped the kindling I'd gathered into the firepit someone had made, and I plucked Oncat from Harshaw's shoulder. She gave a brief hiss, but I didn't care. Right now, I needed to cuddle something soft and furry.

They'd already cleaned and spitted the game Mal had caught, and soon, despite my sadness and worry, the smell of roasting meat had my mouth watering.

We sat around the fire, eating and passing around a flask of *kvas*, watching the flames play over the hull of the *Bittern* as the branches crackled and popped. We had a lot to talk about—who would go with us into the Sikurzoi and who would remain in the valley, whether or not people even wanted to stay. I rubbed my wrist. It helped to focus on the firebird, to think of that instead of the black sheen of Nikolai's eyes, the dark crust of blood near his lips.

Abruptly, Zoya said, "I should have known Sergei couldn't be trusted. He was always a weakling." That seemed unfair, but I let it pass.

"Oncat never liked him," Harshaw added.

Genya fed a branch to the fire. "Do you think he was planning it all along?"

"I've been wondering that," I admitted. "I thought he'd be better once we got out of the White Cathedral and the tunnels, but he almost seemed worse, more anxious."

"That could have been anything," said Tamar. "Cave-in, militia attack, Tolya's snoring."

Tolya threw a pebble at her and said, "Nikolai's men should have watched him more closely."

Or I should never have let him go. Maybe my guilt over Marie had clouded my judgment. Maybe sorrow was clouding it now and there were more betrayals to come.

"Did the *nichevo'ya* really just … tear him apart?" asked Nadia.

I glanced over at Misha. At some point, he'd climbed down from the *Bittern*. Now he was fast asleep beside Mal, still clutching that wooden sword.

"It was horrible," I said softly.

"What about Nikolai?" Zoya asked. "What did the Darkling do to him?"

"I don't know exactly."

"Can it be undone?"

“I don’t know that either.” I looked to David.

“Maybe,” he offered. “I’d need to study him. It’s *merzost.* New territory. I wish I had Morozova’s journals.”

I almost laughed at that. All the time David had been lugging those journals around, I would have gladly thrown them onto a garbage heap. But now that there was a good reason to want them, they were out of my reach, left behind at the Spinning Wheel.

Capture Nikolai. Put him in a cage. See if we could pull him from the shadow’s grasp. The too-clever fox, finally caught. I blinked and looked away. I didn’t want to cry again.

Abruptly, Adrik snarled, “I’m glad Sergei’s dead. I’m just sorry I didn’t get to wring his neck myself.”

“You’d need two hands for that,” said Zoya.

There was a brief, terrible silence, then Adrik scowled and said, “Okay, *stab* him.”

Zoya grinned and passed him the flask. Nadia just shook her head. Sometimes I forgot they were really soldiers. I didn’t doubt that Adrik would mourn the loss of his arm. I wasn’t even sure how it might impact his ability to summon. But I remembered him standing in front of me at the Little Palace, demanding the right to stay and fight. He was tougher than I’d ever be.

I thought of Botkin, my old teacher, pushing me to run another mile, to take another punch. I remembered the words he’d spoken to me so long ago: *Steel is earned.* Adrik had that steel, and so did Nadia. She’d proven it again in our flight from the Elbjen. A part of me had wondered what Tamar saw in her. But Nadia had been in some of the worst fighting at the Little Palace. She’d lost her best friend and the life she’d always known. Yet she hadn’t fallen apart like Sergei or chosen life underground like Maxim. Through all of it, she’d stayed steady.

When Adrik handed the flask back, Zoya took a deep drink and said, “Do you know what Baghra told me at my first lesson with her?” She lowered her voice to imitate Baghra’s throaty rasp. “Pretty face. Too bad you have porridge for brains.”

Harshaw snorted. “I set fire to her hut in class.”

“Of course you did,” said Zoya.

“Accidentally! She refused to ever teach me again. Wouldn’t even speak to me. I saw her on the grounds once, and she walked right by. Didn’t say a word, just whacked me on the knee with her stick. I still have a lump.” He yanked up his trouser leg, and sure enough, there was a knob of bone visible beneath the skin.

“That’s nothing,” Nadia said, her cheeks pinking as we all turned our attention to her. “I had some kind of block where I couldn’t summon for a while. She put me in a room and released a hive of bees in it.”

“What?” I squeaked. It wasn’t just the bees that had shocked me. I’d struggled to summon for months at the Little Palace, and Baghra had never mentioned that other Grisha got blocks.

“What did you do?” Tamar asked incredulously.

“I managed to summon a current to send them up the chimney, but I got stung so many times, I looked like I had firepox.”

“I have never been more glad I’m not Grisha,” Mal said with a shake of his head.

Zoya lifted her flask. “Let’s hear it for the lone *otkazat’sya*.”

“Baghra hated me,” David said quietly.

Zoya waved dismissively. “We all felt that way.”

“No, she really hated me. She taught me once with the rest of the Fabrikators my age, then she refused to ever meet with me again. I used to just stay in the workshops when everyone else had her classes.”

“Why?” Harshaw asked, scratching Oncat under the chin.

David shrugged. “No idea.”

“I know why,” said Genya. I waited, wondering if she really did. “Animal magnetism,” she continued. “One more minute in that hut with you, and she would have torn off all your clothes.”

David considered this. “That seems improbable.”

“Impossible,” Mal and I said at the same time.

“Well, not *impossible*,” David said, looking vaguely insulted.

Genya laughed and planted a firm kiss on his mouth.

I picked up a stick and gave the fire a poke, sending sparks shooting upward. I knew why Baghra had refused to teach David. He’d reminded her too much of

Morozova, so obsessed with knowledge that he'd been blind to his child's suffering, to his wife's neglect. And sure enough, David had created *lumiya* just "for fun," essentially handing the Darkling the means to enter the Fold. But David wasn't like Morozova. He'd been there for Genya when she'd needed him. He was no warrior, but he'd still found a way to fight for her.

I looked around at our strange, battered little group, at Adrik with his missing arm, gazing moon-eyed at Zoya; at Harshaw and Tolya, watching as Mal sketched our route in the dirt. I saw Genya grin, her scars pulling taut as David gestured wildly, trying to explain his idea for a brass arm to Nadia, while Nadia ignored him, running her fingers through the dark waves of Tamar's hair.

None of them were easy or soft or simple. They were like me, nursing hurts and hidden wounds, all broken in different ways. We didn't quite fit together. We had edges so jagged we cut each other sometimes, but as I curled up on my side, the warmth of the fire at my back, I felt a rush of gratitude so sweet it made my throat ache. Fear came with it. Keeping them close was a luxury I would pay for. Now I had more to lose.

CHAPTER 13

IN THE END, everyone stayed. Even Zoya, though she kept up a steady stream of complaints all the way to Dva Stolba.

We'd agreed to split into two groups. Tamar, Nadia, and Adrik would travel with David, Genya, and Misha. They'd secure lodgings in one of the settlements at the southeast edge of the valley. Genya would have to keep her face hidden, but she didn't seem to mind. She'd wrapped her shawl around her head and declared, "I shall be a woman of mystery." I reminded her not to be *too* intriguing.

Mal and I would travel into the Sikurzoi with Zoya, Harshaw, and Tolya. Because we were so close to the border, we knew we might be facing an increased military presence, but we hoped we could blend in with the refugees trying to get through the Sikurzoi before the first snows came.

If we weren't back from the mountains in two weeks, Tamar would meet with any forces the Apparat might send to Caryeva. I didn't like the idea of sending her and Nadia alone, but Mal and I couldn't cut our group down any further. Shu raiders were known to pick off Ravkan travelers near the border, and we wanted to be prepared for trouble. Tamar at least knew the Soldat Sol, and I tried to reassure myself that she and Nadia were both experienced fighters.

I also wasn't sure what I'd do with any soldiers who did show up, but the message had been sent, and I had to believe that we'd figure out something. Maybe by then I'd have the firebird and the beginnings of a plan. I couldn't think too far ahead. Every time I did, I felt panic tugging at me. It was like being underground again, no air to breathe, waiting for the world to come down around

me.

Our team left at sunrise, leaving the others sleeping in the shade of the overhang. Only Misha was awake, watching us with accusatory eyes as he pelted the side of the *Bittern* with pebbles.

“Come here,” Mal said, waving him over. I thought Misha might not budge, but then he shuffled to us, his chin jutting out in a sulk. “Do you have the pin Alina gave you?”

Misha nodded once.

“You know what that means, don’t you? You’re a soldier. Soldiers don’t get to go where they want to. They go where they’re needed.”

“You just don’t want me with you.”

“No, we need you here to take care of the others. You know David is hopeless, and Adrik is going to need help too, even if he doesn’t want to admit it. You’ll have to be careful with that one, help him without letting him know you’re helping. Can you manage that?”

Misha shrugged.

“We need you to take care of them the way you took care of Baghra.”

“But I didn’t take care of her.”

“Yes you did. You watched over her, and you made her comfortable, and you let her go when she needed you to. You did what had to be done, even though it hurt you. That’s what soldiers do.”

Misha looked at him sharply, as if considering this. “I should have stopped her,” he said, his voice breaking.

“If you had, none of us would be here. We’re grateful that you did the hard thing.”

Misha frowned. “David *is* kind of a mess.”

“True,” Mal agreed. “So can we trust you?”

Misha looked away. His expression was still troubled, but he shrugged again.

“Thank you,” Mal said. “You can start by getting water boiling for breakfast.”

Misha nodded once, then jogged back through the gravel to get the water on.

Mal glanced at me as he rose and shouldered his pack. “What?”

“Nothing. That was just … really well done.”

“Same way Ana Kuya got me to stop begging her to keep a lantern lit at

night.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” he said starting the climb. “Told me I had to be brave for you, that if I was scared, you’d be scared.”

“Well, she told me I had to eat my parsnips to set a good example for you, but I still refused to do it.”

“And you wonder why you were always getting the switch.”

“I have principles.”

“That means, ‘If I can be difficult, I will.’”

“Unfair.”

“Hey!” Zoya shouted over the edge of the crater above. “If you’re not up here before I count to ten, I’m going back to sleep and you can carry me to Dva Stolba.”

“Mal,” I sighed. “If I murder her in the Sikurzoi, will you hold me accountable?”

“Yes,” he said. Then added, “That means, ‘Let’s make it look like an accident.’”

* * *

DVA STOLBA TOOK ME by surprise. I’d somehow expected that the little valley would be like a graveyard, a grim wasteland of phantoms and abandoned places. Instead, the settlements were bustling. The landscape was dotted with burned-out hulks and empty fields of ash, but new homes and businesses had sprung up right beside them.

There were taverns and hostelries, a storefront advertising watch repair, and what looked like a shop that lent books by the week. Everything felt oddly impermanent. Broken windows had simply been boarded over. Many of the houses had canvas roofs or holes in the walls that had been covered with wool blankets or woven mats. *Who knows how long we’ll be here?* they seemed to say. *Let’s make do with what we have.*

Had it always been this way? The settlements were constantly being destroyed and rebuilt, governed by the Shu Han or Ravka, depending on how the borders had been drawn at the end of a particular war. Was this how my parents

had lived? It was strange to picture them this way, but I didn't mind the idea. They might have been soldiers or merchants. They might have been happy here. And maybe one of them had been harboring a power, the latent legacy of Morozova's youngest daughter. There were legends of Sun Summoners before me. Most people thought they were hoaxes or empty stories, wishful thinking born of the misery wrought by the Fold. But there might be more to it than that. Or maybe I was clinging to some dream of a heritage I had no real claim to.

We passed through a market square crowded with people, their wares displayed on makeshift tables: tin pans, hunting knives, furs for the trek over the mountains. We saw jars of goose fat, dried figs sold in bunches, fine saddles, and flimsy-looking guns. Strings of freshly plucked ducks, their skin pink and dimpled, hung above one stall. Mal kept his bow and repeating rifle bundled in his pack. The weapons were too finely made not to draw attention.

Children played in the dirt. A squat man in a sleeveless vest was smoking some kind of meat in a big metal drum. I watched him toss a juniper branch inside it, sending up a fragrant, bluish cloud. Zoya scrunched up her nose, but Tolya and Harshaw couldn't dig out their coins fast enough.

This was where Mal's family and mine had met death. Somehow the wild, cheerful atmosphere seemed almost unfair. It certainly didn't match my mood.

I was relieved when Mal said, "I thought it would be more grim."

"Did you see how small the graveyard was?" I asked under my breath. He nodded. In most of Ravka, the cemeteries were bigger than the towns, but when the Shu had burned these settlements, there had been no one left to mourn the dead.

Though we'd been well provisioned from the stocks at the Spinning Wheel, Mal wanted to buy a map made by a local. We needed to know which trails might be blocked by landslides or where the bridges had been washed out.

A woman with white braids peeking from beneath her orange wool hat sat on a low, painted stool, humming to herself and beating a cowbell to catch the attention of passersby. She hadn't bothered with a table, but had laid a rug displaying her stock—canteens, saddlebags, maps, and stacks of metal prayer rings—directly on the ground. A mule stood behind her, its long ears twitching off flies, and occasionally, she would reach back and offer it a pat on the nose.

“Snow’s coming soon,” she said, squinting up at the sky as we poked through the maps. “Need blankets for the journey?”

“We’re set,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Lot of people headed over the border.”

“But not you?”

“Too old to go now. Shu, Fjerdans, Fold…” She shrugged. “You sit still, trouble passes you by.”

Or it smacks right into you, then comes back for seconds, I thought bleakly.

Mal held up one of the maps. “I’m not seeing the eastern mountains, only the west.”

“Better off keeping west,” she said. “You trying for the coast?”

“Yes,” Mal lied smoothly, “then on to Novyi Zem. But—”

“Stay west. People don’t come back from the east.”

“*Ju weh,*” said Tolya. “*Ey ye bat e’yuan.*”

The woman answered back, and they looked over a map together, conversing in Shu while we waited patiently.

Finally, Tolya handed a different map to Mal. “East,” he said.

The woman jabbed her cowbell at Tolya and asked me, “What are you going to feed that one in the hills? Better make sure he doesn’t put *you* on a spit.”

Tolya frowned, but the woman laughed so hard she nearly fell off her stool.

Mal added some prayer rings to the maps and gave over his coins.

“Had a brother who went to Novyi Zem,” the woman said, still chuckling as she returned Mal’s change. “Probably rich now. It’s a good place to start a new life.”

Zoya snorted. “Compared to what?”

“It’s really not bad,” said Tolya.

“Dirt and more dirt.”

“There *are* cities,” Tolya grumbled as we walked away.

“What did that woman have to say about the eastern mountains?” I asked.

“They’re sacred,” said Tolya, “and apparently haunted. She claims the Cera Huo is guarded by ghosts.”

A shiver ran up my spine. “What’s the Cera Huo?”

Tolya’s golden eyes glinted. “The Firefalls.”

* * *

I DIDN’T EVEN NOTICE the ruins until we were almost directly beneath them. They were that nondescript—two worn and weather-beaten spires of rock that flanked the road leading southeast out of the valley. They might have once been an arch. Or an aqueduct. Or two mills, as their name indicated. Or just two pointy bits of rock. What had I expected? Ilya Morozova by the side of the road in a golden halo, holding up a sign that read “You were right, Alina. This way to the firebird”?

But the angles seemed correct. I’d scrutinized the illustration of Sankt Ilya in Chains so often that the image was branded in my mind. The view of the Sikurzoi beyond the spindles matched up to my memory of the page. Had Morozova drawn it himself? Was he responsible for the map left behind in that illustration or had someone else pieced together his story? I might never know.

This is the place, I told myself. *It has to be.*

“Anything familiar?” I asked Mal.

He shook his head. “I guess I hoped…” He shrugged. He didn’t have to say more than that. I’d been carrying the same hope lodged in my heart, that once I was on this road, in this valley, more of my past might suddenly become clear. But all I had was my same worn set of memories: a dish of beets, a broad pair of shoulders, the sway of ox tails ahead of me.

We spotted a few refugees—a woman with a baby at her breast riding in a pony cart while her husband walked alongside, a group of people our age who I assumed were First Army deserters. But the road beneath the ruins was not crowded. The most popular places to try to enter the Shu Han were farther west, where the mountains were less steep and travel to the coast was easier.

The beauty of the Sikurzoi came on me suddenly. The only mountains I’d known were the icy peaks of the far north and the Petrazoi—jagged, gray, and forbidding. But these mountains were gentle, rolling, their soft slopes covered in tall grasses, the valleys between them crossed with slow-moving rivers that flashed blue and then gold in the sun. Even the sky felt welcoming, a prairie of infinite blue, thick white clouds stacked heavy on the horizon, the snowcapped peaks of the southern range visible in the distance.

I knew this was no-man's-land, the dangerous boundary that marked the end of Ravka and the beginning of enemy territory, but it didn't feel that way. There was ample water, space for grazing. If there hadn't been a war, if the lines had somehow been drawn differently, this would have been a peaceful place.

We made no fire and camped in the open that night, our bedrolls spread beneath the stars. I listened to the sigh of the wind in the grasses and thought of Nikolai. Was he out there, tracking us as we tracked the firebird? Would he know us? Or had he lost himself completely? Would a day come when we'd simply be prey to him? I peered into the sky, waiting to see a winged shape blotting out the stars. Sleep did not come easily.

The next day, we left the main road and started to climb in earnest. Mal took us east, toward the Cera Huo, following a trail that seemed to appear and disappear as it wended through the mountains. Storms came on without warning, dense bursts of rain that turned the earth beneath our boots to sucking mud, then vanished as quickly as they'd arrived.

Tolya worried about flash floods, so we left the trail completely and headed for higher ground, spending the rest of the afternoon on the narrow back of a rocky ridge where we could see stormclouds chasing each other over the low hills and valleys, their dark swells glinting with brief flashes of lightning.

The days dragged on, and I was acutely conscious that every step we took deeper into the Shu Han was a step we would have to retrace back to Ravka. What would we find when we returned? Would the Darkling have already marched on West Ravka? And if we found the firebird, if the three amplifiers were brought together at last, would I be strong enough to face him? Mostly, I thought of Morozova and wondered if he'd once walked these same paths, gazed on these same mountains. Had his need to finish the task he'd begun driven him the way my desperation drove me now, forcing me to put one foot in front of the other, to take another step, ford another river, climb another hill?

That night, the temperature dropped enough that we had to set up tents. Zoya seemed to think I should be the one to put ours together, even if we were both going to sleep in it. I was cursing over the pile of canvas when Mal hushed me.

"Someone's out there," he said.

We were in a wide field of feather grass that stretched between two low hills.

I peered into the dusk, unable to make anything out, and lifted my hands questioningly.

Mal gave a shake of his head. “As a last resort,” he whispered.

I nodded. I didn’t want us in another situation like the one we’d had with the militia.

Mal picked up his rifle and signaled. Tolya drew his sword, and we formed up, back to back, waiting. “Harshaw,” I whispered.

I heard Harshaw’s flint being struck. He stepped forward and spread his arms. A blazing gout of fire roared to life. It swept around us in a shining ring, illuminating the faces of the men crouched low in the field beyond. There were five, maybe six of them, golden-eyed and dressed in shearling. I saw bows drawn and the glint of light off at least one gun barrel.

“Now,” I said.

Zoya and Harshaw moved as one, throwing their arms out in wide arcs, the flames flaring across the grass like a living thing, borne by their combined power.

Men shouted. The fire licked out in hungry tongues. I heard a single shot of gunfire, and the thieves turned and ran. Harshaw and Zoya sent the fire after them, chasing them across the field.

“They might come back,” said Tolya. “Bring more men. You get good money for Grisha in Koba.” It was a city just south of the border.

For the first time, I thought about what it must have been like for Tolya and Tamar, never able to return to their father’s country, strangers in Ravka, strangers here too.

Zoya shivered. “They aren’t any better in Fjerda. There are witchhunters who don’t eat animals, won’t wear leather shoes or kill a spider in their homes, but they’ll burn Grisha alive on the pyre.”

“Shu doctors might not be so bad,” said Harshaw. He was still playing with the flames, sending them shooting up in loops and snaking tendrils. “At least they clean their instruments. On the Wandering Isle, they think Grisha blood is a cure-all—for impotence, wasting plague, you name it. When my brother’s power showed itself, they cut his throat and hung him upside down to drain like a pig in a slaughterhouse.”

“Saints, Harshaw,” Zoya gasped.

“I burned that village and everyone in it to the ground. Then I got on a boat and never looked back.”

I thought of the dream the Darkling had once had, that we might be Ravkans and not just Grisha. He’d tried to make a safe place for our kind, maybe the only one in the world. *I understand the desire to remain free.*

Was that why Harshaw kept fighting? Why he’d chosen to stay? He must have shared the Darkling’s dream once. Had he given its care over to me?

“We’ll keep a watch tonight,” Mal said, “and head farther east tomorrow.”

East to the Cera Huo, where phantoms stood guard. But we were already traveling with ghosts of our own.

* * *

THERE WAS NO EVIDENCE of the thieves the next morning, only a field scorched in bizarre patterns.

Mal took us farther into the mountains. Early in our journey, we’d seen the curling smoke of someone’s cookfire or the shape of a hut on a hillside. Now we were alone, our only company the lizards we saw sunning themselves on rocks and, once, a herd of elk grazing in a distant meadow.

If there were signs of the firebird, they were invisible to me, but I recognized the silence in Mal, the deep intent. I’d seen it in Tsibeya when we were hunting the stag and then again on the waters of the Bone Road.

According to Tolya, the Cera Huo was marked differently on every map, and we certainly had no way of knowing if that was where we’d find the firebird. But it had given Mal a direction and now he moved in that steady, reassuring way of his, as if everything in the wild world was already familiar to him, as if he knew all of its secrets. For the others, it became a kind of game, trying to predict which way he would take us.

“What do you see?” Harshaw asked in frustration when Mal turned us away from an easy trail.

Mal shrugged. “It’s more what I don’t see.” He pointed up to where a flock of geese were tacking south in a sharp wedge. “It’s the way the birds move, the way the animals hide in the underbrush.”

Harshaw scratched Oncat behind the ear and whispered loudly, “And people say *I’m* crazy.”

As the days passed, I felt my patience fraying. We had too much time walking with nothing to do but think, and there was no safe place for my thoughts to wander. The past was full of horrors, and the future left me with that breathless, rising panic.

The power inside me had once seemed so miraculous, but each confrontation with the Darkling drove home the limitations of my abilities. *There is no fight to be had.* Despite the death I’d seen and the desperation I felt, I was no closer to understanding or wielding *merzost*. I found myself resenting Mal’s calm, the surety he seemed to carry in his steps.

“Do you think it’s out there?” I asked one afternoon when we’d taken shelter in a dense cluster of pines to wait out a storm.

“Hard to say. Right now, I could just be tracking a big hawk. I’m going on my gut as much as anything, and that always makes me nervous.”

“You don’t seem nervous. You seem completely at ease.” I could hear the irritation in my voice.

Mal glanced at me. “It helps that no one’s threatening to cut you open.”

I said nothing. The thought of the Darkling’s knife was almost comforting—a simple fear, concrete, manageable.

He squinted out at the rain. “And it’s something else, something the Darkling said in the chapel. He thought he needed me to find the firebird. As much as I hate to admit it, that’s why I know I can do it now, because he was so sure.”

I understood. The Darkling’s faith in me had been an intoxicating thing. I wanted that certainty, the knowledge that everything would be dealt with, that someone was in control. Sergei had run to the Darkling looking for that reassurance. *I just want to feel safe again.*

“When the time comes,” Mal asked, “can you bring the firebird down?”

Yes. I was done with hesitation. It wasn’t just that we’d run out of options, or that so much was riding on the firebird’s power. I’d simply grown ruthless enough or selfish enough to take another creature’s life. But I missed the girl who had shown the stag mercy, who had been strong enough to turn away from the lure of power, who had believed in something more. Another casualty of this

war.

“It still doesn’t seem real to me,” I said. “And even if it is, it may not be enough. The Darkling has an army. He has allies. We have…” A band of misfits? Some tattooed zealots? Even with the power of the amplifiers, it seemed a mismatched battle.

“Thanks,” Zoya said sourly.

“She has a point,” said Harshaw, propped against a tree. He had Oncat perched on his shoulder and was sending little flames dancing through the air. “I’m not really feeling up for much.”

“I didn’t mean that,” I protested.

“It’ll be enough,” said Mal. “We’ll find the firebird. You’ll face the Darkling. We’ll fight him, and we’ll win.”

“And then what?” I felt panic press in on me again. “Even if we beat the Darkling and I destroy the Fold, Ravka will be vulnerable.” No Lantsov prince to lead. No Darkling. Just a scrawny orphan from Keramzin with whatever force I might piece together from the Grisha who survived and the remnants of the First Army.

“There’s the Apparat,” said Tolya. “The priest may not be trustworthy, but your followers are.”

“And David thought he might be able to heal Nikolai,” Zoya put in.

I turned on her, my anger rising. “Do you think Fjerda will wait for us to find a cure? How about the Shu?”

“Then you’ll make a new alliance,” said Mal.

“Sell my power to the highest bidder?”

“You negotiate. Set your own terms.”

“Hash out a marriage contract, pick a Fjerdan noble or a Shu general? Hope my new husband doesn’t murder me in my sleep?”

“Alina—”

“And where will you go?”

“I’ll stay by your side as long as you let me.”

“Noble Mal. Will you stand guard outside our bedchamber at night?” I knew I was being unfair, but in that moment I didn’t care.

His jaw set. “I’ll do what I have to do to keep you safe.”

“Keep your head down. Do your duty.”

“Yes.”

“One foot in front of the other. Onward to the firebird. Keep marching like a good soldier.”

“That’s right, Alina. I’m a soldier.” I thought he might finally crack and give me the fight I wanted, that I was itching for. Instead, he stood and shook the water from his coat. “And I’ll keep marching because the firebird is all I can give you. No money. No army. No mountaintop stronghold.” He shouldered his pack. “This is all I have to offer. The same old trick.” He stepped out into the rain. I didn’t know if I wanted to run after him to apologize or knock him into the mud.

Zoya lifted one elegant shoulder. “I’d rather have the emerald.”

I stared at her, then shook my head and released something between a laugh and a sigh. My anger went out of me, leaving me feeling petty and embarrassed. Mal hadn’t deserved that. None of them had.

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

“Maybe you’re hungry,” said Zoya. “I always get mean when I’m hungry.”

“Are you hungry all the time?” asked Harshaw.

“You haven’t seen me mean. When you do, you’ll require a very big hanky.”

He snorted. “To dry my tears?”

“To stanch the bleeding.”

This time my laugh was real. Somehow a little of Zoya’s poison was exactly what I needed. Then, despite all my better judgment, I asked the question I’d wanted to ask for nearly a year. “You and Mal, back in Kribirsk—”

“It happened.”

I knew that and I knew there had been plenty of others before her, but it still stung. Zoya glanced at me, her long black lashes sparkling with rain. “But never since,” she said grudgingly, “and it hasn’t been for lack of trying. If a man can say no to me, that’s something.”

I rolled my eyes. Zoya poked me in the arm with one long finger. “He hasn’t been with anyone, you idiot. Do you know what the girls back at the White Cathedral called him? *Beznako.*”

A lost cause.

“It’s funny,” Zoya said contemplatively. “I understand why the Darkling and Nikolai want your power. But Mal looks at you like you’re … well, like you’re me.”

“No he doesn’t,” said Tolya. “He watches her the way Harshaw watches fire. Like he’ll never have enough of her. Like he’s trying to capture what he can before she’s gone.”

Zoya and I gaped at him. Then she scowled. “You know, if you turned a bit of that poetry on me, I might consider giving you a chance.”

“Who says I want one?”

“I want one!” called Harshaw.

Zoya blew a damp curl from her forehead. “Oncat has a better chance than you.”

Harshaw held the little tabby above him. “Why, Oncat,” he said. “You rogue.”

* * *

AS WE CLOSED IN on the area where the Cera Huo was rumored to be, our pace quickened. Mal grew even quieter, his blue eyes moving constantly over the hills. I owed him an apology, but I never seemed to find the right moment to speak to him.

Almost exactly a week into the journey, we came across what we thought was a dry creek bed that ran between two steep rock walls. We’d been following it nearly ten minutes when Mal knelt and ran his hand through the grass.

“Harshaw,” he said, “can you burn some of this scrub away?”

Harshaw struck his flint and sent a low blanket of blue flame rolling over the creek bed, revealing a pattern of stones too regular to be anything but manmade. “It’s a road,” he said in surprise.

“Here?” I asked. We’d passed nothing but empty mountains for miles.

We stayed alert, searching for signs of what might have come before, hoping to see etched symbols, maybe the little altars we’d seen carved into the rock closer to Dva Stolba, eager for some kind of proof that we were on the right path. But the only lesson in the stones seemed to be that cities rose and fell and were forgotten. *You live in a single moment. I live in a thousand.* I might live

long enough to see Os Alta turn to dust. Or maybe I'd turn my power back on myself and end it all before then. What would life be like when the people I loved were gone? When there were no mysteries left?

We followed the road to where it just seemed to end, buried in a slump of fallen rock covered in grass and yellow wildflowers. We scrambled over it, and when we reached the top, a sliver of ice crept into my bones.

It was as if the color had been leached out of the landscape. The field before us was gray grass. A black ridge stretched along the horizon, covered in trees, their bark smooth and glossy as polished slate, their angular branches free of leaves. But the eerie thing was the way they grew, in perfect, regular lines, equidistant, as if they had each been planted with infinite care.

"That looks wrong," said Harshaw.

"They're soldier trees," said Mal. "It's just the way they grow, like they're keeping ranks."

"That's not the only reason," said Tolya. "This is the ashwood. The gateway to the Cera Huo."

Mal took out his map. "I don't see it."

"It's a story. There was a massacre here."

"A battle?" I asked.

"No. A Shu battalion was brought here by their enemies. They were prisoners of war."

"Which enemies?" asked Harshaw.

Tolya shrugged. "Ravkan, Fjerdan, maybe other Shu. This was old days."

"What happened to them?"

"They starved, and when the hunger became too great, they turned on each other. It's said the last man standing planted a tree for each of his fallen brethren. And now they wait for travelers to pass too close to their branches, so they can claim a final meal."

"Lovely," grumbled Zoya. "Remind me to never ask you for a bedtime story."

"It's just a legend," Mal said. "I've seen those trees near Balakirev."

"Growing like that?" Harshaw asked.

"Not … exactly."

I eyed the shadows in the grove. The trees did look like a regiment marching

toward us. I'd heard similar stories about the woods near Duva, that in the long winters, the trees would snatch up girls to eat. *Superstition,* I told myself, but I didn't want to take another step toward that hillside.

"Look!" said Harshaw.

I followed his gaze. There, amid the deep shadows of the trees, something white was moving, a fluttering shape that rose and fell, slipping between the branches.

"There's another," I gasped, pointing to where a whorl of white shimmered, then disappeared into nothing.

"It can't be," said Mal.

Another shape appeared between the trees, then another.

"I do not like this," said Harshaw. "I do not like this *at all*."

"Oh, for Saints' sake," sneered Zoya. "You really are peasants."

She lifted her hands, and a massive gust of wind tore up the mountain. The white shapes seemed to retreat. Then Zoya hooked her arms, and they rushed at us in a moaning white cloud.

"Zoya—"

"Relax," she said.

I threw up my arms to ward off whatever horrible thing Zoya had brought down on us. The cloud exploded. It burst into harmless flakes that drifted to the ground around us.

"Ash?" I reached out to catch some of it on my fingers. It was fine and white, the color of chalk.

"It's just some kind of weather phenomenon," Zoya said, sending the ashes rising again in lazy spirals. We looked back up the hill. The white clouds continued to move in shifts and gusts, but now that we knew what they were, they seemed slightly less sinister. "You didn't really think they were ghosts, did you?"

I blushed and Tolya cleared his throat. Zoya rolled her eyes and strode toward the hill. "I am surrounded by fools."

"They looked spooky," Mal said to me with a shrug.

"They still do," I muttered.

All the way up the rise, weird little blasts of wind struck us, hot and then cold.

No matter what Zoya said, the grove was an eerie place. I steered clear of the trees' grasping branches and tried to ignore the gooseflesh puckering my arms. Every time a white whorl rose up near us, I jumped and Oncat hissed from Harshaw's shoulder.

When we finally crested the hill, we saw that the trees marched all the way into the valley, though here their branches were lush with purple leaves, their ranks spreading over the landscape below like the folds of a Fabrikator's robe. But that wasn't what stopped us in our tracks.

Ahead of us stood a towering cliff. It looked less a part of the mountains than like the wall of a giant's stronghold. It was dark and massive, nearly flat at the top, the rock the heavy gray of iron. A tangle of dead trees had been blown against its base. The cliff was split down the middle by a roaring waterfall that fed a pool so clear we could see the rocks at the bottom. The lake stretched almost the length of the valley, surrounded by blooming soldier trees, then seemed to disappear belowground.

We made our way down to the valley floor, stepping around and over little pools and rivulets, the thunder of the falls filling our ears. When we reached the largest pool, we stopped to fill our canteens and rinse our faces in the water.

"Is this it?" Zoya asked. "The Cera Huo?"

Setting Oncat aside, Harshaw dunked his head in the water. "Must be," he said. "What's next?"

"Up, I think," said Mal.

Tolya eyed the slick expanse of the cliff wall. The rock was wet with mist from the falls. "We'll have to go around. There's no way of scaling the face."

"In the morning," Mal replied. "Too dangerous to climb in this terrain at night."

Harshaw tilted his head to one side. "We might want to camp a little farther off."

"Why?" asked Zoya. "I'm tired."

"Oncat objects to the landscaping."

"That tabby can sleep at the bottom of the pool for all I care," she snapped.

Harshaw just pointed toward the tangle of dead trees crowded around the bottom of the cliff. They weren't trees at all. They were piles of bones.

“Saints,” Zoya said, backing away. “Are those animal or human?”

Harshaw hitched his thumb over his shoulder. “I saw a very welcoming bunch of boulders back that way.”

“Let’s go there,” said Zoya. “*Now*.”

We hurried from the falls, picking our way through the soldier trees and up the valley walls.

“Maybe the ash is volcanic,” I said hopefully. My imagination was getting the best of me, and I was suddenly sure that I had the ancient remains of burnt men in my hair.

“Could be,” said Harshaw. “There might be volcanic activity near here. Maybe that’s why they’re called the Firefalls.”

“No,” said Tolya. “That’s why.”

I looked back over my shoulder to the valley below. In the light of the setting sun, the falls had gone molten gold. It must have been a trick of the mist or the angle, but it was as if the very water had caught fire. The sun sank lower, setting every pool alight, turning the valley into a crucible.

“Incredible,” Harshaw groaned. Mal and I exchanged a glance. We’d be lucky if he didn’t try to throw himself in.

Zoya dumped her pack on the ground and slumped down on it. “You can keep your damn scenery. All I want is a warm bed and a glass of wine.”

Tolya frowned. “This is a holy place.”

“Great,” she retorted sourly. “See if you can pray me up a dry pair of socks.”

CHAPTER 14

AT DAWN the next morning, while the others damped the fire and gnawed at pieces of hardtack, I drew on my coat and walked back a little ways to look at the falls. The mist was dense in the valley. From here, the bones at the base of the falls just looked like trees. No ghosts. No fire. It felt like a quiet place, somewhere to rest.

We were packing up the ash-covered tents when we heard it—a cry, high and piercing, echoing through the dawn. We halted, silent, waiting to see if it would sound again.

"Could just be a hawk," warned Tolya.

Mal said nothing. He slung his rifle over his shoulder and plunged into the woods. We had to scurry to keep pace with him.

The climb up the back of the falls took us the better part of the day. It was steep and brutal, and though my feet had toughened and my legs were used to hard travel, I still felt the strain of it. My muscles ached beneath my pack, and despite the chill in the air, sweat beaded on my forehead.

"When we catch this thing," panted Zoya, "I'm going to turn it into a stew."

I could feel the excitement rippling through all of us, the sense that we were close now, and we drove each other to push harder up the mountain. In some places, the rise was nearly vertical. We had to pull ourselves higher by grabbing tight to the roots of scraggly trees or wedging our fingers into the rock. At one point, Tolya brought out iron spikes and hammered them directly into the mountain so we could use them as a makeshift ladder.

Finally, late in the afternoon, we hauled our bodies over a ragged stone lip

and found ourselves on the flat top of the cliff wall, a smooth expanse of rock and moss, slick with mist and split by the frothing tide of the river.

Looking north, beyond the abrupt drop of the falls, we could see back the way we'd come—the far ridge of the valley, the gray field that led to the ashwood, the indentation of the old road, and beyond it, storms moving over the grass-covered foothills. And they were just foothills. That was clear now. Because if we turned south, we had our first real view of the mountains, the vast, white-capped Sikurzoi, the source of the snowmelt that fed the Cera Huo.

"They just go on and on," said Harshaw wearily.

We made our way to the side of the rapids. It would be tricky fording them, and I wasn't sure there was a point. We could see across to the other side, where the cliff simply ended. There was nothing there. The plateau was clearly and disappointingly empty.

The wind picked up, whipping through my hair and sending a fine mist stinging against my cheek. I glanced south at the white mountains. Autumn was here and winter was on its way. We'd been gone over a week. What if something had happened to the others back in Dva Stolba?

"Well," said Zoya angrily, "where is it?"

Mal walked to the edge of the falls and looked out at the valley.

"I thought you were supposed to be the best tracker in all of Ravka," she said. "Just where do we go now?"

Mal rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "Down one mountain, up the next. That's the way it works, Zoya."

"For how long?" she said. "We can't just keep on this way."

"Zoya," Tolya cautioned.

"How do we even know this thing exists?"

"What were you expecting?" asked Tolya. "A nest?"

"Why not? A nest, a feather, a steaming pile of dung. Something. *Anything.*"

Zoya was the one saying it, but I sensed the fatigue and disappointment in the others. Tolya would keep going until he collapsed. I wasn't sure Harshaw and Zoya could take much more.

"It's too wet to make camp here," I said. I pointed toward the woods behind the plateau where the trees were reassuringly ordinary, their leaves lit with red

and gold. “Head that way until you find a dry spot. Make a fire. We’ll figure out what to do after dinner. Maybe it’s time to split up.”

“You can’t go farther into the Shu Han without protection,” Tolya objected.

Harshaw said nothing, just nuzzled Oncat and failed to meet my eyes.

“We don’t have to decide right now. Just go make camp.”

Carefully, I crossed to the edge of the plateau to join Mal. The drop was dizzying, so I looked into the distance instead. If I squinted, I thought I could just make out the burned field where we’d chased off the thieves, but it might have been imagination.

“I’m sorry,” he said at last.

“Don’t apologize. For all we know, there is no firebird.”

“You don’t believe that.”

“No, but maybe we weren’t meant to find it.”

“You don’t believe that either.” He sighed. “So much for the good soldier.”

I winced. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“You once put goose droppings in my shoes, Alina. A bad mood I can handle.” He glanced at me and said, “We all know the burden you’re carrying. You don’t have to bear it alone.”

I shook my head. “You don’t understand. You can’t.”

“Maybe not. But I saw this with soldiers in my unit. You keep storing up all that anger and grief. Eventually it spills over. Or you drown in it.”

He’d been telling me the same thing when we’d first arrived at the mine, when he’d said the others needed to grieve with me. I’d needed it too, even if I hadn’t wanted to admit it. I’d needed to not be alone. And he was right. I did feel like I was drowning, fear closing in over me like an icy sea.

“It’s not that easy,” I said. “I’m not like them. I’m not like anyone.” I hesitated then added, “Except him.”

“You’re nothing like the Darkling.”

“I am, even if you don’t want to see it.”

Mal raised a brow. “Because he’s powerful and dangerous and eternal?” He gave a rueful laugh. “Tell me something. Would the Darkling ever have forgiven Genya? Or Tolya and Tamar? Or Zoya? Or me?”

“It’s different for us,” I said. “Harder to trust.”

“I have news for you, Alina. That’s tough for everyone.”

“You don’t—”

“I know, I know. I don’t get it. I just know there’s no way to live without pain—no matter how long or short your life is. People let you down. You get hurt and do damage in return. But what the Darkling did to Genya? To Baghra? What he tried to do to you with that collar? That’s weakness. That’s a man afraid.” He peered out at the valley. “I may never be able to understand what it is to live with your power, but I know you’re better than that. And they all know it too,” he said with a nod back to where the others had gone to make camp. “That’s why we’re here, fighting beside you. That’s why Zoya and Harshaw will whine all night, but tomorrow they’ll stay.”

“Think so?”

He nodded. “We’ll eat, we’ll sleep, and then we see what happens next.”

I sighed. “Just keep going.”

He laid a hand on my shoulder. “You move forward, and when you falter, you get up. And when you can’t, you let us carry you. You let me carry you.” He dropped his hand. “Don’t stay out here too long,” he said, then turned and strode back over the plateau.

I won’t fail you again.

The night before Mal and I had first entered the Fold, he’d promised that we would survive. *We’re going to be fine*, he’d told me. *We always are.* In the year since, we’d been tortured and terrorized, broken and rebuilt. We would probably never feel fine again, but I’d needed that lie then, and I needed it now. It kept us standing, kept us fighting another day. It was what we’d been doing our whole lives.

The sun was just starting to set. I stood at the edge of the falls, listening to the rush of the water. As the sun dipped, the falls caught fire, and I watched the pools in the valley turn gold. I leaned over the drop, glimpsing the pile of bones below. Whatever Mal had been hunting, it was big. I peered into the mist rising off the rocks at the base of the falls. The way it billowed and shifted, it almost looked like it was alive, as if—

Something came rushing up at me. I stumbled backward and hit the ground with a jarring thud to my tailbone. A cry cut through the silence.

My eyes searched the sky. A huge winged shape soared above me in a widening arc.

“Mal!” I shouted. My pack was at the edge of the plateau, along with my rifle and bow. I made a dash for them, and the firebird came straight at me.

It was huge, white like the stag and the sea whip, its vast wings tinged with golden flame. They beat the air, the gust driving me backward. Its call echoed through the valley as it opened its massive beak. It was big enough to take my arm off in one bite, maybe my head. Its talons gleamed, long and sharp.

I raised my hands to use the Cut, but I couldn’t keep my footing. I slipped and felt myself tumbling toward the cliff’s edge—hip, then head, striking damp rock. *The bones,* I thought. *Oh, Saints, the bones at the bottom of the falls.* This was how it killed.

I clawed at the slick stone, trying to find purchase—and then I was falling.

My scream caught on my lips as my arm was nearly wrenched from its socket. Mal had hold of me just below my elbow. He was on his stomach, hanging over the cliff face, the firebird circling above him in the fading light.

“I’ve got you!” he shouted, but his grip was slipping up the damp skin of my forearm.

My feet dangled over nothing, my heart pounding in my chest. “Mal…” I said desperately.

He leaned out farther. We were both going over.

“I’ve got you,” he repeated, his blue eyes blazing. His fingertips closed around my wrist.

The jolt slammed through us at the same time, the same crackling shock we’d felt that night in the woods near the *banya*. He flinched. This time we had no choice but to hold tight. Our eyes met, and power surged between us, bright and inevitable. I had the sense of a door swinging open, and all I wanted was to step through—this taste of perfect, gleaming elation was nothing compared to what lay on the other side. I forgot where I was, forgot everything but the need to cross that threshold, to claim that power.

And with that hunger came horrible understanding. *No,* I thought desperately. *Not this.*

But it was too late. I knew.

Mal gritted his teeth. I felt his grip go even tighter. My bones rubbed together. The burn of power was almost unendurable, a dull whine that filled my head. My heart beat so hard I thought I might not survive it. I needed to walk through that door.

Then, miraculously, he was pulling me higher, inch by inch. I pawed at the rock with my other hand, searching for the top of the cliff, and finally made contact. Mal took hold of both my arms, and I wriggled onto the safety of the plateau.

As soon as his hand released my wrist, the shuddering rush of power relented. We dragged ourselves away from the edge, muscles trembling, panting for breath.

That echoing call sounded again. The firebird hurtled toward us. We shoved up to our knees. Mal had no time to draw his bow. He threw himself in front of me, arms spread wide as the firebird shrieked and dove, its talons extended directly toward him.

The impact never came. The firebird drew up short, its claws bare inches from Mal's chest. Its wings beat once, twice, driving us back. Time seemed to slow. I could see us both reflected in its great golden eyes. Its beak was razor sharp, and its feathers seemed to blaze with a light of their own. Even through my fear, I felt awe. The firebird was Ravka. It was right that we should kneel.

It gave another piercing cry, then whirled and flapped its wings, soaring into the gathering dusk.

We sank to the ground, breathing hard.

"Why did it stop?" I gasped.

A long moment passed. Then Mal said, "We're not hunting it anymore."

He knew. Just as I did. *He knew.*

"We need to get out of here," he said. "It still might come back."

Dimly, I was aware of the others running toward us over the slippery rock as we got to our feet. They must have heard my screams.

"That was it!" shouted Zoya, pointing at the disappearing shape of the firebird. She lifted her hands to try to bring it back in a downdraft.

"Zoya, stop," said Mal. "Let it go."

"Why? What happened? Why didn't you kill it?"

“It’s not the amplifier.”

“How can you know that?”

Neither of us answered.

“What is going on?” she shouted.

“It’s Mal,” I said finally.

“What’s Mal?” asked Harshaw.

“Mal is the third amplifier.” The words came out in a rasp, but solid, so much more even and strong than I ever would have anticipated.

“What are you talking about?” Zoya’s fists were clenched, and there were hectic spots of color on her cheeks.

“We should find cover,” said Tolya.

We limped across the plateau and followed the others a short distance up the next hill to the camp they’d made near a tall poplar.

Mal dropped his rifle and unslung his bow. “I’m going to go catch dinner,” he said, and melted into the woods before I could think to form a protest.

I slumped down on the ground. Harshaw started the fire, and I sat before it, staring at the flames, barely feeling their warmth. Tolya handed me a flask, then dropped into a crouch, and after waiting for a nod from me, slammed my shoulder back into its socket. The pain wasn’t enough to stop the images pouring through my head, the connections my mind wouldn’t stop making.

A girl in a field, standing over her slain sister, the black wisps of the Cut rising from her body, a father kneeling beside her.

He was a great Healer. Baghra had gotten it wrong. It had taken more than the Small Science to save Morozova’s other daughter. It had taken *merzost*, resurrection. I’d been wrong too. Baghra’s sister hadn’t been Grisha. She’d been *otkazat’sya* after all.

“You must have known,” said Zoya, sitting down on the other side of the fire. Her gaze was accusatory.

Had I? The jolt that night by the *banya*, I’d assumed it was something in me.

And yet, when I looked back, the pattern seemed clear. The first time I’d used my power had been when Mal lay dying in my arms. We’d searched for the stag for weeks, but we’d found it after our first kiss. When the sea whip had revealed itself, I’d been standing in the circle of his arms, close to him for the first time

since we'd been forced aboard the Darkling's ship. The amplifiers wanted to be brought together.

And hadn't our lives been bound from the first? By war. By abandonment. Maybe by something more. It couldn't be chance that we'd been born into neighboring villages, that we'd survived the war that had taken both of our families, that we'd both ended up at Keramzin.

Was this the truth behind Mal's gift for tracking, that he was somehow tied to everything, to the making at the heart of the world? Not a Grisha, and no ordinary amplifier, but something else entirely?

I am become a blade. A weapon to be used. How right he'd been.

I covered my face with my hands. I wanted to blot out this knowledge, carve it from my skull. Because I hungered for the power that lay beyond that golden door, desired it with a kind of pure and aching fever that made me want to tear at my skin. The price for that power would be Mal's life.

What had Baghra said? *You may not be able to survive the sacrifice that* merzost *requires.*

Mal returned a little while later. He'd brought back two fat rabbits. I heard the sounds of him and Tolya working as they cleaned and spitted the animals, and soon I smelled cooking meat. I had no appetite.

We sat there, listening to the branches pop and hiss in the heat of the flame, until finally Harshaw spoke. "If someone doesn't talk soon, I'm going to set fire to the woods."

So I took a sip from Zoya's flask, and I talked. The words came more easily than I expected. I told them Baghra's story, the horrible tale of a man obsessed, of the daughter he neglected, of the other daughter who had nearly died because of it.

"No," I corrected myself. "She did die that day. Baghra killed her. And Morozova brought her back."

"No one can—"

"He could. It wasn't healing. It was resurrection, the same process he used to create the other amplifiers. It's all in his journals." The means of keeping oxygen in the blood, the method for preventing decay. The power of the Healer and the Fabrikator pushed to their limits and well beyond, taken to a place they were

never meant to go.

"*Merzost*," Tolya whispered. "Power over life and death."

I nodded. Magic. Abomination. The power of creation. That was why the journals were incomplete. In the end, there had been no reason for Morozova to hunt for a creature to make into the third amplifier. The cycle had already been completed. He'd endowed his daughter with the power he'd meant for the firebird. The circle had closed.

Morozova had achieved his grand design, but not the way he had expected. *To dabble in* merzost*, well, the results are never quite what one would hope.* When the Darkling had tampered with the making at the heart of the world, the punishment for his arrogance was the Fold, a place where his power was meaningless. Morozova had created three amplifiers that could never be brought together without his daughter forfeiting her life, without his descendants paying in flesh and blood.

"But the stag and the sea whip … they were ancient," said Zoya.

"Morozova chose them deliberately. They were sacred creatures—rare, fierce. His child was just an ordinary *otkazat'sya* girl." Was that why the Darkling and Baghra had discounted her so readily? They'd assumed she'd died that day, but the resurrection must have made her stronger—her fragile, mortal life, a life bound by the rules of this world, had been replaced by something else. But in the moment when Morozova gave his daughter a second life, a life that didn't rightly belong to her, would he have cared if it was abomination that made it possible?

"She survived the plunge into the river," I said. "And Morozova brought her south to the settlements." To live and die in the shadow of the arch that would someday give Dva Stolba its name.

I looked at Mal. "She must have passed her power on to her descendants, built into their bones." A bitter laugh escaped me. "I thought it was me," I said. "I was so desperate to believe there was some great purpose to all this, that I didn't just … happen. I thought I was the other branch of Morozova's line. But it was you, Mal. It was always you."

Mal watched me through the flames. He hadn't said a word through the whole conversation, through all of a dinner that only Tolya and Oncat had managed to eat.

He said nothing now. Instead he rose and walked to me. He held out his hand. I hesitated the briefest moment, almost afraid to touch him, then placed my palm in his and let him pull me to my feet. Silently, he led me to one of the tents.

Behind me, I heard Zoya grumble, “Oh, Saints, now I have to listen to Tolya snore all night?”

“You snore too,” said Harshaw. “And it isn’t ladylike.”

“I do not…”

Their voices faded as we bent to enter the dim confines of the tent. Firelight filtered through the canvas walls and sent shadows swaying. Without a word, we lay down in the furs. Mal curled around me, his chest pressed to my back, his arms a tight circle, his breath soft against the crook of my neck. It was the way we’d slept with the insects buzzing around us by the shores of Trivka’s Pond, in the belly of a ship bound for Novyi Zem, on a narrow cot in the run-down boardinghouse in Cofton.

His hand slid down my forearm. Gently, he clasped the bare skin of my wrist, letting his fingers touch, testing. When they met, that jolting force moved through both of us, even that brief taste of power nearly unbearable in its force.

My throat constricted—with misery, with confusion, and with shameful, undeniable longing. To want this from him was too much, too cruel. *It’s not fair.* Stupid words, childish. Senseless.

“We’ll find another way,” I whispered.

Mal’s fingers separated, but he kept my wrist in a loose hold as he drew me closer. I felt as I always had in his arms—complete, like I was home. But now I had to question even that. Was what I felt real or some product of a destiny Morozova had set into motion hundreds of years ago?

Mal brushed the hair from my neck. He pressed a single brief kiss to the skin above the collar.

“No, Alina,” he said softly. “We won’t.”

* * *

THE RETURN JOURNEY to Dva Stolba seemed shorter. We kept to the high country, to the narrow spines of the hills, as distance and days faded beneath our feet. We moved more quickly because the terrain was familiar and Mal wasn’t

seeking signs of the firebird, but I also just felt as if time were contracting. I dreaded the reality that awaited us back in the valley, the decisions we would have to make, the explanations I would have to give.

We traveled in near silence, Harshaw humming occasionally or murmuring to Oncat, the rest of us locked in our own thoughts. After that first night, Mal kept his distance. I hadn't approached him. I wasn't even sure what I wanted to say. His mood had changed—that calm was still there, but now I had the eerie sense that he was drinking in the world, memorizing it. He would turn his face up to the sun and let his eyes close, or break a stalk of bur marigold and press it to his nose. He hunted for us every night that we had enough cover for a fire. He pointed out larks' nests and wild geranium, and caught a field mouse for Oncat, who seemed too spoiled to do any hunting of her own.

"For a doomed man," said Zoya, "you're remarkably chipper."

"He isn't doomed," I snapped.

Mal nocked an arrow, drew back, and released. It twanged into what looked like a cloudless and empty sky, but a second later, we heard a distant caw and a shape plummeted to the earth nearly a mile ahead of us. He shouldered his bow. "We all die," he said as he jogged off to retrieve his kill. "Not everyone dies for a reason."

"Are we philosophizing?" asked Harshaw. "Or were those song lyrics?"

As Harshaw started humming, I ran to catch up with Mal.

"Don't say that," I said as I came level with him. "Don't talk that way."

"All right."

"And don't think that way either."

He actually grinned.

"Mal, please," I said desperately, not even sure what I was asking for. I grabbed his hand. He turned to me, and I didn't stop to think. I went up on my toes and kissed him. It took him the barest second to react, then he dropped his bow and kissed me back, arms winding tight around me, the hard planes of his body pressed against mine.

"Alina—" he began.

I grabbed the lapels of his coat, tears filling my eyes. "Don't tell me this is all happening for a reason," I said fiercely. "Or that it's going to be okay. Don't tell

me you're ready to die."

We stood in the tall grass, wind singing through the reeds. He met my gaze, his blue eyes steady. "It's not going to be okay." He brushed the hair back from my cheeks and cupped my face in his rough hands. "None of this is happening for a reason." He skimmed his lips over mine. "And Saints help me, Alina, I want to live forever."

He kissed me again, and this time, he didn't stop—not until my cheeks were flushed and my heart was racing, not until I could barely remember my own name, let alone anyone else's, not until we heard Harshaw singing, and Tolya grumbling, and Zoya cheerfully promising to murder us all.

* * *

THAT NIGHT, I slept in Mal's arms, wrapped in furs beneath the stars. We whispered in the dark, stealing kisses, conscious of the others lying only a few feet away. Some part of me wished that a Shu raiding party would come and put a bullet through both of our hearts, leave us there forever, two bodies that would turn to dust and be forgotten. I thought about just leaving, abandoning the others, abandoning Ravka as we'd once intended, striking out through the mountains and making our way to the coast.

I thought of all these things. But I rose the next morning, and the morning after that. I ate dry biscuits, drank bitter tea. Too soon, the mountains faded, and we began our final descent into Dva Stolba. We'd arrived back sooner than expected, in time to retrieve the *Bittern* and still meet any forces the Apparat might send to Caryeva. When I saw the two stone spindles of the ruins, I wanted to level them, let the Cut do what time and weather had failed to, and turn them to rubble.

It took a little while to locate the boardinghouse where Tamar and the others had found lodging. It was two stories high and painted a cheerful blue, its porch hung with prayer bells, its pointed roof covered in Shu inscriptions that glittered with gold pigment.

We found Tamar and Nadia seated at a low table in one of the public rooms, Adrik beside them, his empty coat sleeve neatly pinned, a book perched awkwardly on his knees. They sprang to their feet when they saw us.

Tolya enveloped his sister in an enormous hug, while Zoya gave Nadia and Adrik a grudging embrace. Tamar hugged me close as Oncat sprang from Harshaw's shoulders to forage through the leavings of their meal.

"What happened?" she asked, taking in my troubled expression.

"Later."

Misha came pelting down the stairs and hurled himself at Mal. "You came back!" he shouted.

"Of course we did," said Mal, sweeping him into a hug. "Did you keep to your duties?"

Misha nodded solemnly.

"Good. I expect a full report later."

"Come on," Adrik said eagerly. "Did you find it? David's upstairs with Genya. Should I go get him?"

"Adrik," chastised Nadia, "they're exhausted and probably starving."

"Is there tea?" asked Tolya.

Adrik nodded and went off to order.

"We have news," said Tamar, "and it isn't good."

I didn't think it could possibly be worse than our news, so I waved her on. "Tell me."

"The Darkling attacked West Ravka."

I sat down hard. "When?"

"Almost immediately after you left."

I nodded. It was some comfort in knowing there was nothing I could have done. "How bad?"

"He used the Fold to take a big chunk out of the south, but from what we've heard, most of the people had already evacuated."

"Any word of Nikolai's forces?"

"There are rumors of cells cropping up fighting under the Lantsov banner, but without Nikolai to lead them, I'm not sure how long they'll hold out."

"All right." At least now I knew what we were dealing with.

"There's more."

I glanced at Tamar questioningly, and the look on her face sent a chill slithering over my skin.

“The Darkling marched on Keramzin.”

CHAPTER 15

MY STOMACH LURCHED. “What?”

“There are … there are rumors that he put it to the torch.”

“Alina—” Mal said.

“The students,” I said, panic creeping in on me. “What happened to the students?”

“We don’t know,” said Tamar.

I pressed my hands to my eyes, trying to think. “Your key,” I said, my breath coming in harsh gasps.

“There’s no reason to believe—”

“The *key*,” I repeated, hearing the quaking edge in my voice.

Tamar handed it to me. “Third on the right,” she said softly.

I took the stairs two at a time. Near the top, I slipped and banged my knee hard on one of the steps. I barely felt it. I stumbled down the hall, counting the doors. My hands were shaking so badly, it took me two tries to fit the key in the lock and get it to turn.

The room was painted in reds and blues, just as cheerful as the rest of the place. I saw Tamar’s jacket thrown over a chair by the tin basin, the two narrow beds pushed together, the rumpled wool blankets. The window was open, and autumn sunlight flooded through. A cool breeze lifted the curtains.

I slammed the door behind me and walked to the window. I gripped the sill, vaguely registering the rickety houses at the edge of the settlement, the spindles in the distance, the mountains beyond. I felt the pull of the wound in my shoulder, the creep of darkness inside me. I launched myself across the tether,

seeking him, the only thought in my mind: *What have you done?*

With my next breath, I was standing before him, the room a blur around me.

"At last," the Darkling said. He turned to me, his beautiful face coming into focus. He was leaning against a scorched mantel. Its outline was sickeningly familiar.

His gray eyes were empty, haunted. Was it Baghra's death that had left him this way or some horrific crime he'd committed here?

"Come," the Darkling said softly. "I want you to see."

I was trembling, but I let him take my hand and place it in the crook of his arm. As he did, the blurriness of the vision cleared and the room came to life around me.

We were in what had been the sitting room at Keramzin. The shabby sofas were stained black with soot. Ana Kuya's treasured samovar lay on its side, a tarnished hulk. Nothing remained of the walls but a charred and jagged skeleton, the ghosts of doorways. The curving metal staircase that had once led to the music room had buckled from the heat, its steps fusing together. The ceiling was gone. I could see straight through the wreck of the second story. Where the attic should have been, there was only gray sky.

Strange, I thought stupidly. *The sun is shining in Dva Stolba.*

"I've been here for days," he said, leading me through the wreckage, over the piles of debris, through what had once been the entry hall, "waiting for you."

The stone steps that led to the front door were smeared with ash but intact. I saw the long, straight gravel drive, the white pillars of the gate, the road that led to town. It had been nearly two years since I'd seen this view, but it was just as I remembered.

The Darkling placed his hands on my shoulders and turned me slightly.

My legs gave way. I fell to my knees, my hands clasped over my mouth. A sound tore from me, too broken to be called a scream.

The oak I'd once climbed on a dare still stood, untouched by the fire that had taken Keramzin. Now its branches were full of bodies. The three Grisha instructors hung from the same thick limb, their *kefta* fluttering slightly in the wind—purple, red, and blue. Beside them, Botkin's face was nearly black above the rope that had dug into his neck. He was covered in wounds. He'd died

fighting before they'd strung him up. Next to him, Ana Kuya swayed in her black dress, her heavy key ring at her waist, the toes of her button boots nearly scraping the ground.

"She was, I think, the closest thing you had to a mother," murmured the Darkling.

The sobs that shook me were like the lashes of a whip. I flinched with each one, bent double, collapsing into myself. The Darkling knelt before me. He took me by the wrists, pulling my hands free from my face, as if he wanted to watch me weep.

"Alina," he said. I kept my eyes on the steps, my tears clouding my vision. I would not look at him. "Alina," he repeated.

"Why?" The word was a wail, a child's cry. "Why would you do this? *How* can you do this? Don't you feel any of it?"

"I have lived a long life, rich in grief. My tears are long since spent. If I still felt as you do, if I ached as you do, I could not have borne this eternity."

"I hope Botkin killed twenty of your Grisha," I spat at him, "a hundred."

"He was an extraordinary man."

"Where are the students?" I made myself ask, though I wasn't sure I could bear the answer. "What have you done?"

"Where are *you*, Alina? I felt sure you would come to me when I moved against West Ravka. I thought your conscience would demand it. I could only hope that this would draw you out."

"*Where are they?*" I screamed.

"They are safe. For now. They will be on my skiff when I enter the Fold again."

"As hostages," I said dully.

He nodded. "In case you get any thoughts of attack rather than surrender. In five days, I will return to the Unsea, and you will come to me—you and the tracker—or I will drive the Fold all the way to West Ravka's coast, and I will march those children, one by one, to the mercy of the volcra."

"This place … these people, they were innocent."

"I have waited hundreds of years for this moment, for your power, for this chance. I have earned it with loss and with struggle. I will have it, Alina.

Whatever the cost.”

I wanted to claw at him, to tell him I’d see him torn apart by his own monsters. I wanted to tell him I would bring all the power of Morozova’s amplifiers down on him, an army of light, born of *merzost*, perfect in its vengeance. I might be able to do it, too. If Mal gave up his life.

“There will be nothing left,” I whispered.

“No,” he said gently as he folded me in his arms. He pressed a kiss to the top of my hair. “I will strip away all that you know, all that you love, until you have no shelter but me.”

In grief, in horror, I let myself break apart.

* * *

I WAS STILL ON MY KNEES, my hands clutching the windowsill, my forehead pressed against the wooden slats of the boardinghouse wall. Outside, I could hear the faint jingle of prayer bells. Inside, there was no sound but the hitch of my breath, the rasp of my sobs as the whip continued to fall, as I bent my back and wept. That was where they found me.

I didn’t hear the door open, or their steps as they approached. I just felt gentle hands take hold of me. Zoya sat me down on the edge of the bed, and Tamar settled beside me. Nadia took a comb to my hair, carefully working through the tangles. Genya washed first my face, then my hands with a cool cloth she’d wetted in the basin. It smelled faintly of mint.

We sat there, saying nothing, all of them clustered around me.

“He has the students,” I said flatly. “Twenty-three children. He killed the teachers. And Botkin.” And Ana Kuya, a woman they’d never known. The woman who had raised me. “Mal—”

“He told us,” said Nadia softly.

I think some part of me expected blame, recrimination. Instead, Genya rested her head on my shoulder. Tamar squeezed my hand.

This wasn’t just comfort, I realized. They were leaning on me—as I was leaning on them—for strength.

I have lived a long life, rich in grief.

Had the Darkling had friends like this? People whom he’d loved, who had

fought for him, and cared for him, and made him laugh? People who had become little more than sacrifices to a dream that outlived them?

"How long do we have?" Tamar asked.

"Five days."

A knock came at the door. It was Mal. Tamar made room for him beside me.

"Bad?" he asked.

I nodded. I couldn't yet stand to tell him what I'd seen. "I have five days to surrender, or he'll use the Fold again."

"He'll do it anyway," said Mal. "You said so yourself. He'll find a reason."

"I might buy us some time—"

"At what cost? You were willing to give up your life," he said quietly. "Why won't you let me do the same?"

"Because I can't bear it."

His face went hard. He seized my wrist and again I felt that jolt. Light cascaded behind my eyes, as if my whole body were ready to crack open with it. Unspeakable power lay behind that door, and Mal's death would open it.

"You *will* bear it," he said. "Or all of these deaths, all we've given up, will be for nothing."

Genya cleared her throat. "Um. The thing is, you may not have to. David has an idea."

* * *

"ACTUALLY, IT WAS Genya's idea," David said.

We were crowded around a table beneath an awning, a little way down the street from our boardinghouse. There were no real restaurants in this part of the settlement, but a kind of makeshift tavern had been set up in a burned-out lot. There were lanterns strung over the rickety tables, a wooden keg of sweet fermented milk, and meat roasting in two metal drums like the one we'd seen that first day at the market. The air was thick with the smell of juniper smoke.

Two men were shooting dice at a table near the keg while another plucked his way through a shapeless tune on a battered guitar. There was no discernible melody, but Misha seemed satisfied. He'd taken up an elaborate dance that apparently required clapping and a great deal of concentration.

“We’ll make sure to put Genya’s name on the plaque,” said Zoya. “Just get on with it.”

“Remember how you disguised the *Bittern*?” David asked. “The way you bent the light around the ship instead of letting it bounce off of it?”

“I was thinking,” said Genya. “What if you did that with us?”

I frowned. “You mean—”

“It’s the exact same principle,” said David. “It’s a greater challenge because there are more variables than just blue sky, but curving light around a soldier is no different than curving light around an object.”

“Wait a minute,” said Harshaw. “You mean we’d be invisible?”

“Exactly,” said Genya.

Adrik leaned forward. “The Darkling will launch from the drydocks in Kribirsk. We could sneak into his camp. Get the students out that way.” His fist was clenched, his eyes alight. He knew those children better than any of us. Some of them were probably his friends.

Tolya frowned. “There’s no way we’d get into camp and free them without being noticed. Some of those kids are younger than Misha.”

“Kribirsk will be too complicated,” said David. “Lots of people, interrupted sight lines. If Alina had more time to practice—”

“We have five days,” I repeated.

“So we attack on the Fold,” said Genya. “Alina’s light will keep the volcra at bay—”

I shook my head. “We’d still have to fight the Darkling’s *nichevo’ya*.”

“Not if they can’t see us,” said Genya.

Nadia grinned. “We’d be hiding in plain sight.”

“He’ll have *oprichniki* and Grisha too,” said Tolya. “They won’t be short on ammunition like we will. Even if they can’t see their targets, they may just open fire and hope they get lucky.”

“So we stay out of range.” Tamar moved her plate to the center of the table. “This is the glass skiff,” she said. “We place marksmen around the perimeter and use them to thin the Darkling’s ranks. *Then* we get close enough to sneak onto the skiff, and once we get the kids to safety—”

“We blow it to bits,” said Harshaw. He was practically salivating at the

prospect of the explosion.

"And the Darkling with it," Genya finished.

I gave Tamar's plate a turn, considering what the others were suggesting. Without the third amplifier, my power was no match for the Darkling's in a head-on confrontation. He'd proved that in no uncertain terms. But what if I came at him unseen, using light for cover the way others used darkness? It was sneaky, even cowardly, but the Darkling and I had left honor behind long ago. He'd been in my head, waged war on my heart. I wasn't interested in a fair fight, not if there was a chance I could save Mal's life.

As if he could read my mind, Mal said, "I don't like it. Too many things can go wrong."

"This isn't just your choice," said Nadia. "You've been fighting beside us and bleeding with us for months now. We deserve the chance to try and save your life."

"Even if you're a useless *otkazat'sya*," added Zoya.

"Careful," said Harshaw. "You're talking to the Darkling's … wait, what are you? His cousin? His nephew?"

Mal shuddered. "I have no idea."

"Are you going to start wearing black now?"

Mal gave a very firm "*No.*"

"You're one of us," said Genya, "whether you like it or not. Besides, if Alina has to kill you, she may go completely crazy *and* she'll have the three amplifiers. Then it will be up to Misha to stop her with the power of awful dancing."

"She is pretty moody," said Harshaw. He tapped his temple. "Not totally *there*, if you know what I mean."

They were kidding, but they might also have been right. *You were meant to be my balance.* What I felt for Mal was messy and stubborn and might leave me heartbroken in the end, but it was also human.

Nadia reached out and nudged Mal's hand. "At least consider the plan. And if it all goes wrong—"

"Alina gets a new bracelet," finished Zoya.

I scowled. "How about I slice *you* open and see how your bones fit?"

Zoya fluffed her hair. "I bet they're just as gorgeous as the rest of me."

I gave Tamar's plate another turn, trying to imagine what this kind of maneuver might require. I wished I had Nikolai's mind for strategy. One thing I was sure of. "It will take more than an explosion to kill the Darkling. He survived the Fold and the destruction of the chapel."

"Then what?" asked Harshaw.

"It has to be me," I said. "If we can separate him from his shadow soldiers, I can use the Cut." The Darkling was powerful, but I doubted even he could bounce back from being torn in half. And though I had no claim to Morozova's name, I was the Sun Summoner. I'd hoped for a grand destiny, but I would settle for a clean kill.

Zoya released a brief, giddy laugh. "This actually might work."

"It's worth thinking about," I said to Mal. "The Darkling will expect an attack, but he won't expect this."

Mal was silent for a long moment. "All right," he said. "But if it does go wrong … we all agree what has to happen."

He looked around the table. One by one they nodded. Tolya's face was stoic. Genya dropped her gaze. Finally, only I remained.

"I want your word, Alina."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "I'll do it." The words tasted like iron on my tongue.

"Good," he said. He grabbed my hand. "Now, let's show Misha how bad dancing's done."

"Kill you, dance with you. Any other requests?"

"Not at the moment," he said, pulling me close. "But I'm sure I'll think of something."

I tucked my head against Mal's shoulder and breathed in his scent. I knew I shouldn't let myself believe in this possibility. We didn't have an army. We didn't have the resources of a king. We only had this ragged crew. *I will strip away all that you know, all that you love.* If he could, I knew the Darkling would use these people against me, but it had never occurred to him that they might be more than liabilities. Maybe he'd underestimated them, and maybe he'd underestimated me too.

It was stupid. It was dangerous. But Ana Kuya used to tell me that hope was

tricky like water. Somehow it always found a way in.

* * *

WE STAYED UP LATE that night, talking through the logistics of the plan. The realities of the Fold complicated everything—where and how we would enter, whether or not it was even possible for me to cloak myself, let alone the others, how to isolate the Darkling and get the students clear. We had no blasting powders, so we'd have to make our own. I also wanted to ensure that the others had some way out of the Fold if anything happened to me.

We left early the next morning and crossed back through Dva Stolba to retrieve the *Bittern* from the quarry. It was strange to see it sitting where we'd left it, tucked safely away like a pigeon in the eaves.

"Saints," said Adrik as we clambered into the hulls. "Is that my blood?"

The stain was nearly as big as he was. We'd all been so tired and beaten after our long escape from the Spinning Wheel that no one had even thought to deal with it.

"You made the mess," said Zoya. "You clean it up."

"Need two hands to swab," Adrik retorted, taking a place at the sails instead.

Adrik seemed to relish Zoya's taunts over Nadia's constant fussing. I'd been relieved to learn that he could still summon, though it would take some time for him to be able to control strong currents with just one arm. *Baghra could teach him.* The thought came at me before I remembered that was no longer possible. I could almost hear her voice in my head: *Should I cut off your other arm? Then you'd have something to whine about. Do it again and do it better.* What would she have made of all of this? What would she have made of Mal? I pushed the thought away. We'd never know, and there was no time for mourning.

Once we were in the air, the Squallers set a gentle pace and I used the time to practice bending the light as I camouflaged the ship from below.

The journey took only a few hours, and we landed in a marshy pasture west of Caryeva. The town was the site of the summer horse sales every year. It wasn't known for anything but its racing track and its breeding stables, and even without the war, this late in the year, it would have been all but deserted.

The missive to the Apparat had proposed that we meet at the racecourse.

Tamar and Harshaw would scout the track on foot to make sure we weren't walking into a trap. If anything felt wrong, they'd circle back to meet us, and we'd decide what to do from there. I didn't think the Apparat would turn us over to the Darkling, but there was also the possibility that he'd struck some kind of new bargain with the Shu Han or Fjerda.

We were a day early, and the pasture was the perfect place to practice cloaking moving targets. Misha insisted on being first.

"I'm smaller," he said. "That will make it easier."

He ran out into the center of the field.

I raised my hands, gave a twist of my wrists, and Misha disappeared. Harshaw gave an appreciative whistle.

"Can you see me?" Misha shouted. As soon as he started waving, the light around him rippled and his skinny forearms appeared as if suspended in space.

Focus. They vanished.

"Misha," instructed Mal, "run toward us."

He appeared, then disappeared again as I adjusted the light.

"I can see him from the side," Tolya called from across the pasture.

I blew out a breath. I had to think about this more carefully. Disguising the ship had been easier because I'd only been altering the reflection of the light from below. Now I had to think about every angle.

"Better!" said Tolya.

Zoya yelped. "That little brat just kicked me."

"Smart kid," said Mal.

I lifted a brow. "Smarter than some."

He had the good grace to blush.

I spent the rest of the afternoon vanishing one, then two, then five Grisha at a time in the field.

It was a different kind of work, but Baghra's lessons still applied. If I concentrated too hard on projecting my power, variables overwhelmed me. But if I thought about the light being everywhere, if I didn't try to prod it and just let it bend, it got much easier.

I thought of the times I'd seen the Darkling use his power to blind soldiers in a battle, taking on multiple enemies at once. It was easy for him, natural. *I know*

things about power that you can barely guess at.

I practiced that night, then started up again the next morning after Tamar and Harshaw set out, but my concentration kept faltering. With more marksmen, our attack on the Darkling's skiff might actually stand a chance. What would be waiting at the racecourse? The priest himself? No one at all? I'd imagined a serf army, protected by three amplifiers, marching beneath the banner of the firebird. That wasn't the war we were waging anymore.

"I can see him!" Zoya singsonged at me. And sure enough, Tolya's big shape was flickering in and out as he jogged to my right.

I dropped my hands. "Let's break for a bit," I suggested.

Nadia and Adrik unfurled one of the sails so she could help him learn to manage updraft, and Zoya sprawled lazily on the deck to offer less than helpful critique.

Meanwhile, David and Genya bent their heads over one of his notebooks, trying to figure out where they could extract the components for a batch of *lumiya*. It turned out Genya didn't just have a gift for poisons. Her talents had always lain somewhere between Corporalnik and Materialnik, but I wondered what she might have become, what path she might have chosen, if not for the Darkling's influence. Mal and Misha headed to the far side of the field with arms full of pinecones and set them along the fence as targets so Misha could learn to shoot.

That left me and Tolya with nothing to do but worry and wait. He sat down beside me on one of the hulls, legs dangling over.

"Do you want to practice some more?" he asked.

"I probably should."

A long moment passed and then he said, "Can you do it? When the time comes?"

I was eerily reminded of Mal asking me if I could bring down the firebird. "You don't think the plan will work."

"I don't think it matters."

"You don't—"

"If you defeat the Darkling, the Fold will remain."

I kicked my heels against the hull. "I can deal with the Fold," I said. "My

power will make crossings possible. We can eliminate the volcra.” I didn’t like to think about that. As monstrous as they were, the volcra had once been human. I leaned back and studied Tolya’s face. “You’re not convinced.”

“You asked me once why I didn’t let you die in the chapel, why I let Mal go to you. Maybe there was a reason you both lived. Maybe this is it.”

“It was a supposed Saint who started all of this, Tolya.”

“And a Saint will end it.”

He slid from the hull to the ground and looked up at me. “I know you don’t believe as Tamar and I do,” he said, “but no matter how this ends, I’m glad our faith brought us to you.”

He headed off across the field to join Mal and Misha.

Whether it was coincidence or providence that had made Tolya and Tamar my friends, I was grateful for them. And if I was honest with myself, I envied their faith. If I could believe I had been blessed by some divine purpose, it might make the hard choices easier.

I didn’t know if our plan would work, and if it did, there were still too many unknowns. If we bested the Darkling, what would become of his shadow soldiers? And what about Nikolai? What if killing the Darkling caused his death? Should we be trying to capture the Darkling instead? If we survived, Mal would have to go into hiding. His life would be forfeit if anyone learned what he was.

I heard the sound of hoofbeats. Nadia and I climbed up on the captain’s platform to get a better look, and as the party came into view, my heart sank.

“Maybe there are more, back at the racecourse,” said Nadia.

“Maybe,” I said. But I didn’t believe it.

I made a quick count. Twelve soldiers. As they drew closer, I saw they were all young and most bore the sun tattoo on their faces. Ruby was there, with her pretty green eyes and blond braid, and I saw Vladim among them with two other bearded men I thought I recognized from the Priestguards.

I hopped down from the platform and went to greet them. When the party spotted me, they slipped from their horses and each dropped to one knee, heads bowed.

“Ugh,” said Zoya. “This again.”

I cast her a warning look, though I'd had the exact same thought. I'd nearly forgotten how much I dreaded the burden of Sainthood. But I took on the mantle, playing my part.

"Rise," I said, and when they did, I gestured Vladim forward. "Is this all of you?"

He nodded.

"And what excuse does the Apparat send?"

He swallowed. "None. The pilgrims say daily prayers for your safety and for the destruction of the Fold. He claims that your last command was for him to watch over your flock."

"And my plea for aid?"

Ruby shook her head. "The only reason we knew that you and Nikolai Lantsov had requested help was because a monk loyal to you retrieved the message from the Church of Sankt Lukin."

"So how do you come to be here?"

Vladim smiled and those absurd dimples appeared in his cheeks again. He exchanged a glance with Ruby.

"We escaped," she said.

I'd known the Apparat wasn't to be trusted, and yet some part of me had hoped he might offer me more than prayers. But I'd told him to tend to my followers, to keep them from harm, and they were certainly safer in the White Cathedral than marching into the Fold. The Apparat would do what he did best: wait. When the dust cleared, either I would have defeated the Darkling or found my martyrdom. Either way, men would still take up arms in my name. The Apparat's empire of the faithful would rise.

I laid my hands on Vladim's and Ruby's shoulders. "Thank you for your loyalty. I hope you won't be sorry for it."

They bowed their heads and murmured, "Sankta Alina."

"Let's move," I said. "You're a big enough group that you may have attracted attention, and those tattoos can't have helped."

"Where are we going?" asked Ruby, pulling up her scarf to hide her tattoo.

"Into the Fold."

I saw the new soldiers shift uneasily. "To fight?" she asked.

“To travel,” Mal replied.

No army. No allies. We had only three more days until we were to face the Darkling. We would take our chances, and if we failed, there would be no more options. I would murder the only person I’d ever loved and who had ever loved me. I’d dive back into battle wearing his bones.

CHAPTER 16

IT WOULDN'T BE SAFE to approach Kribirsk on this side of the Fold, so we'd decided to stage our attack from West Ravka, and that meant dealing with the logistics of a crossing. Because Nadia and Zoya couldn't keep the *Bittern* aloft with too many additional passengers, we agreed that Tolya would escort the Soldat Sol to the eastern shore of the Fold and wait for us there. It would take them a full day on horseback, and that would give the rest of us time to enter West Ravka and locate a suitable base camp. Then we'd loop back to lead the others across the Fold under the protection of my power.

We boarded the *Bittern,* and mere hours later, we were speeding toward the strange black fog of the Shadow Fold. This time, when we entered the darkness, I was prepared for the sense of familiarity that gripped me, that feeling of likeness. It was even stronger now that I'd dabbled in *merzost*, the very power that had created this place. I understood it better too, the need that had driven the Darkling to try to re-create Morozova's experiments, a legacy he felt was his.

The volcra came at us, and I glimpsed the dim shapes of their wings, heard their cries as they tore at the circle of light I summoned. If the Darkling had his way, they'd soon be well fed. I was grateful when we burst into the sky above West Ravka.

The territory west of the Fold had been evacuated. We flew over abandoned villages and houses, all without seeing a soul. In the end, we decided to set up in an apple farm just southwest of what was left of Novokribirsk, less than a mile from the dark reach of the Fold. It was called Tomikyana, the name written across the side of the cannery and the barn full of cider presses. Its orchards were

thick with fruit that would never be harvested.

The owner's house was lavish, a perfect little cake of a building, lovingly maintained, and topped with a white cupola. I felt almost guilty as Harshaw broke a window and climbed inside to unlock the doors.

"New money," sniffed Zoya as we made our way through the overdecorated rooms, each shelf and mantel brimming with porcelain figurines and curios.

Genya picked up a ceramic pig. "Vile."

"I like it here," protested Adrik. "It's nice."

Zoya made a retching sound. "Maybe taste will come with age."

"I'm only three years younger than you."

"Then maybe you're just doomed to be tacky."

The furniture had been covered with sheets. Misha yanked one free and ran from room to room trailing it behind him like a cape. Most of the cupboards had been emptied, but Harshaw found a tin of sardines that he opened and shared with Oncat. We'd have to send people out to the neighboring farms to scout for food.

Once we'd made sure there were no other squatters, we left David, Genya, and Misha to get started procuring materials for the production of *lumiya* and blasting powders. Then the rest of us reboarded the *Bittern* to cross back to Ravka.

We'd planned to reunite with the Soldat Sol at the monument to Sankta Anastasia that stood on a low hill overlooking what had once been Tsemna. Thanks to Anastasia, Tsemna had survived the wasting plague that had claimed half the population of the surrounding villages. But Tsemna hadn't survived the Fold. It had been swallowed up when the Black Heretic's disastrous experiments first created the Unsea.

The monument was an eerie sight, a giant stone woman rising out of the earth, arms spread wide, her benevolent gaze fixed on the nothingness of the Fold. Anastasia was rumored to have rid countless towns of sickness. Had she worked miracles, or was she simply a talented Healer? Was there any difference?

We'd arrived before the Soldat Sol, so we landed and made camp for the night. The air was still warm enough that we didn't need tents, and we laid our

bedrolls next to the foot of the statue near a patchy field studded with red boulders. Mal took Harshaw with him to try to find game for dinner. It was scarce down here, as if the animals were just as wary of the Unsea as we were.

I wrapped a shawl around my shoulders and walked down the hill to the edge of the black shore. *Two days,* I thought as I looked into the seething black mists. I knew better than to think I understood what lay ahead of me. Every time I'd tried to predict my fate, my life had been upended.

I heard a soft scraping sound behind me. I turned and froze. Nikolai was perched atop a high rock. He was cleaner than he had been, but he wore the same ragged trousers. His taloned feet gripped the ridge of the rock, and his shadow wings beat gently at the air, his gaze black and unreadable.

I'd been hoping he would show himself again, but now I wasn't sure what to do. Had he been watching us? What had he seen? How much had he understood?

Carefully, I reached into my pocket, afraid any sudden movement might make him bolt.

I held out my hand, the Lantsov emerald resting on my palm. He frowned, a line appearing between his brows, then folded his wings and leapt soundlessly from the rock. It was hard not to back away. I didn't want to be afraid, but the way he moved was so inhuman. He stalked toward me slowly, eyes focused on the ring. When he was less than a foot away, he cocked his head to one side.

Despite the black eyes and the inky lines that coursed up his neck, he still had an elegant face—his mother's fine cheekbones, the strong jaw that must have come from his ambassador father. His frown deepened. Then he reached out and plucked the emerald up in his claws.

"It's—" The words died on my lips. Nikolai turned my palm over and slid the ring onto my finger.

My breath caught between a laugh and a sob. He knew me. I couldn't stop the tears that welled in my eyes.

He pointed to my hand and made a sweeping gesture. It took me a second to grasp his meaning. He was imitating the way I moved when I summoned.

"You want me to call the light?"

His face stayed blank. I let sunlight pool in my palm. "This?"

The glow seemed to galvanize him. He seized my hand and slapped it against

his chest. I tried to draw away, but he held my hand in place. His grip was viselike, made stronger by whatever monstrous thing the Darkling had placed inside him.

I shook my head. “No.”

Again, he slapped my hand against his chest, the movement almost frantic.

“I don’t know what my power will do to you,” I protested.

The corner of his mouth curled, the faintest suggestion of Nikolai’s wry smile. I could almost hear him say, *Really, lovely, what could be worse?* Beneath my hand, his heart beat—steady and human.

I released a long breath. “All right,” I said. “I’ll try.”

I summoned the barest bit of light, letting it flow through my palm. He winced, but held my hand firmly in place. I pushed a little harder, trying to direct the light into him, thinking of the spaces between, letting it seep through his skin.

The black cracks on his torso began to recede. I couldn’t quite believe what I was seeing. Could it possibly be this simple?

“It’s working,” I gasped.

He grimaced, but waved me on, asking for more.

I called the light into him, watching the black veins fade and recoil.

He was panting now, his eyes closed. A low, pained whine rose from his throat. His grip around my wrist was iron.

“Nikolai—”

Then I felt something push back, as if the darkness within him was fighting. It shoved against the light. All at once, the cracks exploded outward, just as dark as before, like the roots of a tree drinking deep of poisoned water.

Nikolai flinched and shoved away from me with a frustrated snarl. He looked down at his chest, misery carved into his features.

It was no good. Only the Cut worked on the *nichevo’ya.* It might well destroy the thing inside Nikolai, but it would kill him too.

His shoulders slumped, his wings roiling with the same shifting movement as the Fold.

“We’ll think of something. David will come up with a solution, or we’ll find a Healer.…”

He dropped to his haunches, elbows resting on his knees, face buried in his hands. Nikolai had seemed infinitely capable, confident in his belief that every problem had a solution and he would be the one to find it. I couldn't bear seeing him this way, broken and defeated for the first time.

I approached him cautiously and crouched down. He wouldn't meet my eyes. Tentatively, I reached out and touched his arm, ready to draw back if he startled or snapped. His skin was warm, the feel of it unchanged despite the shadows lurking beneath it. I slipped my arms around him, careful of the wings that rustled at his back.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

He dropped his forehead to my shoulder.

"I'm so sorry, Nikolai."

He released a small, shuddering sigh.

Then he inhaled and tensed. He turned his head. I felt his breath on my neck, the scrape of one of his teeth beneath my jaw.

"Nikolai?"

His arms clamped around me. His claws dug into my back. There was no mistaking the growl that issued from his chest.

I pushed away from him and shot to my feet.

"Stop!" I said harshly.

His hands flexed. His lips had pulled back to reveal his onyx fangs. I knew what I saw in him: appetite.

"Don't," I pleaded. "This isn't you. You can control this."

He took a step toward me. Another rumbling, animal growl rolled through him.

I lifted my hands. "Nikolai," I said warningly. "I will put you down."

I saw the moment that reason returned. His face crumpled in horror at what he'd wanted to do, at what some part of him probably still wanted to do. His body was trembling with the desire to feed.

His black eyes brimmed with flickering shadows. Were they tears? He clenched his fists, threw back his head. The tendons in his neck knotted, and he released an echoing shriek of helplessness and rage. I'd heard it before, when the Darkling summoned the *nichevo'ya*, the rending of the fabric of the world, the

cry of something that should not be.

He launched himself into the air and hurtled straight for the Fold.

"Nikolai!" I screamed. But he was already gone, swallowed by the seething blackness, lost to the volcra's domain.

I heard footsteps and turned to see Mal, Harshaw, and Zoya running toward me, Oncat yowling and darting between their legs. Harshaw had his flint out, and Mal was unslinging his rifle.

Zoya's eyes were wide. "Was that a *nichevo'ya*?"

I shook my head. "It was Nikolai."

They stopped dead. "He found us?" said Mal.

"He's been tracking us since we left the Spinning Wheel."

"But the Darkling—"

"If he were the Darkling's creature, we'd already be dead."

"How long have you known he was following us?" asked Zoya angrily.

"I saw him once back at the copper mine. There was nothing to do about it."

"We could have had Mal put an arrow through him," said Harshaw.

I jabbed a finger at him. "I wouldn't abandon you, and I'm not abandoning Nikolai."

"Easy," said Mal, stepping forward. "He's gone now, and there's no point fighting about it. Harshaw, go start a fire. Zoya, the grouse we caught need cleaning."

She stared at him and didn't budge. He rolled his eyes.

"All right, they need cleaning by *someone else*. Please go find somebody to order around."

"My pleasure."

Harshaw returned his flint to his sleeve. "They're all crazy, Oncat," he said to the tabby. "Invisible armies, monster princes. Let's go set fire to something."

I rubbed a hand over my eyes as they walked off. "Are you going to yell at me too?"

"No. I've wanted to shoot Nikolai plenty of times, but that seems a little petty now. Curious about that ring, though."

I'd forgotten about the massive jewel on my hand. I pulled it off and shoved it in my pocket. "Nikolai gave it to me back at the Spinning Wheel. I thought he

might recognize it."

"Did he?"

"I think so. Before he tried to eat me."

"Saints."

"He flew into the Fold."

"Do you think he meant to—"

"Kill himself? I don't know. Maybe it's like a vacation home to him now. I don't even know if the volcra would see him as prey." I leaned against the boulder Nikolai had been perched on just minutes before. "He tried to have me heal him. It didn't work."

"You don't know what you may be able to do once the amplifiers are brought together."

"You mean after I murder you?"

"Alina—"

"We are not talking about this."

"You can't just pull the covers over your head and pretend this isn't happening."

"Can and will."

"You're being a brat."

"And you're being noble and self-sacrificing, and it makes me want to throttle you."

"Well, that's a start."

"That's not funny."

"How am I supposed to deal with this?" he asked. "I don't *feel* noble or self-sacrificing. I'm just…"

"What?"

He threw up his hands. "Hungry."

"You're hungry?"

"Yes," he snapped. "I'm hungry and I'm tired and I'm pretty sure that Tolya's going to eat all the grouse."

I couldn't help it. I burst out laughing. "Zoya warned me about this. She gets cranky when she's hungry too."

"I'm not cranky."

“Sulky,” I amended graciously.

“I am *not* sulking.”

“You’re right,” I said, trying to restrain my giggles. “Definitely more of a pout than a sulk.”

He snagged my hand and pulled me in for a kiss. He nipped my ear once, hard.

“Ow!”

“I told you I was hungry.”

“You’re the second person to try to bite me today.”

“Oh, it gets worse. When we get back to camp, I’m requesting the Third Tale of Kregi.”

“I’m telling Harshaw you’re a dog person.”

“I’m telling Zoya you don’t like her hair.”

We kept it up all the way back to the *Bittern*, shoving and taunting each other, feeling a little bit of the strain of the last weeks ease. But as the sun set and I looked over my shoulder into the Fold, I wondered what human things might remain beyond its shores, and if they could hear our laughter.

* * *

THE SOLDAT SOL ARRIVED late that night and got only a few hours of sleep before we set out the next day. They were wary as we entered the Fold, but I’d expected them to be far worse, clutching icons and chanting prayers. When we took our first steps into the darkness and I let the light burst forth in a flood around us, I understood: they didn’t need to plead with their Saints. They had me.

The *Bittern* drifted high above us, well within the roof of the bright bubble I’d created, but I’d chosen to travel on the sands so that I could practice bending light within the confines of the Fold. To the Soldat Sol, this new display of power was one more miracle, further proof that I was a living Saint. I remembered the Apparat’s claim: *There is no greater power than faith, and there will be no greater army than one driven by it.* I prayed that he was right, that I wasn’t just another leader taking their loyalty and repaying them with useless, honorable deaths.

It took us the better part of that day and night to cross the Fold and escort all of the Soldat Sol up the western shore. By the time we arrived back at Tomikyana, David and Genya had completely taken over. The kitchen looked like a storm had blown through. Bubbling pots covered the cookstove, and a huge kettle had been brought in from the cider press to serve as a cooling tub. David perched on a stool at the big wooden table where the servants had probably rolled dough only weeks before. Now it was littered with glass and metal, smears of some tarlike substance, and countless little bottles of foul-smelling yellow sludge.

"Is this entirely safe?" I asked him.

"Nothing is entirely safe."

"How reassuring."

He smiled. "I'm glad."

In the dining room, Genya had set up her own work space, where she was helping to construct canisters for the *lumiya* and slings that would carry them. The others could activate them as late as they dared during the attack, and if something happened to me on the Fold, they might still have enough light to get out. All of the farm owner's glassware had been conscripted—goblets, snifters, wine and liqueur glasses, an elaborate collection of vases, and a chafing dish in the shape of a fish.

The tea set had been filled with screws and grommets, and Misha sat cross-legged on a silk-cushioned chair, gleefully deconstructing saddles and organizing the strips and bits of leather into careful piles.

Harshaw was dispatched to steal whatever food he could find from nearby estates, work he seemed disturbingly adept at.

I labored beside Genya and Misha for most of the day. Out in the gardens, the Squallers practiced creating an acoustic blanket. It was a variation on the trick Zoya had performed after the cave-in, and we hoped it would allow us to enter the Fold and take up our positions in darkness without attracting the attention of the volcra. It would be a temporary measure at best, but we just needed it to last long enough to enable the ambush. Periodically, my ears would crackle, and all sound would seem to dampen, then I'd hear Nadia as clearly as if she were standing in the room with me, or Adrik's voice booming in my ear.

The pop of gunfire floated back to us from the orchard where Mal and the twins were choosing the best marksmen from the Soldat Sol. We had to be cautious with our ammunition, so they used their bullets sparingly. Later I heard them in the parlor, sorting through weapons and supplies.

We pieced together a dinner of apples, hard cheese, and stale black bread that Harshaw had found in some abandoned larder. The dining room and kitchen were a wreck, so we built a big fire in the grate of the grand receiving room and set out a makeshift picnic, sprawled on the floor and the watered silk couches, toasting bits of bread skewered on the gnarled branches of apple trees.

"If I survive this," I said, wiggling my toes near the fire, "I'm going to have to find some way to compensate these poor people for the damages."

Zoya snorted. "They'll be forced to redecorate. We're doing them a favor."

"And if we don't survive," observed David, "this whole place will be enveloped in darkness."

Tolya pushed aside a flowered cushion. "Might be for the best."

Harshaw took a swig of cider from the jug Tamar had brought in from the press. "If I live, the first thing I'm doing is coming back here and swimming around in a tank of this stuff."

"Go easy, Harshaw," said Tamar. "We need you awake tomorrow."

He groaned. "Why do battles always have to be so early?" Grudgingly, he gave up the jug to one of the Soldat Sol.

We'd gone over the plan until all of us were sure we knew exactly where to be and when. We'd enter the Fold at dawn. The Squallers would go in first to lay down the acoustic blanket and hide our movements from the volcra. I'd heard Nadia whispering with Tamar about not wanting Adrik with them, but Tamar had argued hard in favor of including him. "He's a warrior," she'd said. "If you make him believe he's less now, he'll never know he can be more." I would be with the Squallers, in case anything went wrong. The marksmen and the other Grisha would follow.

We'd planned the ambush at the center of the Fold, almost directly between Kribirsk and Novokribirsk. Once we spotted the Darkling's skiff, I would illuminate the Unsea, bending the light to keep us invisible. If that didn't bring him to a halt, our marksmen would. They would thin his ranks, and then it was

up to Harshaw and the Squallers to create enough chaos that the twins and I could board the skiff, locate the students, and get them to safety. Once they were clear, I would deal with the Darkling. Hopefully, he would never see me coming.

Genya and David would remain at Tomikyana with Misha. I knew Misha would insist on going with us, so Genya had slipped a sleeping draft into his dinner. He was already yawning, curled up near the grate, and I hoped he would sleep through our departure in the morning.

The night wore on. We knew we needed to sleep, but no one much felt like it. Some people decided to bed down by the fire in the receiving room while others trickled out into the house in pairs. Nobody wanted to be alone tonight. Genya and David had work to do in the kitchens. Tamar and Nadia had disappeared early. I thought Zoya might take her pick of the Soldat Sol, but as I slipped out the door, she was still watching the fire, Oncat purring in her lap.

I made my way down the dark hall to the parlor, where Mal was making a final check of the weapons and gear. It was a strange sight, to see the piles of guns and ammunition stacked on a marble tabletop next to the framed miniatures of the lady of the house and a pretty collection of snuffboxes.

“We’ve been here before,” he said.

“We have?”

“When we came out of the Fold the first time. We stopped in the orchard, not very far from the house. I recognized it earlier when we were out shooting.”

I remembered. It seemed like a lifetime ago. The fruit on the trees had been too small and sour to eat.

“How did the Soldat Sol do today?”

“Not bad. Only a few of them have much range. But if we’re lucky, that’s all we’ll need. A lot of them saw action in the First Army, so at least there’s a chance they’ll keep their heads.”

Laughter drifted back to us from the receiving room. Someone—Harshaw, I suspected—had started singing. But in the parlor, it was quiet and I could hear that it had begun to rain.

“Mal,” I said. “Do you think … do you think it’s the amplifiers?”

He frowned, checking the sight on a rifle. “What do you mean?”

“Is that what’s between us? My power and yours? Is that why we became

friends, why…” I trailed off.

He picked up another gun, sighted down the barrel. “Maybe that brought us together, but it didn’t make us who we are. It didn’t make you the girl who could get me to laugh when I had nothing. It sure as hell didn’t make me the idiot who took that for granted. Whatever there is between us, we forged it. It belongs to us.” Then he set down the rifle and wiped his hands on a rag.

“Come with me,” he said, taking my hand and pulling me behind him.

We moved through the darkened house. I heard voices singing something bawdy down the hall, footsteps overhead as someone ran from one room to the next. I thought Mal might lead me up the stairs to the bedrooms; I guess I hoped he would, but instead he took me through the east wing of the house, past a silent sewing room, a library, all the way to a windowless vestibule lined with trowels, spades, and dried cuttings.

“Um … delightful?”

“Wait here.” He opened a door I hadn’t seen, tucked into the wall.

In the dim light, I saw it led to some kind of long, narrow conservatory. The rain beat a steady rhythm against the vaulted roof and glazed glass walls. Mal moved deeper into the room, lighting lanterns that rested on the edge of a slender reflecting pool. Apple trees lined the walls, their boughs dense with clusters of white flowers. Their petals lay like a smattering of snow on the red tile floor and floated on the surface of the water.

I trailed Mal down the length of the pool. The air inside was balmy, sweet with apple blossoms and loamy with the rich scent of soil. Outside, the wind rose and howled with the storm, but in here it was as if the seasons had been suspended. I had the strangest sense that we could be anywhere, that the rest of the house had simply fallen away, and we were completely alone.

At the far end of the room, a desk was tucked into the corner. A shawl had been thrown over the back of a scrollwork chair. There was a basket of sewing things resting on a rug patterned with apple blossoms. The lady of the house must have come here to do her needlework, to sip her morning tea. In the daytime, she would have had a perfect view of the orchards through the big arched windows. A book was open on the desk. I peered at the pages.

“It’s a diary,” Mal said. “Statistics on the spring crop, the progress of hybrid

trees.”

“Her glasses,” I said, picking up the gold wire frames. “I wonder if she’s missing them.”

Mal leaned against the stone rim of the pool. “Do you ever wonder what it might have been like if the Grisha Examiners had discovered your power back at Keramzin?”

“Sometimes.”

“Ravka would be different.”

“Maybe not. My power was useless before we found the stag. Without you, we might never have located any of Morozova’s amplifiers.”

“*You’d* be different,” he said.

I put the delicate frames aside and flipped through the columns of numbers and tidy handwriting. What kind of person might I have been? Would I have become friends with Genya or simply seen her as a servant? Would I have had Zoya’s confidence? Her easy arrogance? What would the Darkling have been to me?

“I can tell you what would have happened,” I said.

“Go on.”

I closed the diary and turned back to Mal, perching on the edge of the desk. “I would have gone to the Little Palace and been spoiled and pampered. I would have dined off of golden plates, and I never would have struggled to use my power. It would have been like breathing, the way it always should have been. And in time, I would have forgotten Keramzin.”

“And me.”

“Never you.”

He raised a brow.

“Possibly you,” I admitted. He laughed. “The Darkling would have sought Morozova’s amplifiers, fruitlessly, hopelessly, until one day a tracker, a no one, an *otkazat’sya* orphan, traveled into the ice of Tsibeya.”

“You’re assuming I didn’t die on the Fold.”

“In my version, you were never sent into the Fold. When you tell the story, you can die tragically.”

“In that case, carry on.”

“This nobody, this nothing, this pathetic orphan—”

“I get it.”

“He would be the first to spot the stag after centuries of searching. So of course the Darkling and I would have to travel to Tsibeya in his great black coach.”

“In the snow?”

“His great black sleigh,” I amended. “And when we arrived at Chernast, your unit would be led into our exalted presence—”

“Are we allowed to walk, or do we wriggle in on our bellies like the lowly worms we are?”

“You walk, but you do it with a lot of deference. I would be seated on a raised dais, and I would wear jewels in my hair and a golden *kefta*.”

“Not black?”

I paused. “Maybe black.”

“It wouldn’t matter,” Mal said. “I still wouldn’t be able to stop looking at you.”

I laughed. “No, you would be making eyes at Zoya.”

“Zoya’s there?”

“Isn’t she always?”

He smiled. “I would have noticed you.”

“Of course you would. I’m the Sun Summoner, after all.”

“You know what I mean.”

I looked down, brushing petals off of the desk. “Did you ever notice me at Keramzin?”

He was silent for a long moment, and when I glanced at him, he was looking up at the glass ceiling. He’d gone red as a beet.

“Mal?”

He cleared his throat, crossed his arms. “As a matter of fact, I did. I had some very … distracting thoughts about you.”

“You did?” I sputtered.

“And I felt guilty for every one of them. You were supposed to be my best friend, not…” He shrugged and turned even redder.

“Idiot.”

“That fact is well established and adds nothing to the plot.”

“Well,” I said, taking another swipe at the petals, “it wouldn’t matter if you noticed me, because I would have noticed you.”

“A lowly *otkazat’sya*?”

“That’s right,” I said quietly. I didn’t feel like teasing him anymore.

“And what would you have seen?”

“A soldier—cocky, scarred, extraordinary. And that would have been our beginning.”

He rose and closed the distance between us. “And this still would have been our end.” He was right. Even in dreams, we had no future. If we somehow both survived tomorrow, I would have to seek an alliance and a crown. Mal would have to find a way to keep his heritage a secret.

Gently, he took my face in his hands. “I would have been different too, without you. Weaker, reckless.” He smiled slightly. “Afraid of the dark.” He brushed the tears from my cheeks. I wasn’t sure when they’d started. “But no matter who or what I was, I would have been yours.”

I kissed him then—with grief and need and years of longing, with the desperate hope that I could keep him here in my arms, with the damning knowledge that I could not. I leaned into him, the press of his chest, the breadth of his shoulders.

“Going to miss this,” he said as he kissed my cheeks, my jaw, my eyelids. “The way you taste.” He set his lips to the hollow beneath my ear. “The way you smell.” His hands slid up my back. “The way you feel.” My breath hitched as his hips settled against mine.

Then he drew back, searching my eyes. “I wanted more for you,” he said. “A white veil in your hair. Vows we could keep.”

“A proper wedding night? Just tell me this isn’t goodbye. That’s the only vow I need.”

“I love you, Alina.”

He kissed me again. He hadn’t answered, but I didn’t care, because his mouth was on mine, and in this moment, I could pretend I wasn’t a savior or a Saint, that I could simply choose him, have a life, be in love. That we wouldn’t have one night, we would have thousands. I pulled him down with me, easing his

body over mine, feeling the cold floor at my back. He had a soldier's hands, rough and calloused, heating my skin, sending hungry sparks through my body that made me lift my hips to try and bring him closer.

I pulled his shirt over his head, letting my fingers trail over the smooth ridges of his muscled back, feeling the lightly raised lines of the words that marked him. But when he slid the fabric of my blouse from my arms, I stiffened, feeling suddenly, painfully aware of every wrong thing about me. Jutting bones, too-small breasts, skin pale and dry as an onion. Then he cupped my cheek, his thumb tracing my lip.

"You are all I've ever wanted," he said. "You are the whole of my heart."

I saw myself then—sour, silly, difficult, lovely in his eyes. I drew him to me, felt him shudder as our bodies came together, skin against skin, felt the heat of his lips, his tongue, hands moving until the need between us drew taut and anxious as a bowstring waiting for release.

He clasped his hand to my wrist and my mind filled with light. All I saw was Mal's face, all I felt was his body—above me, around me, an awkward rhythm at first, then slow and steady as the beat of the rain. It was all we needed. It was all we would ever have.

CHAPTER 17

THE NEXT MORNING, I woke to find that Mal had already risen. He'd left me a pot of hot tea on a tray surrounded by apple blossoms. The rain had stopped, but the walls of the conservatory were covered in mist. I rubbed my sleeve against a pane of glass and looked out into the deep blue of early dawn. A deer was moving between the trees, head bent to the sweet grass.

I dressed slowly, drank my tea, lingered by the reflecting pool where the lanterns had long since gone out. In a few hours' time, this place might be buried in darkness. I wanted to remember every detail. On a whim, I picked up a pen and flipped to the last page of the diary and wrote our names.

Alina Starkov

Malyen Oretsev

I wasn't sure why I did it. I just needed to say we had been there.

I found the others packing up in the main hall. Genya waylaid me by the door with my coat in her hands. The olive wool was freshly pressed.

"You should look your best when you put the Darkling in the ground."

"Thanks," I said with a smile. "I'll try not to bleed all over it."

She kissed both of my cheeks. "Good luck. We'll be waiting when you get back."

I took her hand and placed Nikolai's ring in her palm. "If something goes wrong, if we don't make it—take David and Misha and get to Os Kervo. This should buy you all the help you need."

She swallowed, then hugged me hard.

Outside, the Soldat Sol waited in rigid formation, rifles on their backs,

canisters of inactive *lumiya* slung over their shoulders. The tattoos on their faces looked fierce in the dawn light. The Grisha wore roughspun. They might have been ordinary soldiers.

Harshaw had left Oncat curled up with Misha, but now she sat in the parlor window, lazily grooming herself and watching us assemble. Tolya and Tamar had their golden sunbursts pinned to their chests. Mal's was still with Misha. He smiled when he saw me, and tapped the space where the pin would have gone, right over his heart.

The deer had scattered. The orchard was empty as we moved through it, boots leaving deep marks on the soft earth. A half hour later, we were standing at the shores of the Fold.

I joined the other Etherealki: Zoya, Nadia, Adrik, and Harshaw. It felt somehow right that we should be the first to enter and that we would do it together. The Squallers raised their arms, summoning current and dropping the pressure as Zoya had done back in the caves. My ears crackled as they layered the acoustic blanket. If it didn't hold, Harshaw and I were ready to summon light and fire to drive the volcra back. We spread out in a line, and with measured steps, we entered the darkness of the Fold.

The Unsea always felt like the end of everything. It wasn't only the dark, it was the terrible sense of isolation, as if the world had disappeared, leaving only you, the rattle of your breath, the stuttering beat of your heart.

As we stepped onto the dead gray sands and the darkness thickened around us, it took everything in me not to raise my hands and wrap all of us in safe, protective light. I listened closely, expecting to hear the beating of wings, one of those horrible, inhuman shrieks, but I heard nothing, not even our footsteps on the sand. Whatever the Squallers were doing was working. The silence was deep and impenetrable.

"Hello?" I whispered.

"We hear you." I whirled. I knew Zoya was farther down the line, but it sounded like she was speaking right in my ear.

We moved at a steady pace. I heard a click, then almost ten minutes later, a double click. We'd gone a mile. At one point, I heard the distant flap of wings above us, and I felt fear move through our ranks like a living thing. The volcra

might not hear us but they could scent prey from miles away. Were they circling above us even now, sensing that something was wrong, that someone was near? I doubted Zoya's trick would keep us safe for long. The absolute madness of what we were doing struck me in that moment. We had dared what no one else ever had: We'd entered the Fold without light.

We kept moving. Two clicks later, we stopped and took up our positions to wait. As soon as we sighted the Darkling's skiff, we'd have to move quickly.

My thoughts turned to him. Cautiously, I tested the tether that bound us. Hunger quaked through me with palpable force. He was eager, ready to unleash the power of the Fold, ready for a fight. I felt it too. I let it echo back to him, that rush of anticipation, that need: *I am coming for you.*

Mal and Tolya—maybe all of the others—believed that the amplifiers had to be brought together, but they had never felt the thrill of using *merzost*. It was something no other Grisha understood, and in the end, it was what bound the Darkling and me most closely—not our powers, not the strangeness of them, not that we were both aberrations, if not abominations. It was our knowledge of the forbidden, our desire for more.

The minutes ticked by, and my nerves began to jangle. The Squallers could maintain the acoustic blanket for only so long. What if the Darkling waited until night to attack? *Where are you?*

The answer came in a pale violet glow, moving toward us from the east.

Two clicks. We fanned out in the formation we had practiced.

Three clicks. That was my signal. I raised my hands and set the Fold ablaze. In the same moment, I bent the light, letting it flow around each of our soldiers like a stream.

What did the Darkling see? Dead sands, the flat sheen of a gray sky, the ruined hulks of skiffs falling to dust. And that was all. We were invisible. We were air.

The skiff slowed. As it drew closer, I saw its black sails marked with the sun in eclipse, the strange, smoked-glass quality of its hull. The violet flame of the *lumiya* shimmered over its sides, vague and flickering in the bright glare of my power.

Squallers stood at the masts in their blue *kefta.* A few Inferni lined the

railings, flanked by Heartrenders in red, heavily armed *oprichniki* in gray. It was a spare force. The students must be belowdecks. The Darkling stood at the prow, surrounded by his shadow horde. As always, the first sight of him was practically a physical blow. It was like going to him in a vision: He was simply more real, more vibrant than everything else around him.

It happened so fast, I barely had time to register it. The first shot struck one of the Darkling's *oprichniki*. He toppled over the skiff's railing. Then the shots came in a rapid patter, like raindrops on a rooftop at the start of a storm. Grisha and *oprichniki* slumped and fell against one another as confusion broke out aboard the glass skiff. I saw more bodies fall.

Someone shouted, "Return fire!" and the air erupted with the jarring thunder of gunshots, but we were safely out of range. The *nichevo'ya* beat their wings, turning in wide arcs, searching for targets. Flints were struck, and the Inferni who remained on the skiff sent gouts of flame flaring through the air. Cloaked from sight, Harshaw turned the fire back on them. I heard screams.

Then silence, broken only by moaning and shouted orders from the glass skiff. Our sharpshooters had done their job well. The area around the railing was littered with bodies. The Darkling, unharmed, was pointing to a Heartrender and issuing some kind of command. I couldn't make out his words, but I knew this was when he would use the students.

I looked around me, tracking the shooters, the Grisha, feeling their presence in the light.

A single click. The Squallers sent a wave of sand crashing through the air. More shouts rose from the deck as the Darkling's Squallers tried to respond.

That was our cue. The twins and I bolted for the skiff, approaching from the stern. We didn't have much time.

"Where are they?" Tolya whispered as we boarded. It was strange to hear his voice but not to see him.

"Maybe below," I replied. The skiff was shallow, but there was room enough.

We picked our way across the deck, searching for a hatch, careful not to brush against the Darkling's Grisha and guards.

The remaining *oprichniki* had their guns trained on the empty sands beyond the skiff. We were close enough that I could see the sweat on their brows, their

wide eyes. They twitched, jumping at every real or imagined sound. "*Maleni*," they whispered. Ghosts. Only the Darkling seemed unfazed. His face was serene as he surveyed the destruction I'd loosed. I was close enough to strike, but he was still protected by his shadow soldiers. I had the uneasy sensation that he was waiting for something.

Suddenly, an *oprichnik* yelled, "Get down!"

The people around us dove to the deck and the air exploded with gunfire.

Two other glass skiffs plowed into view, loaded with *oprichniki*. As soon as they came into contact with the light, the skiffs ignited with the glowing violet flame of *lumiya*.

"Did you think I would come to meet you unprepared, Alina?" the Darkling called over the chaos. "Did you think I would not sacrifice an entire fleet of skiffs to this cause?"

However many he had sent, only two had made it through. But that would be enough to turn the tide. I heard screams, shouting, our soldiers returning fire. A red stain appeared in the sand and with a lurch I realized that one of our people was bleeding. It could be Vladim. Zoya. Mal. I had to get them out of here. Where were the students? I tried to keep my focus. I couldn't let the light falter. Our forces had canisters of *lumiya.* They could retreat into the Fold, but I knew they wouldn't. Not until I was clear of the Darkling's skiff.

I crept around the masts, searching for some sign of a trapdoor or hatch.

Then a searing pain cut through my shoulder. I fell backward, crying out. I'd been shot.

I sprawled on the deck, feeling my hold on the light falter. Tolya's shape flickered into view beside me. I tried to regain control. He disappeared, but through the railing I could see soldiers and Grisha appearing on the sands. *Oprichniki* leapt from the other skiffs, moving in for the attack, and the *nichevo'ya* surged into the battle.

Panic clamored through me as I scrambled for focus. I couldn't feel my right arm. I made myself breathe. *Stop huffing like a wild boar.* If Adrik could summon with one arm, then I could too.

Tamar appeared near the prow, vanished, stuttered back into view. A *nichevo'ya* slammed into her. She screamed as it sunk its claws deep into her

back.

No. I gathered my fractured concentration and reached for the Cut, though I had only one good arm to wield it. I wasn't sure that I could hit the shadow soldier without wounding Tamar, but I couldn't just watch her die.

Then another shape dove into the fray from above. It took me a long second to understand what I was seeing: Nikolai—fangs bared, wings spread.

With his talons, he seized the *nichevo'ya* that held Tamar and wrenched its head back, forcing it to release her. It skittered and writhed, but Nikolai flew upward and hurled it into the blackness beyond. I heard frenzied shrieks from somewhere in the distance—volcra. The shadow soldier did not reappear.

Nikolai swooped back down, barreling into another of the Darkling's *nichevo'ya.* I could almost imagine his laugh. *Well, if I'm going to be a monster, I might as well be king of the monsters.*

Then I gasped as my good arm was slammed down to the deck. The Darkling loomed over me, his boot pressing down painfully on my wrist.

"There you are," he said in his cool, cut-glass voice. "Hello, Alina."

The light collapsed. Darkness crowded in, lit only by the eerie flicker of violet flame.

I grunted as the Darkling's boot ground down on the bones of my arm.

"Where are the students?" I gritted out.

"They aren't here."

"What did you do to them?"

"They're safe and sound back in Kribirsk. Probably having their lunch." His *nichevo'ya* circled around us, forming a perfect, protective dome that shifted and writhed—wings, talons, hands. "I knew the threat would be enough. Did you really believe I would endanger Grisha children when we've lost so many?"

"I thought…" I'd thought he was capable of anything. *He wanted me to believe,* I realized. When he'd shown me Botkin's and Ana Kuya's corpses. He'd wanted me to believe in his ruthlessness.

Then I remembered his words from so long ago: *Make me your villain.*

"I know what you thought, what you've always thought of me. It's so much easier that way, isn't it? To puff yourself up with your own righteousness."

"I didn't invent your crimes." This wasn't over yet. All I needed was to reach

the flint in my sleeve. All I needed was a spark. It might not kill either of us, but it would hurt like hell, and it might buy the others time.

"Where is the boy? I have my Summoner. I want my tracker too."

Mal was still just a tracker to him, thank the Saints. My good hand curled into my sleeve, brushed the edge of the flint. "I won't let him be used," I said. "Not as leverage. Not as anything."

"On your back, the faithful dying around you, and yet you remain defiant."

He yanked me to my feet. Two *nichevo'ya* slid into place to restrain me as the flint slipped out of my grasp. The Darkling shoved the fabric of my coat aside, his hands sliding down my body. My heart sank as his fingers closed over the first pack of blasting powder. He pulled it from my pocket, then quickly located the second. He sighed.

"I can feel your intent as you feel mine, Alina. Your hopeless resolve, your martyr's determination. I recognize it now."

The tether. An idea came to me then. It was the smallest chance, but I would take it.

The Darkling tossed the packs of blasting powder to a *nichevo'ya* who arced away with them into the darkness. He watched me with cool gray eyes as we waited, the sounds of the battle muffled by the whirring of the shadow soldiers around us. A moment later, a shattering *boom* sounded from somewhere in the distance.

The Darkling shook his head. "It may well take me another lifetime to break you, Alina, but I will put my mind to the task."

He turned and I acted. Restrained by the *nichevo'ya*, I couldn't use the Cut, but I wasn't powerless. I twisted my wrists. The violet light of the *lumiya* bent around me. At the same time, I reached across the tether between us.

The Darkling's head jerked up and for a moment, though I still stood invisible in the grip of the *nichevo'ya*, I was staring at him from beside the mast. The vision of the girl before him was whole and unwounded. She raised her arms to deliver the Cut. The Darkling didn't stop to think—he reacted. It was the barest second, the brief space between instinct and understanding, but it was enough. His shadow soldiers released me and sprang forward to protect him. I lunged toward the railing and threw myself over the side of the skiff.

I landed on my wounded arm, and pain slammed through my body. The Darkling's howl of rage sounded behind me. I knew I'd lost control of the light, and that meant I was visible. I made myself keep moving, dragging myself across the sand, away from the violet glow of the *lumiya*. I saw sun soldiers and Grisha fighting by the illuminated skiffs. Harshaw down. Ruby bleeding.

I forced myself to my feet. My head spun. I clutched my wounded arm and lurched into the darkness. I had no sight, no sense of direction. I plunged farther into the black, trying to make my mind work, to form some kind of plan. I knew the volcra could come for me at any moment, but I couldn't risk the light. *Think*, I berated myself. I was out of ideas. The blasting powders were gone. I couldn't raise the Cut. My sleeve was wet with blood, and my footsteps slowed. I had to find someone to heal my arm. I had to regroup. I couldn't just run from the Darkling again the way I'd done that first time on the Fold. I'd been running ever since.

"Alina."

I spun. Mal's voice in the dark. *Let it be a trick of sound*, I thought. But I knew the Squallers' blanket had long since been lifted. How had he found me? Stupid question. Mal would always find me.

I gasped as he grabbed my wounded arm. Despite the pain and the risk, I summoned a weak wash of light, saw his beautiful face streaked with dirt and blood. And the knife in his hand. I recognized the blade. It was Tamar's, Grisha-made. Had she offered it to him for this moment? Had he sought her out to ask for it?

"Mal, don't. This isn't over yet—"

"It is, Alina."

I tried to pull away, but he wrapped his hand hard around my wrist, fingers pinching together, the sharp jolt of power moving through both of us, calling me, demanding that I step through that door. With his other hand, he forced my fingers around the knife's grip. The light wavered.

"No!"

"Don't let it all be for nothing, Alina."

"Please—"

An agonized scream rose over the clamor of the battle. It sounded like Zoya.

“Save them, Alina. Don’t let me live knowing I might have stopped this.”

“Mal—”

“Save them. This once, let me carry you.” His gaze locked on mine. “End this,” he said.

His grip tightened. *There is no end to our story.*

I would never know if it was greed or selflessness that moved my hand. With Mal’s fingers guiding mine, I shoved the knife up and into his chest.

The momentum jerked me forward, and I stumbled. I pulled back, the knife falling from both of our hands, blood spilling from the wound, but he kept his hold on my wrist.

“Mal,” I sobbed.

He coughed and blood burbled from his lips. He swayed forward. I nearly toppled as I clutched him to me, his hold on my wrist so tight I thought the bones might snap. He gasped, a wet rattle. His full weight slumped against me, dragging me down, fingers still clenched, pressed against my skin as if he were taking my pulse.

I knew when he was gone.

For a moment, all was silent, a held breath—and then everything exploded into white fire. A roar filled my ears, an avalanche of sound that shook the sands and made the very air vibrate.

I screamed as power flooded through me, as I burned, consumed from the inside. I was a living star. I was combustion. I was a new sun born to shatter air and eat the earth.

I am ruination.

The world trembled, dissolved, crashed in on itself.

And then the power was gone.

My eyes flew open. Thick darkness surrounded me. My ears were ringing.

I was on my knees. My hands found Mal’s body, the damp crumple of his blood-soaked shirt.

I threw up my hands, calling the light. Nothing happened. I tried again, reaching for the power and finding only absence. I heard a shriek from above. The volcra were circling. I could see bursts of Inferni flame, the dim shapes of soldiers fighting in the violet glow of the skiffs. Somewhere, Tolya and Tamar

were calling my name.

"Mal…" My throat was raw. I didn't know my own voice.

I sought the light, as I had once done deep in the belly of the White Cathedral, searching for any faint tendril. But this was different. I could feel the wound inside me, the gap where something whole and right had been. I wasn't broken. I was empty.

My fists bunched in Mal's shirt.

"Help me," I gasped.

What is infinite? The universe and the greed of men.

What lesson was this? What sick joke? When the Darkling had toyed with the power at the heart of creation, the Fold had been his reward, a place where his power was meaningless, an abomination that would keep him and his country in servitude for hundreds of years. Was this my punishment, then? Was Morozova truly mad, or was he just a failure?

"Someone help!" I screamed.

Tolya and Tamar were racing toward me, Zoya trailing behind, their bodies lit by glass canisters of *lumiya*. Tolya was limping. Zoya had a burn along one side of her face. Tamar was practically covered in blood from the wounds the *nichevo'ya* had given her. They all stopped short when they saw Mal.

"Bring him back," I cried.

Tolya and Tamar went to their knees beside him, but I saw the look they exchanged.

"Alina—" said Tamar.

"Please," I sobbed. "Bring him back to me."

Tamar opened Mal's mouth, attempting to force air into his lungs. Tolya placed one hand on Mal's chest, applying pressure to the wound and trying to restore the beat of his heart.

"We need more light," he said.

A choked laugh escaped me. I held up my hands, pleading with the light and with any Saint who had ever lived. It was no good. The gesture felt false. It was a pantomime. There was nothing there.

"I don't understand," I cried as I pressed my wet cheek to Mal's. His skin was already cooling.

Baghra had warned me: *You may not be able to survive the sacrifice that* merzost *requires.* But what was the point of this sacrifice? Had we lived only to be a lesson in the price of greed? Was that the truth of Morozova's madness, some kind of cruel equation that took all our love and loss and added them up to nothing?

It was too much. The hate and pain and grief overwhelmed me. If I'd had my power back for even a second, I would have burned the world to a cinder.

Then I saw it—a light in the distance, a gleaming blade that pierced the dark.

Before I could make sense of it, another appeared—a bright point that became two broad beams, sweeping high and wild above me.

A torrent of light burst from the darkness just a few feet from me. As my eyes adjusted I saw Vladim, his mouth open in shock and confusion as light poured from his palms.

I turned my head and saw them sparking to life, one by one across the Fold, like stars appearing in a twilight sky, Soldat Sol and *oprichniki*, their weapons forgotten, their faces baffled, awed, terrified, and bathed in light.

The Darkling's words came back to me, spoken on a ship that sailed the icy waters of the Bone Road. *Morozova was a strange man. He was a bit like you, drawn to the ordinary and the weak.*

He'd had an *otkazat'sya* wife.

He'd nearly lost an *otkazat'sya* child.

He'd thought himself alone in the world, alone in his power.

Now I understood. I saw what he had done. This was the gift of the three amplifiers: power multiplied a thousand times, but not in one person. How many new Summoners had just been created? How far had Morozova's power reached?

The arcs and cascades of light blossomed around me, a bright garden growing in this unnatural night. The beams met, and where they crossed, the darkness burned away.

The shrieks of the volcra erupted around me as the Fold began to unravel. It was a miracle.

And I didn't care. The Saints could keep their miracles. The Grisha could keep their long lives and their lessons. Mal was dead.

“How?”

I looked up. The Darkling stood behind us, stunned, taking in the impossible sight of the Fold coming apart around us. “This can’t be. Not without the firebird. The third—” He stopped short as his eyes settled on Mal’s body, the blood on my hands. “It can’t be,” he repeated.

Even now, as the world we knew was remade in bursts and flashes of light, he couldn’t comprehend what Mal truly was. He wouldn’t.

“What power is this?” he demanded. The Darkling stalked toward us, shadows pooling in his palms, his creatures swirling around him.

The twins drew their weapons. Without thinking, I lifted my hands, reaching for the light. Nothing happened.

The Darkling stared. He dropped his arms. The skeins of darkness faded.

“No,” he said, bewildered, shaking his head. “No. This isn’t— What have you done?”

“Keep working,” I ordered the twins.

“Alina—”

“*Bring him back to me*,” I repeated. I wasn’t making sense. I knew that. They didn’t have Morozova’s power. But Mal could make rabbits out of rocks. He could find true north standing on his head. He would find his way back to me again.

I lurched to my feet, and the Darkling strode toward me.

His hands went to my throat. “No,” he whispered.

Only then did I realize the collar had fallen away. I looked down. It lay in pieces beside Mal’s body. My wrist was bare; the fetter had broken too.

“This isn’t right,” he said, and in his voice I heard desperation, a new and unfamiliar anguish. His fingers skimmed my neck, cupped my face. I felt no surge of surety. No light stirred within me to answer his call. His gray eyes searched mine—confused, nearly frightened. “You were meant to be like me. You were meant … You’re *nothing* now.”

He dropped his hands. I saw the realization strike him. He was truly alone. And he always would be.

I saw the emptiness enter his eyes, felt the yawning void inside him stretch wider, an infinite wasteland. The calm left him, all that cool certainty. He cried

out in his rage.

He spread his arms wide, calling the darkness. The *nichevo'ya* scattered like a flock of birds flushed from a hedge and turned on Soldat Sol and *oprichniki* alike, cutting them down, snuffing out the beams of light that blazed from their bodies. I knew there was no bottom to the Darkling's pain. He would just keep falling and falling.

Mercy. Had I ever really understood it? Had I actually believed I knew what it was to suffer? To forgive? *Mercy,* I thought. *For the stag, for the Darkling, for us all.*

If we'd still been bound by that tether, he might have sensed what I was about to do. My fingers twitched in the sleeve of my coat, curling a scrap of shadow around the blade of my knife—the knife I had plucked from the sands, wet with Mal's blood. This was the only power that was left to me, one that had never really been mine. An echo, a joke, a carnival trick. *It's something you took from him.*

"I don't need to be Grisha," I whispered, "to wield Grisha steel."

With one swift movement, I drove the shadow-wrapped blade deep into the Darkling's heart.

He made a soft sound, little more than an exhalation. He looked down at the hilt protruding from his chest, then back up at me. He frowned, took a step, tottered slightly. He righted himself.

A single laugh burst from his lips, and a fine spray of blood settled over his chin. "Like *this*?"

His legs faltered. He tried to stop his descent, but his arm gave way and he crumpled, rolling to his back. *It's simple enough. Like calls to like.* The Darkling's own power. Morozova's own blood.

"Blue sky," he said. I looked. In the distance I saw it, a pale glimmer, almost completely obscured by the black mist of the Fold. The volcra were swooping away from it, looking for someplace to hide. "Alina," he breathed.

I knelt beside him. The *nichevo'ya* had left off their attacks. They circled and clattered above us, unsure of what to do. I thought I glimpsed Nikolai among them, arcing toward that patch of blue.

"Alina," the Darkling repeated, his fingers seeking mine. I was surprised to

find fresh tears filling my eyes.

He reached up and brushed his knuckles over the wetness on my cheek. The smallest smile touched his bloodstained lips. “Someone to mourn me.” He dropped his hand, as if the weight were too much. “No grave,” he gasped, his hand tightening on mine, “for them to desecrate.”

“All right,” I said. The tears came harder. *There will be nothing left.*

He shuddered. His eyelids drooped.

“Once more,” he said. “Speak my name once more.”

He was ancient, I knew that. But in this moment he was just a boy—brilliant, blessed with too much power, burdened by eternity.

“Aleksander.”

His eyes fluttered shut. “Don’t let me be alone,” he murmured. And then he was gone.

A sound like a great sigh rushed over us, lifting my hair.

The *nichevo’ya* blew apart, scattering like ashes in wind, leaving startled soldiers and Grisha staring at the places where they’d been. I heard a wrenching cry and looked up in time to see Nikolai’s wings dissolve, darkness spilling from him in black wisps as he plummeted to the gray sand. Zoya ran to him, trying to slow his fall with an updraft.

I knew I should move. I should do something. But I couldn’t seem to make my legs work. I slumped between Mal and the Darkling, the last of Morozova’s line. I was bleeding from my bullet wound. I touched the bare skin at my neck. It felt naked.

Dimly, I was aware of the Darkling’s Grisha retreating. Some of the *oprichniki* went too, the light still flowing from them in uncontrollable fits and starts. I didn’t know where they were going. Maybe back to Kribirsk to warn their compatriots that their master had fallen. Maybe they were just running. I didn’t care.

I heard Tolya and Tamar whispering back and forth. I couldn’t make out the words, but the resignation in their voices was clear enough.

“Nothing left,” I said softly, feeling the emptiness inside me, the emptiness everywhere.

The Soldat Sol were cheering, letting light blaze around them in glorious arcs

as they burned the Fold away. Some of them had climbed up on the Darkling's glass skiffs. Others had formed a line, bringing the beams of light together, sending a cascade of sunlight speeding through the thinning scraps of darkness, unraveling the Fold in a rippling wave.

They were crying, laughing, joyous in their triumph, so loud that I almost didn't hear it—a soft rasp, fragile, impossible. I tried to keep it out, but hope came at me hard, a longing so acute I knew its end would break me.

Tamar sobbed. Tolya swore. And there it was again: the thready, miraculous sound of Mal drawing breath.

CHAPTER 18

THEY TOOK US OUT of the Fold in one of the Darkling's skiffs. Zoya appropriated the battered glass vessel with effortless command, then kept the curious Soldat Sol distracted as Tolya and Tamar loaded us onto the deck, hidden beneath heavy coats and folded *kefta*. The Darkling's body was wrapped in the blue robes of one of his fallen Inferni. I'd made him a promise, and I intended to keep it.

The Squallers—Zoya, Nadia, and Adrik, all of them alive and as whole as they'd been when the battle began—filled the black sails and carried us over the dead sands as fast as their power would allow.

I lay next to Mal. He was still in terrible pain, drifting in and out of consciousness. Tolya continued to work on him, checking his pulse and his breathing.

Somewhere on the skiff, I heard Nikolai talking, his voice husky and damaged by whatever dark thing had used him. I wanted to go to him, see his face, make sure he was all right. He must have broken bones after that fall. But I'd lost a lot of blood, and I found myself slipping away, my weary mind eager for oblivion. As my eyes began to slide shut, I grabbed Tolya's hand.

"I died here. Do you understand?" He frowned. He thought I was delirious, but I needed to make him hear. "This was my martyrdom, Tolya. I died here today."

"Sankta Alina," he said softly, and pressed a kiss to my knuckles, a courtly gesture, like a gentleman at a dance. I prayed to all the real Saints that he understood.

* * *

IN THE END, my friends did a good job of my death, and an even better job of Nikolai's resurrection.

They got us back to Tomikyana and stashed us in the barn, tucked away with the cider presses in case the Soldat Sol returned. They got Nikolai cleaned up, cut his hair, filled him with sugary tea and stale bread. Genya even found him a First Army uniform. Within hours, he was headed to Kribirsk, flanked by the twins, along with Nadia and Zoya, dressed in blue *kefta* stolen from the dead.

The story they concocted was simple: He'd been the Darkling's prisoner, slated for execution on the Fold, but he'd escaped and, with the Sun Summoner's help, managed to vanquish the Darkling. Few people knew the truth of what had happened. The battle had been a confusion of violence waged in near darkness, and I suspected the Darkling's Grisha and *oprichniki* would be too busy running or begging for royal pardons to dispute this new version of events. It was a good story with a tragic ending—the Sun Summoner had given her life to save Ravka and its new King.

Most of my hours back at Tomikyana were a blur: The smell of apples. The rustle of pigeons in the eaves. The rise and fall of Mal's breath beside me. At some point, Genya came to look in on us, and I thought I must be dreaming. The scars on her face were still there, but most of the black ridges were gone.

"Your shoulder too," she said with a smile. "Scarred, but not nearly so frightening."

"Your eye?" I asked.

"Gone for good. But I've grown rather fond of my patch. I think it lends me a certain rakishness."

I must have dozed off because the next thing I knew, Misha was standing in front of me with flour on his hands.

"What were you baking?" I asked, my words blurry at the edges.

"Ginger cake."

"Not apple?"

"I'm sick of apples. Do you want to stir the icing?"

I remembered nodding, then fell back asleep.

* * *

IT WASN'T UNTIL late that night that Zoya and Tamar came to check on us, bringing news from Kribirsk. It seemed that the power of the amplifiers had reached all the way to the drydocks. The explosion had knocked Grisha and dockworkers from their feet, and mayhem had erupted as light started to pour from every *otkazat'sya* within range.

As the Fold began to disintegrate, they'd dared to step past its shores and join in the destruction. Some of them had picked up guns and started hunting volcra, rounding them up in the few remaining scraps of the Fold and putting them to death. It was said some of the monsters had escaped, braving the light to seek deep shadows elsewhere. Now, between the dockworkers, the Soldat Sol, and the *oprichniki* who had not fled, all that remained of the Unsea were a few dark wisps that hung in the air or trailed over the ground like lost creatures separated from the herd.

When rumors of the Darkling's death had reached Kribirsk, the military camp had descended into chaos—and in strode Nikolai Lantsov. He installed himself in the royal quarters, began assembling First Army captains and Grisha commanders, and simply started giving orders. He'd mobilized all the remaining units of the army to secure the borders, sent messages to the coast to rally Sturmhond's fleet, and had apparently managed it all on no sleep and two fractured ribs. No one else would have had the ability, let alone the nerve—certainly not a younger son and rumored bastard. But Nikolai had been training for this his entire life, and I knew he had a gift for the impossible.

"How is he?" I asked Tamar.

She paused, then said, "Haunted. There's a difference in him, though I'm not sure anyone else would notice."

"Maybe," objected Zoya. "But I've never seen anything like it. If he gets any more charming, men and women may start lying down in the street for the privilege of being stepped on by the new Ravkan King. However did you resist him?"

"Good question," Mal murmured from beside me.

"Turns out I don't care for emeralds," I said.

Zoya rolled her eyes. “Or royal blood, blinding charisma, tremendous wealth —”

“You can stop now,” said Mal.

I leaned my head against his shoulder. “Those are all nice enough, but my real passion is lost causes.” Or just one really. *Beznako.* My lost cause, found again.

“I am surrounded by fools,” Zoya said, but she was smiling.

Before Tamar and Zoya returned to the main house, Tamar checked our injuries. Mal was weak, but given what he’d been through, that was to be expected. Tamar had healed the bullet wound in my shoulder, and aside from being a bit shaky and sore, I felt good as new. At least, that was what I told them. I could feel the ache of absence where my power had been like a phantom limb.

I dozed on the mattress they’d dragged into the barn, and when I woke, Mal was lying on his side, watching me. He was pale, and his blue eyes seemed almost too bright. I reached out and traced the scar that ran along his jaw, the one he’d gotten in Fjerda when he’d first been hunting the stag.

“What did you see?” I asked. “When—”

“When I died?”

I gave him a gentle shove, and he winced.

“I saw Ilya Morozova on the back of a unicorn, playing a balalaika.”

“Very funny.”

He eased back and carefully tucked his arm under his head. “I didn’t see anything. All I remember is pain. The knife felt like it was on fire, like it was carving my heart from my chest. Then nothing. Just darkness.”

“You were gone,” I said with a shiver. “And then my power—” My voice broke.

He put out his arm, and I laid my head against his shoulder, careful not to disturb the bandages on his chest. “I’m sorry,” he said. “There were times … there were times I wished your power away. But I never wanted this.”

“I’m grateful to be alive,” I said. “The Fold is gone. You’re safe. It just … hurts.” I felt petty. Harshaw was dead, and so were half of the Soldat Sol, including Ruby. Then there were the others: Sergei, Marie, Paja, Fedyor, Botkin.

Baghra. So many lost to this war. The list stretched on and on.

"Loss is loss," Mal said. "You have the right to grieve."

I stared up at the barn's wooden beams. Even the shred of darkness I'd commanded had abandoned me. That power had belonged to the Darkling, and it had left this world with him.

"I feel empty."

Mal was quiet for a long moment, then said, "I feel it too." I pushed up on my elbow. His gaze was faraway. "I won't know until I try to track, but I feel different. I used to just know things. Even lying here, I could have sensed deer in the field, a bird resting on a branch, maybe a mouse burrowing in the wall. I never thought about it, but now there's this kind of … silence."

Loss. I'd wondered how Tolya and Tamar had brought Mal back. I'd been willing to simply call it a miracle. Now I thought I understood. Mal had possessed two lives, but only one was rightfully his. The other was stolen, an inheritance wrought from *merzost,* snatched from the making at the heart of the world. It was the force that had animated Morozova's daughter when her human life had gone, the power that had reverberated through Mal's bones. His blood had been thick with it, and that purloined bit of creation was what had made him such a remarkable tracker. It had bound him to every living thing. *Like calls to like.*

And now it was gone. The life stolen by Morozova and given to his daughter had reached its end. The life Mal had been born with—fragile, mortal, temporary—was his alone. Loss. This was the price the world had demanded for balance. But Morozova couldn't have known that the person to unlock the secrets of his amplifiers wouldn't be some ancient Grisha who had lived a thousand years and grown weary of his power. He couldn't have known that it would all come down to two orphans from Keramzin.

Mal took my hand, curling his fingers in mine, and pressed it to his chest. "Do you think you could be happy?" he asked. "With a used-up tracker?"

I smiled at that. Cocky Mal, charming, brave, and dangerous. Was that doubt in his voice? I kissed him once, gently. "If you can be happy with someone who stuck a knife in your chest."

"I helped. And I told you I can handle a bad mood."

I didn’t know what came next or who I was supposed to be. I owned nothing, not even the borrowed clothes on my back. And yet, lying there, I realized I wasn’t afraid. After all I’d been through, there was no fear left in me—sadness, gratitude, maybe even hope, but the fear had been eaten up by pain and challenge. The Saint was gone. The Summoner too. I was just a girl again, but this girl didn’t owe her strength to fate or chance or a grand destiny. I’d been born with my power; the rest I’d earned.

“Mal, you’ll have to be careful. The story of the amplifiers could leak out. People might still think you have power.”

He shook his head. “Malyen Oretsev died with you,” he said, his words echoing my thoughts closely enough to raise the hair on my arms. “That life is over. Maybe I’ll be smarter in the next one.”

I snorted. “We’ll see. We’re going to have to choose new names, you know.”

“Misha is already making a list of suggestions.”

“Oh, Saints.”

“You have nothing to complain about. Apparently I am to be Dmitri Dumkin.”

“Suits you.”

“I should warn you that I’m keeping a tab of all of your insults so that I can reward you when I’m healed.”

“Easy with the threats, Dumkin. Maybe I’ll tell the Apparat all about your miraculous recovery, and he’ll turn you into a Saint too.”

“He can try,” said Mal. “I don’t intend to waste my days in holy pursuits.”

“No?”

“No,” he said as he drew me closer. “I have to spend the rest of my life finding ways to deserve a certain white-haired girl. She’s very prickly, occasionally puts goose droppings in my shoes or tries to kill me.”

“Sounds fatiguing,” I managed as his lips met mine.

“She’s worth it. And one day maybe she’ll let me chase her into a chapel.”

I shuddered. “I don’t like chapels.”

“I did tell Ana Kuya I would marry you.”

I laughed. “You remember that?”

“Alina,” he said and kissed the scar on my palm, “I remember everything.”

* * *

IT WAS TIME to leave Tomikyana behind. We'd had only one night to recover, but news of the destruction of the Fold was spreading fast, and soon the farm's owners might return. And even if I was no longer the Sun Summoner, there were still things I needed to do before I could bury Sankta Alina forever.

Genya brought us clean clothes. Mal limped behind the cider presses to change while she helped me put on a simple blouse and the *sarafan* that went over it. They were peasant clothes, not even military.

She'd once woven gold through my hair at the Little Palace, but now a more radical change was necessary. She used a pot of hematite and a clutch of shiny rooster feathers to temporarily alter its distinctive white color, then tied a kerchief around my head for good measure.

Mal returned wearing a tunic and trousers and a simple coat. He had on a black wool cap with a narrow brim. Genya wrinkled her nose. "You look like a farmer."

"I've looked worse." He peered at me. "Is your hair red?"

"Temporarily."

"And she's almost pulling it off," Genya added, and sailed from the barn. The effects would fade in a few days without her assistance.

Genya and David would travel separately to meet with Grisha gathering at the military camp in Kribirsk. They'd offered to bring Misha with them, but he'd elected to go with me and Mal. He claimed we needed looking after. We made sure that his golden sunburst was safely hidden away and that his pockets were stuffed with cheese for Oncat. Then we headed into the gray sands of what had once been the Fold.

It was easy to blend in with the crowds crossing to and from Ravka. There were families, groups of soldiers, nobles, and peasants. Children climbed over the ruins of sandskiffs. People gathered in spontaneous parties. They kissed and hugged, handed around bottles of *kvas* and fried bread stuffed with raisins. They greeted each other with shouts of "*Yunejhost!*" Unity.

Amid the celebrations, there were pockets of grief. Silence reigned in the crumbling remains of what had been Novokribirsk. Most of the buildings had

slumped into dust. There were only dim suggestions of spaces where the streets had been, and everything had been bleached a nearly colorless gray. The round stone fountain that had stood at the center of the town looked like a crescent moon, eaten away wherever the Fold's dark power had touched it. Old men poked at the odd ruins and muttered to each other. Even beyond the fallen town's edges, mourners laid flowers on the wrecks of skiffs, and built little altars in their hulls.

Everywhere, I saw people wearing the double eagle, carrying banners, and waving Ravkan flags. Girls wore pale blue and gold ribbons in their hair, and I heard whispers of the tortures the brave young prince had endured at the Darkling's hands.

I heard my name too. Pilgrims were already flooding into the Fold to see the miracle that had occurred and to offer up prayers to Sankta Alina. Once again, vendors had begun setting up carts littered with what they claimed were my finger bones, and my face stared back at me from the painted surfaces of wooden icons. It wasn't quite me, though. This was a prettier girl, with round cheeks and serene brown eyes, the antlers of Morozova's collar resting on her slender neck. Alina of the Fold.

No one spared us a second glance. We weren't nobles. We weren't Second Army. We weren't this strange new class of Summoner soldier. We were anonymous. We were tourists.

In Kribirsk, the party was in full swing. The drydocks were ablaze with colored lanterns. People sang and drank aboard the sandskiffs. They crowded on the steps of the barracks and raided the mess tent for food. I glimpsed the yellow flag of the Documents Tent, and though some part of me ached to return there, to take in the old familiar smells of ink and paper, I couldn't risk the possibility that one of the cartographers would recognize me.

The brothels and taverns in town were doing a booming business. An impromptu dance was being held in the central square, though just down the street a crowd had gathered at the old church to read the names written on its walls and light candles for the dead. I paused to light one for Harshaw, then another, and another. He would have liked the flames.

Tamar had found a room for us at one of the more respectable inns. I left Mal

and Misha there with promises to return that night. The news coming out of Os Alta was still a tangle, and we hadn't had word of Misha's mother yet. I knew he must be hopeful, but he hadn't said a word about it, just solemnly vowed to watch over Mal in my absence.

"Read him religious parables," I whispered to Misha. "He *loves* that."

I barely dodged the pillow Mal threw across the room.

* * *

I DIDN'T GO directly to the royal barracks, but took a route that led me past where the Darkling's silk pavilion had once stood. I'd assumed that he would rebuild it, but the field was empty, and when I reached the Lantsov quarters, I quickly understood why. The Darkling had taken up residence there. He'd hung black banners from the windows and the carving of the double eagle above the doors had been replaced with a sun in eclipse. Now workmen were pulling down the black silks and replacing them with Ravkan blue and gold. An awning had been set up to catch plaster as a soldier took a massive hammer to the stone symbol above the door, shattering it to dust. A cheer went up from the crowd. I couldn't share in their excitement. For all his crimes, the Darkling had loved Ravka, and he'd wanted its love in return.

I found a guard near the entry and asked after Tamar Kir-Bataar. He looked down his nose at me, seeing nothing but a scrawny peasant girl, and for a moment, I heard the Darkling say, *You're* nothing *now.* The girl I'd once been would have believed him. The girl I'd become wasn't in the mood.

"What exactly are you waiting for?" I snapped. The soldier blinked and jumped to attention. A few minutes later, Tamar and Tolya were jogging down the steps to me.

Tolya swept me up in his huge arms.

"Our sister," he explained to the curious guard.

"Our sister?" hissed Tamar as we entered the royal barracks. "She doesn't look anything like us. Remind me never to let you work intelligence."

"I have better things to do than trade in whispers," he said with dignity. "Besides, she *is* our sister."

I swallowed the lump in my throat and said, "Did I come at a bad time?"

Tamar shook her head. “Nikolai ended meetings early so people could attend the…” She trailed off.

I nodded.

They led me down a hall decorated with weapons of war and charts of the Fold. Those maps would have to change now. I wondered if anything would ever grow on those deadened sands.

“Will you stay with him?” I asked Tamar. Nikolai had to be desperate for people he could trust around him.

“For a while. Nadia wants to, and there are still some members of the Twenty-Second alive too.”

“Nevsky?”

She shook her head.

“Did Stigg make it out of the Spinning Wheel?”

She shook her head again. There were others to ask after, casualty lists I dreaded reading, but that would have to wait.

“I might stay on,” said Tolya. “Depends on—”

“Tolya,” his sister said sharply.

Tolya flushed and shrugged. “Just depends.”

We reached a set of heavy double doors, their handles the heads of two screaming eagles.

Tamar knocked. The room was dark, lit only by the blaze of a fire in the grate. It took me a moment to pick Nikolai out in the gloom. He was seated in front of the fire, his polished boots propped up on a cushioned stool. A plate of food sat beside him, along with a bottle of *kvas*, though I knew he preferred brandy.

“We’ll be outside,” Tamar said.

At the sound of the door shutting, Nikolai started. He jumped to his feet and bowed. “Forgive me,” he said. “I was lost in thought.” Then he grinned and added, “Unfamiliar territory.”

I leaned back against the door. A lapse. Covered with charm, but a lapse nonetheless. “You don’t have to do that.”

“But I do.” His smile slipped. He gestured to the chairs by the fire. “Join me?”

I crossed the room. The long table was littered with documents and sheaves of letters emblazoned with the royal seal.

A book lay open on the chair. He moved it aside and we sat.

“What are you reading?”

He glanced at the title. “One of Kamenski’s military histories. Really, I just wanted to look at the words.” He ran his fingers over the cover. His hands were marred with nicks and cuts. Though my scars had faded, the Darkling had marked Nikolai in a different way. Faint black lines still ran along each of his fingers where claws had shoved their way through his skin. He would have to pass them off as signs of the torture he’d endured as the Darkling’s prisoner. In a way, it was true. At least the rest of the markings seemed to have faded. “I couldn’t read,” he continued. “When I was … I would see signs in store windows, writing on crates. I couldn’t understand them, but I remembered enough to know that they were more than scratches on a wall.”

I settled deeper into the chair. “What else do you remember?”

His hazel eyes were distant. “Too much. I … I can still feel that darkness inside me. I keep thinking it will go, but—”

“I know,” I said. “It’s better now, but it’s still there.” Like a shadow next to my heart. I didn’t know what that might imply about the Darkling’s power, and I didn’t want to consider it. “Maybe it will fade in time.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers. “This isn’t what people want of a king, what they expect from me.”

“Give yourself a chance to heal.”

“Everyone is watching. They need reassurance. It won’t be long before the Fjerdans or the Shu try to move against me.”

“What will you do?”

“My fleet is intact, thank the Saints and Privyet,” he said, referring to the officer he’d left in command when he’d given up the mantle of Sturmhond. “They should be able to neutralize Fjerda for a time, and there are supply ships already waiting in the harbor with deliveries of weapons. I’ve sent word to every operational military outpost. We’ll do our best to secure the borders. I leave for Os Alta tomorrow, and I have emissaries en route to try to bring the militias back under the King’s flag.” He gave a slight laugh. “My flag.”

I smiled. “Just think of all of the bowing and scraping in your future.”

“All hail the Pirate King.”

“Privateer.”

“Why dance around it? ‘Bastard King’ is more likely.”

“Actually,” I said, “they’re already calling you *Korol Rezni.*” I’d heard it whispered in the streets of Kribirsk: King of Scars.

He looked up sharply. “Do you think they know?”

“I doubt it. But you’re used to rumors, Nikolai. And this might be a good thing.”

He raised a brow.

“I know you love to be loved,” I said, “but a little fear couldn’t hurt, either.”

“Did the Darkling teach you that?”

“And you. I seem to remember a certain story about a Fjerdan captain’s fingers and a hungry hound.”

“Next time warn me when you’re paying attention. I’ll talk less.”

“*Now* you tell me.”

A faint smile tugged at his lips. Then he frowned. “I should warn you—the Apparat will be there tonight.”

I sat up straighter. “You pardoned the priest?”

“I had to. I need his support.”

“Will you offer him a place at court?”

“We’re in negotiations,” he said bitterly.

I could offer him all the information I had on the Apparat, but I suspected what would help most was the location of the White Cathedral. Unfortunately, Mal was the only one who might have been able to lead us back there, and I wasn’t sure that was a possibility anymore.

Nikolai gave the bottle of *kvas* an idle turn.

“It’s not too late,” he said. “You could stay. You could come back with me to the Grand Palace.”

“And do what?”

“Teach, help me rebuild the Second Army, rusticate by the lake?”

This was what Tolya had been alluding to. He’d hoped I might return to Os Alta. It hurt to even think about.

I shook my head. “I’m not Grisha, and I’m certainly not a noble. I don’t belong at court.”

“You could stay with me,” he said quietly. He gave the bottle another turn. “I still need a Queen.”

I rose from my chair and nudged his booted feet aside, settling on the little stool to look up at him.

“I’m not the Sun Summoner anymore, Nikolai. I’m not even Alina Starkov. I don’t *want* to return to court.”

“But you understand this … thing.” He tapped his chest.

I did. *Merzost.* Darkness. You could hate it and hunger for it at the same time.

“I’d only be a liability. Power is alliance,” I reminded him.

“I do love it when you quote me.” He sighed. “If only I weren’t so damnably wise.”

I reached into my pocket and set the Lantsov emerald on Nikolai’s knee. Genya had given it back to me when we’d left Tomikyana.

He picked it up, turned it over. Its stone flashed green in the firelight. “A Shu princess then? A buxom Fjerdan? A Kerch magnate’s daughter?” He held out the ring. “Keep it.”

I stared at him. “How much of that *kvas* have you drunk?”

“None. Keep it. Please.”

“Nikolai, I can’t.”

“I owe you, Alina. Ravka owes you. This and more. Do good works or commission an opera house or just take it out and gaze at it longingly when you think of the handsome prince you might have made your own. For the record, I favor the latter option, preferably paired with copious tears and the recitation of bad poetry.”

I laughed.

He took my hand and pressed the ring into it. “Take it and build something new.”

I turned the ring over in my hand. “I’ll think about it.”

He rolled his eyes. “What is your aversion to the word *yes*?”

I felt tears rising and had to blink them away. “Thank you.”

He leaned back. “We were friends, weren’t we? Not just allies?”

“Don’t be an ass, Nikolai. We *are* friends.” I gave him a hard tap on the knee. “Now, you and I are going to settle some things about the Second Army. And then we’re going to watch me burn.”

* * *

ON OUR WAY to the drydocks, I slipped away and found Genya. She and David were cloistered in a Fabrikator tent on the east side of the camp. When I handed her the sealed letter marked with the Ravkan double eagle, she paused, holding it gingerly, as if the heavy paper were dangerous to the touch.

She ran her thumb over the wax seal, fingers quaking slightly. “Is it…?”

“It’s a pardon.”

She tore it open and then clutched it to her.

David didn’t look up from his worktable when he said, “Are we going to jail?”

“Not just yet,” she said. She brushed away a tear. “Thank you.” Then she frowned as I handed her the second letter. “What is this?”

“A job offer.” It had taken some convincing, but in the end Nikolai had seen the sense in my suggestions. I cleared my throat. “Ravka still needs its Grisha, and Grisha still need a safe haven in the world. I want you to lead the Second Army, along with David. And Zoya.”

“Zoya? Are you punishing me?”

“She’s powerful, and I think she has it in her to be a good leader. Or she’ll make your life a nightmare. Possibly both.”

“Why us? The Darkling—”

“The Darkling is gone, and so is the Sun Summoner. Now the Grisha can lead themselves, and I want all the orders represented: Etherealki, Materialki, and you—Corporalki.”

“I’m not really a Corporalnik, Alina.”

“When you had the chance, you chose red. And I hope that those divisions won’t matter so much if the Grisha are led by their own. All of you are strong. All of you know what it is to be seduced by power or status or knowledge. Besides, you’re all heroes.”

“They’ll follow Zoya, maybe even David—”

“Hmm?” he asked distractedly.

“Nothing. You’re going to have to go to more meetings.”

“I hate meetings,” he grumbled.

“Alina,” she said, “I’m not so sure they’ll follow me.”

“You *make* them follow you.” I touched her shoulder. “Brave and unbreakable.”

A slow smile spread over her face. Then she winked. “And marvelous.”

I grinned. “So you accept?”

“I accept.”

I hugged her tight. She laughed, then tugged at a lock of hair that had slipped free from my kerchief.

“Already fading,” she said. “Should we freshen you up?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” she agreed.

I embraced her once more, then slipped outside into the last scraps of daylight.

* * *

I WENDED MY WAY back through camp, following the crowd past the drydocks and into the sands of what had been the Unsea. The sun had almost set and dusk was falling, but it was impossible to miss the pyre, a massive mound of birches, their branches tangled like white limbs.

A shiver passed through me as I saw the girl laid to rest atop it. Her hair spread around her head in a white halo. She wore a *kefta* of blue and gold, and Morozova’s collar curled around her throat, the stag’s antlers a silvery gray against her skin. Whatever wire or Fabrikator craft held the pieces together had been hidden from view.

My eyes roved over her face—my face. Genya had done an extraordinary job. The shape was just right, the tilt of the nose, the angle of the jaw. The tattoo on her cheek was gone. There was almost nothing left of Ruby, the Soldat Sol who would have lived to be a Summoner if she hadn’t perished on the Fold. She’d died an ordinary girl.

I’d balked at the idea of using her body this way, troubled that her family

would have nothing to bury. It had been Tolya who convinced me. “She believed, Alina. Even if you don’t, let this be her final act of faith.”

Beside Ruby, the Darkling lay in his black *kefta.*

Who had tended him? I wondered, feeling an ache rise in my throat. Who had combed his dark hair back so neatly from his forehead? Who had folded his graceful hands on his chest?

Some in the crowd were complaining that the Darkling had no business sharing a pyre with a Saint. But this felt right to me, and the people needed to see an end to it.

The remaining Soldat Sol had gathered around the pyre, their bare backs and chests emblazoned with tattoos. Vladim was there too, head bowed, the raised flesh of his brand outlined by firelight. Around them, people wept. Nikolai stood at the periphery, immaculate in his First Army uniform, the Apparat at his side. I pulled my shawl up.

Nikolai’s gaze touched mine briefly from across the circle. He gave the signal. The Apparat raised his hands. The Inferni struck their flints. Flame leapt in bright arcs, circling and diving between the birches like darting birds, licking at the tinder until it smoldered and caught.

The fire grew, flames shimmering, the shaking leaves of a great golden tree. Around me, the moans and weeping of the crowd grew louder.

Sankta, they cried. *Sankta Alina.*

My eyes burned with the smoke. The smell was sickly sweet.

Sankta Alina.

No one knew his name to curse or extol, so I spoke it softly, beneath my breath.

“Aleksander,” I whispered. A boy’s name, given up. Almost forgotten.

AFTER

A CHAPEL STOOD on the coast of West Ravka, south of Os Kervo, on the shores of the True Sea. It was a quiet place, where the waves came nearly to the door. The whitewashed walls were laden with shells, and the dome that floated above the altar looked less like the heavens than the deep blue well of the sea.

There was no grand betrothal, no contract or false ransom. The girl and the boy had no families to fuss over them, to parade them through the nearby town or honor them with feasts. The bride wore no *kokochnik*, no dress of gold. Their only witnesses were an orange cat that slunk between the pews and a child, motherless now too, who carried a wooden sword. He had to stand on a chair to hold the driftwood crowns above their heads as the blessings were said. The names they gave were false ones, though the vows they made were true.

* * *

THERE WERE STILL WARS, and there were still orphans, but the building that rose over the ruin that had been Keramzin was nothing like the one before. It was not a Duke's home, full of things that shouldn't be touched. It was a place for children. The piano in the music room was left uncovered. The larder door was never locked. A lantern was always lit in the dormitories to keep away the dark.

The staff did not approve.

The students were too boisterous. Too much money was wasted on sugar for tea, on coal in the winter, on books that contained nothing but fairy stories. And why did each child require a new pair of skates?

Young. Rich. Possibly mad. These were the words whispered about the couple who ran the orphanage. But they paid well, and the boy was so charming that it was hard to stay mad at him, even when he refused to take the switch to

some hellion who had tracked mud across the entryway floor.

He was said to be a distant relation of the Duke's, and though his table manners were fine enough, he had a soldier's way about him. He taught the students how to hunt and trap, and the new ways of farming so favored by Ravka's King. The Duke himself had taken up residence at his winter house in Os Alta. The last few years of the war had been hard on him.

The girl was different, small and strange, with white hair that she wore loose down her back like an unmarried woman, seemingly oblivious to the glares and disapproving clucking of the teachers and the staff. She told the students peculiar stories of flying ships and underground castles, of monsters who ate earth, and birds that rose on wings of flame. Often, she went barefoot in the halls, and the smell of fresh paint never seemed to fade, as she was always starting on some new project or other, drawing a map over one of the classroom walls or covering the ceiling of the girls' dormitory with irises.

"Not much of an artist," sniffed one of the teachers.

"Certainly has an imagination, though," the other replied, peering skeptically at the white dragon that curled around the banister of the stairs.

The students learned math and geography, science and art. Tradesmen were brought in from local towns and villages to offer apprenticeships. The new King hoped to abolish the draft in a few years' time, and if he succeeded, every Ravkan would need some kind of trade. When the children were tested for Grisha powers, they were allowed to choose whether or not to go to the Little Palace, and they were always welcome back at Keramzin. At night, they were told to keep the young King in their prayers—*Korol Rezni* who would keep Ravka strong.

* * *

EVEN IF THE BOY and the girl weren't quite nobility, they certainly had friends in high places. Presents arrived frequently, sometimes marked with the royal seal: a set of atlases for the library, sturdy wool blankets, a new sleigh and a pair of matched white horses to pull it. Once a man arrived with a fleet of toy boats that the children launched on the creek in a miniature regatta. The teachers noted that the stranger was young and handsome, with golden hair and hazel

eyes, but most definitely odd. He stayed late to dinner and never once removed his gloves.

Every winter, during the feast of Sankt Nikolai, a troika would make its way up the snowy road and three Grisha would emerge dressed in furs and thick wool *kefta*—red, purple, and blue—their sledge weighted down with presents: figs and apricots soaked in honey, piles of walnut candies, mink-lined gloves, and boots of butter-soft leather. They stayed up late, long after the children had gone to bed, talking and laughing, telling stories, eating pickled plums and roasting lamb sausages over the fire.

That first winter, when it was time for her friends to leave, the girl ventured out into the snow to say goodbye, and the stunning raven-haired Squaller handed her another gift.

"A blue *kefta*," said the math teacher, shaking her head. "What would she do with that?"

"Maybe she knew a Grisha who died," replied the cook, taking note of the tears that filled the girl's eyes. They did not see the note that read, *You will always be one of us.*

The boy and the girl had both known loss, and their grief did not leave them. Sometimes he would find her standing by a window, fingers playing in the beams of sunlight that streamed through the glass, or sitting on the front steps of the orphanage, staring at the stump of the oak next to the drive. Then he would go to her, draw her close, and lead her to the shores of Trivka's pond, where the insects buzzed and the grass grew high and sweet, where old wounds might be forgotten.

She saw sadness in the boy too. Though the woods still welcomed him, he was separate from them now, the bond born into his bones burned away in the same moment that he'd given up his life for her.

But then the hour would pass, and the teachers would catch them giggling in a dim hallway or kissing by the stairs. Besides, most days were too full for mourning. There were classes to teach, meals to prepare, letters to write. When evening fell, the boy would bring the girl a glass of tea, a slice of lemon cake, an apple blossom floating in a blue cup. He would kiss her neck and whisper new names in her ear: beauty, beloved, cherished, my heart.

They had an ordinary life, full of ordinary things—if love can ever be called that.

1. The connection between Alina and the Darkling has changed in *Ruin and Rising.* How? Why? What does this change mean for each of them and how does it affect the events of the book?
2. Genya undergoes a big physical transformation throughout the series. How does her personality change too? What does Genya mean when she says, “I am not ruined. I’m ruination”?
3. What does the Apparat want from Alina? What methods does he use to try to manipulate her? How does she manipulate him?
4. What motives might the Darkling have for telling Alina his real name? How does she use this knowledge?
5. Alina says that David’s crime is a hunger for knowledge, not power. How does David’s way of thinking help and hurt Alina’s cause? How is David different from Morozova, and how is he the same?
6. Nikolai and Alina are allies. What are his reasons for wanting to marry her? How does she feel about those reasons and the idea of being his queen?
7. Why does Baghra decide to tell Alina the story of her childhood? How does it help Alina? What part of the story does Alina misinterpret and why do you think she makes this mistake?
8. Alina and Zoya start out as enemies. How does their relationship change? Why does Alina choose Zoya to be one of the people to lead the Grisha at the end of the story?
9. What happens to Alina’s power at the end of the book? Why? How does this affect her future and her understanding of her past?
10. Why does Harshaw choose to fight on Alina’s side? Why do Tolya and Tamar stay loyal to her? What are the motives of some of her other allies?
11. What are the Darkling’s strengths as a leader? Why do people choose to follow him? Why does Sergei make the choice that he does?
12. Alina and Mal have a long history together. How does this influence their friendship? Their romance? How does it make their relationship stronger? How does it hold them back?
13. Why does the Darkling choose to punish Nikolai the way that he does? How does Nikolai’s transformation affect him, both physically and mentally, by the end of the book?

THE WANDERING ISLE
LEFLIN
THE BONE ROAD
JELKA
VILKI
NOVYI ZEM
WEDDLE
THE TRUE SEA
REB HARBOR
EAMES HARBOR
SHRIFTPORT
EAMES CHIN
COFTON
KETTERDAM
KERCH
LAND BRIDGE
SOUTHERN COLONIES
Map Illustration by Keith Thompson

ISENVEE
KENST HJERTE
ELLING
OVERÜT
FJERDA
AVFALLE
ELBJEN
DJERHOLM
HALMHEND
PERMAFROST
CHERNAST
ARKESK
ULENSK
THE UNSEA
TSIBEYA
PETRAZOI
RAVKA
NOVO-KRIBIRSK
KRYEVOST
KRIBIRSK
BALAKIREV
OS ALTA
POLIZNAYA
KERAMZIN
SIKURSK
TSEMNA
CARYEVA
DVA STOLBA
SIKURZOI
KOBA
BHEZJU
SHU HAN
AHMRAT JEN

THE
GRISHA
SOLDIERS OF THE SECOND ARMY
MASTERS OF THE SMALL SCIENCE
CORPORALKI
(THE ORDER OF THE LIVING AND THE DEAD)
Heartrenders
Healers
ETHEREALKI
(THE ORDER OF SUMMONERS)
Squallers
Inferni
Tidemakers
MATERIALKI
(THE ORDER OF FABRIKATORS)
Durasts
Alkemi

For my father, Harve—
Sometimes our heroes don’t make it to the end.

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A few years back, I started a journey into the dark with a girl who didn't yet have a name. I've been lucky to have wonderful people holding me up and cheering me on every step of the way.

TEAM SCIENCE(!)

The funny thing about the trick Alina pulls by bending light is that it's one of the most sound bits of science in these books. In the real world, it's called "invisibility cloak technology" (which makes me happy on a lot of levels). Google it, and prepare to have your mind blown. Peter Bibring suggested it to me, and Tomikyana is named after his daughter Iris Tommiko. Harper Seiko: I promise to get your name into the next book. I also need to shout out Peter's wife, Michelle Chihara, who is my dear friend and a wonderful writer. When the Grisha trilogy sold to Henry Holt, I danced in her kitchen. That is not a euphemism. Many thanks to John Williams for the spark that led to the acoustic blanket.

TEAM WORDY

Noa Wheeler and I have haggled over titles, bonded over books, and colluded over dumplings. Thank you for making the hard work so much fun. Huge thanks also to Jon Yaged, Jean Feiwel, Laura Godwin, Angus Killick, Elizabeth Fithian, Lucy del Priore, April Ward, Rich Deas, Allison Verost, the relentlessly patient Molly Brouillette, and the wonderful Ksenia Winnicki and Caitlin Sweeny, who have done so much to promote the trilogy online. I also want to say a special thank-you to Veronica Roth, John Picacio, Michael Scott, Lauren DeStefano, and Rick Riordan, who have been very kind to me and these books.

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Morgan Fahey has been an amazing reader and has kept me company with late-night chats and email hilarity. Thank you for talking the Leighyore off many a ledge. Sarah Mesle helped me wade through so many plot woes, and I will never forget our New Year's Eve bunker chat—SkyMall! Kayte Ghaffar, aka Empress of Swag, aka Master Fabrikator, aka Smartypants: I don't know what I would have done without you as conspirator and confidante. Many thanks to Cindy Pon, Marie Rutkoski, Robin Wasserman, Amie Kaufman, Jennifer Rush, Sarah Rees Brennan, Cassandra Clare, and Marie Lu for encouragement, gossip,

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TEAM LOS ANGELES

Love and gratitude to Ray Tejada, Austin Wilkin, and Rachel Tejada of Ocular Curiosity (aka the League of Unplumbable Fun!). David and Erin Peterson are my favorite power couple—thank you for being so generous with your talent and time. Rachael Martin makes a damn fine date ball, and Robyn Bacon is the woman to trust when it comes to JUSTICE. Jimmy Freeman has coddled me with kindness, encouragement, and hospitality. Gretchen McNeil is a marvelous convention roommate, and for such a Marianne, she's awfully full of great advice. Big thanks to Dan Braun, Brandon Harvey, Liz Hamilton, Josh Kamensky, Heather Joy and the wee Phoebe, Aaron Wilson and Laura Recchi, Michael Pessah, the ridiculously badass Christina Strain, Romi Cortier, Tracey Taylor, Lauren Messiah, Mel Caine, Mike DiMartino, and Kurt Mattila, who got me hooked on comics all over again. Brad Farwell, you don't live in Los Angeles, but you didn't fit into any of the other categories. Jerk.

TEAM BOOK PUSHER

Huge thanks to the librarians, teachers, bloggers, and booksellers who helped these books find their readers. And as always, love to the Brotherhood without Banners who welcomed me into one of the most supportive and generous fandoms around. They also throw the best parties.

TEAM TUMBLR

Some people supported the Grisha Trilogy early and must be paid due tribute: Irene Koh, who changed the way I see my own characters; Kira, aka eventhepartofyouthatlovedhim, who blogged early and often; the wonderful ladies of the Grisha Army; Emily Pursel, Laura Maldonado, Elena of Novelsounds, Laura and Kyra, and Madeleine Michaud, who writes the very best asks. There are so many more of you who have made graphics and fanmixes, who have created art and fic, who have chatted with me, and inspired me, and kept me going. Thank you for making this journey so much more magical.

TEAM FAMILY

Christine, Sam, Ryan, Emily—I love you guys. Shem, you are an amazing artist and the best possible person to see New York with. And finally, all the love and thanks to my adorable, wonderful mumsy, who cried at the right scenes and has learned to speak fluent narwhal.

Dear Marvelous Readers,

Thank you for traveling to Ravka with me and for all the support you've shown this trilogy. I was surprised at how emotional I felt saying good-bye to some of these characters, and as you may have guessed, I'm not quite ready to leave the world of the Grisha behind.

Though *Ruin and Rising* is very much Alina's journey, the story also belongs to the people who fight by her side. I've always loved narratives about crews of misfits facing impossible odds—from Robin Hood's Merry Men to *Oceans 11* to *The Dirty Dozen* to *Inglourious Basterds*—and that's exactly the kind of story I'll be telling in my next book.

If you look at the map in *Ruin and Rising*, you'll see a little country called Kerch, an island nation with tremendous economic power. While other countries have squabbled, Kerch has remained neutral and prospered. Its capital, Ketterdam, is a jewel of art, culture, and wealth, home to the world stock exchange, a famous university, and the hub of all international trade.

But there is another side to Ketterdam: a criminal underworld ruled by constantly warring gangs and fed by the illegal trade in guns, drugs, and slaves that all flow through the city's ports—not to mention fat profits from the brothels and gambling palaces of Ketterdam's pleasure district, the Barrel. For a price, you can have anything you want in Ketterdam. Just don't be surprised if you don't get quite what you paid for.

And the Barrel is where Kaz Brekker is most at home. No crime is too low, no task too dangerous for Kaz, the thief and gang leader often called Dirtyhands. He clawed his way out of the city's worst slums; now he's just a heist away from taking his rightful place among Ketterdam's most dangerous criminal players and exacting revenge on the man who destroyed his life. But to do it, he'll have to assemble a team of assassins, thugs, convicts, and outcast Grisha to help him infiltrate Fjerda's famous Ice Court. It's a dangerous job, probably a suicide mission, but they are the Dregs: low on cash, flexible on ethics, and the one crew

who just might pull off the impossible—if they don't kill each other first.

I'm looking forward to introducing you to Kaz and all of his outlaw crew. Until then, if you're walking the streets of the Barrel, keep an eye on your wallet and your wits about you!

—Leigh Bardugo

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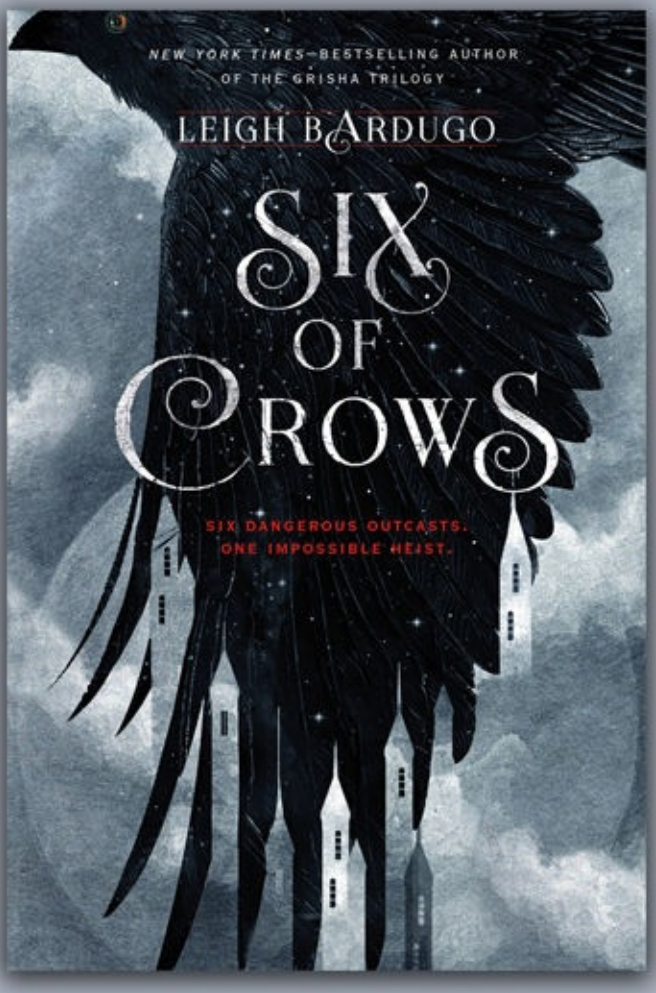
KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK OF LEIGH BARDUGO'S

SIX OF CROWS



LEIGH BARDUGO

SIX OF CROWS

HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY
NEW YORK

To Kayte—
secret weapon, unexpected friend

PART ONE

SHADOW BUSINESS

1
Joost

Joost had two problems: the moon and his mustache.

He was supposed to be making his rounds at the Hoede house, but for the last fifteen minutes, he'd been hovering around the southeast wall of the gardens, trying to think of something clever and romantic to say to Anya.

If only Anya's eyes were blue like the sea or green like an emerald. Instead, her eyes were brown—lovely, dreamy … melted chocolate brown? Rabbit fur brown?

"Just tell her she's got skin like moonlight," his friend Pieter had said. "Girls love that."

A perfect solution, but the Ketterdam weather was not cooperating. There'd been no breeze off the harbor that day, and a gray milk fog had wreathed the city's canals and crooked alleys in damp. Even here among the mansions of the Geldstraat, the air hung thick with the smell of fish and bilge water, and smoke from the refineries on the city's outer islands had smeared the night sky in a briny haze. The full moon looked less like a jewel than a yellowy blister in need of lancing.

Maybe he could compliment Anya's laugh? Except he'd never heard her laugh. He wasn't very good with jokes.

Joost glanced at his reflection in one of the glass panels set into the double doors that led from the house to the side garden. His mother was right. Even in his new uniform, he still looked like a baby. Gently, he brushed his finger along his upper lip. If only his mustache would come in. It definitely felt thicker than yesterday.

He'd been a guard in the *stadwatch* less than six weeks, and it wasn't nearly as exciting as he'd hoped. He thought he'd be running down thieves in the Barrel or patrolling the harbors, getting first look at cargo coming in on the docks. But ever since the assassination of that ambassador at the town hall, the Merchant Council had been grumbling about security, so where was he? Stuck walking in circles at some lucky mercher's house. Not just any mercher, though. Councilman Hoede was about as high placed in Ketterdam government as a man could be. The kind of man who could make a career.

Joost adjusted the set of his coat and rifle, then patted the weighted baton at his hip. Maybe Hoede would take a liking to him. *Sharp eyed and quick with the cudgel*, Hoede would say. *That fellow deserves a promotion.*

"Sergeant Joost Van Poel," he whispered, savoring the sound of the words. "*Captain* Joost Van Poel."

"Stop gawking at yourself."

Joost whirled, cheeks going hot as Henk and Rutger strode into the side garden. They were both older, bigger, and broader of shoulder than Joost, and they were house guards, private servants of Councilman Hoede. That meant they wore his pale green livery, carried fancy rifles

from Novyi Zem, and never let Joost forget he was a lowly grunt from the city watch.

"Petting that bit of fuzz isn't going to make it grow any faster," Rutger said with a loud laugh.

Joost tried to summon some dignity. "I need to finish my rounds."

Rutger elbowed Henk. "That means he's going to go stick his head in the Grisha workshop to get a look at his girl."

"*Oh, Anya, won't you use your Grisha magic to make my mustache grow?*" Henk mocked.

Joost turned on his heel, cheeks burning, and strode down the eastern side of the house. They'd been teasing him ever since he'd arrived. If it hadn't been for Anya, he probably would have pleaded with his captain for a reassignment. He and Anya only ever exchanged a few words on his rounds, but she was always the best part of his night.

And he had to admit, he liked Hoede's house, too, the few peeks he'd managed through the windows. Hoede had one of the grandest mansions on the Geldstraat—floors set with gleaming squares of black and white stone, shining dark wood walls lit by blown glass chandeliers that floated like jellyfish near the coffered ceilings. Sometimes Joost liked to pretend that it was his house, that he was a rich mercher just out for a stroll through his fine garden.

Before he rounded the corner, Joost took a deep breath. *Anya, your eyes are brown like … tree bark?* He'd think of something. He was better off just being spontaneous anyway.

He was surprised to see the glass-paneled doors to the Grisha workshop open. More than the hand-painted blue tiles in the kitchen or the mantels laden with potted tulips, this workshop was a testimony to Hoede's wealth. Grisha indentures didn't come cheap, and Hoede had three of them.

But Yuri wasn't seated at the long worktable, and Anya was nowhere to be seen. Only Retvenko sprawled out on a chair in dark blue robes, eyes shut, a book open on his chest.

Joost hovered in the doorway, then cleared his throat. "These doors should be shut and locked at night."

"House is like furnace," Retvenko drawled without opening his eyes, his Ravkan accent thick and rolling. "Tell Hoede I stop sweating, I close doors."

Retvenko was a Squaller, older than the other Grisha indentures, his hair shot through with silver. There were rumors he'd fought for the losing side in Ravka's civil war and had fled to Kerch after the fighting.

"I'd be happy to present your complaints to Councilman Hoede," Joost lied. The house was always overheated, as if Hoede were under obligation to burn coal, but Joost wasn't going to be the one to mention it. "Until then—"

"You bring news of Yuri?" Retvenko interrupted, finally opening his heavily hooded eyes.

Joost glanced uneasily at the bowls of red grapes and heaps of burgundy velvet on the worktable. Yuri had been working on curtains for Mistress Hoede, but he'd fallen badly ill a few days ago, and Joost hadn't seen him since. Dust had begun to gather on the velvet, and the grapes were going bad.

"I haven't heard anything."

"Of course you hear nothing. Too busy strutting around in stupid purple uniform."

What was wrong with his uniform? And why did Retvenko even have to be here? He was Hoede's personal Squaller and often traveled with the merchant's most precious cargos, guaranteeing favorable winds to bring the ships safely and quickly to harbor. Why couldn't he be away at sea now?

"I think Yuri may be quarantined."

"So helpful," Retvenko said with a sneer. "You can stop craning neck like hopeful goose," he added. "Anya is gone."

Joost felt his face heat again. "Where is she?" he asked, trying to sound authoritative. "She should be in after dark."

“One hour ago, Hoede takes her. Same as night he came for Yuri.”

“What do you mean, ‘he came for Yuri’? Yuri fell ill.”

“Hoede comes for Yuri, Yuri comes back sick. Two days later, Yuri vanishes for good. Now Anya.”

For good?

“Maybe there was an emergency. If someone needed to be healed—”

“First Yuri, now Anya. I will be next, and no one will notice except poor little Officer Joost. Go now.”

“If Councilman Hoede—”

Retvenko raised an arm and a gust of air slammed Joost backwards. Joost scrambled to keep his footing, grabbing for the doorframe.

“I said *now*.” Retvenko etched a circle in the air, and the door slammed shut. Joost let go just in time to avoid having his fingers smashed, and toppled into the side garden.

He got to his feet as quickly as he could, wiping muck from his uniform, shame squirming in his belly. One of the glass panes in the door had cracked from the force. Through it, he saw the Squaller smirking.

“That’s counting against your indenture,” Joost said, pointing to the ruined pane. He hated how small and petty his voice sounded.

Retvenko waved his hand, and the doors trembled on their hinges. Without meaning to, Joost took a step back.

“Go make your rounds, little watchdog,” Retvenko called.

“That went well,” snickered Rutger, leaning against the garden wall.

How long had he been standing there? “Don’t you have something better to do than follow me around?” Joost asked.

“All guards are to report to the boathouse. Even you. Or are you too busy making friends?”

“I was asking him to shut the door.”

Rutger shook his head. “You don’t ask. You tell. They’re servants. Not honored guests.”

Joost fell into step beside him, insides still churning with humiliation. The worst part was that Rutger was right. Retvenko had no business talking to him that way. But what was Joost supposed to do? Even if he’d had the courage to get into a fight with a Squaller, it would be like brawling with an expensive vase. The Grisha weren’t just servants; they were Hoede’s treasured possessions.

What had Retvenko meant about Yuri and Anya being taken, anyway? Had he been covering for Anya? Grisha indentures were kept to the house for good reason. To walk the streets without protection was to risk getting plucked up by a slaver and never seen again. *Maybe she’s meeting someone*, Joost speculated miserably.

His thoughts were interrupted by the blaze of light and activity down by the boathouse that faced the canal. Across the water he could see other fine mercher houses, tall and slender, the tidy gables of their rooftops making a dark silhouette against the night sky, their gardens and boat-houses lit by glowing lanterns.

A few weeks before, Joost had been told that Hoede’s boathouse would be undergoing improvements and to strike it from his rounds. But when he and Rutger entered, he saw no paint or scaffolding. The *gondels* and oars had been pushed up against the walls. The other house guards were there in their sea green livery, and Joost recognized two *stadwatch* guards in purple. But most of the interior was taken up by a huge box—a kind of freestanding cell that looked like it was made from reinforced steel, its seams thick with rivets, a huge window embedded in one of its walls. The glass had a wavy bent, and through it, Joost could see a girl seated at a table, clutching her red silks tight around her. Behind her, a *stadwatch* guard stood at attention.

Anya, Joost realized with a start. Her brown eyes were wide and frightened, her skin pale. The

little boy sitting across from her looked doubly terrified. His hair was sleep mussed, and his legs dangled from the chair, kicking nervously at the air.

"Why all the guards?" asked Joost. There had to be more than ten of them crowded into the boathouse. Councilman Hoede was there, too, along with another merchant Joost didn't know, both of them dressed in mercher black. Joost stood up straighter when he saw they were talking to the captain of the *stadwatch.* He hoped he'd gotten all the garden mud off of his uniform. "What is this?"

Rutger shrugged. "Who cares? It's a break in the routine."

Joost looked back through the glass. Anya was staring out at him, her gaze unfocused. The day he'd arrived at Hoede house, she'd healed a bruise on his cheek. It had been nothing, the yellow-green remnants of a crack he'd taken to the face during a training exercise, but apparently Hoede had caught sight of it and didn't like his guards looking like thugs. Joost had been sent to the Grisha workshop, and Anya had sat him down in a bright square of late winter sunlight. Her cool fingers had passed over his skin, and though the itch had been terrible, bare seconds later it was as if the bruise had never been.

When Joost thanked her, Anya had smiled and Joost had been lost. He knew his cause was hopeless. Even if she'd had any interest in him, he could never afford to buy her indenture from Hoede, and she would never marry unless Hoede decreed it. But it hadn't stopped him from dropping by to say hello or to bring her little gifts. She'd liked the map of Kerch the best, a whimsical drawing of their island nation, surrounded by mermaids swimming in the True Sea, and ships blown along by winds depicted as fat-cheeked men. It was a cheap souvenir, the kind tourists bought along East Stave, but it had seemed to please her.

Now he risked raising a hand in greeting. Anya showed no reaction.

"She can't see you, moron," laughed Rutger. "The glass is mirrored on the other side."

Joost's cheeks pinked. "How was I to know that?"

"Open your eyes and pay attention for once."

First Yuri, now Anya. "Why do they need a Grisha Healer? Is that boy injured?"

"He looks fine to me."

The captain and Hoede seemed to reach some kind of agreement.

Through the glass, Joost saw Hoede enter the cell and give the boy an encouraging pat. There must have been vents in the cell because he heard Hoede say, "Be a brave lad, and there's a few *kruge* in it for you." Then he grabbed Anya's chin with a liver-spotted hand. She tensed, and Joost's gut tightened. Hoede gave Anya's head a little shake. "Do as you're told, and this will soon be over, *ja*?"

She gave a small tight smile. "Of course, Onkle."

Hoede whispered a few words to the guard behind Anya, then stepped out. The door shut with a loud clang, and Hoede slid a heavy lock into place.

Hoede and the other merchant took positions almost directly in front of Joost and Rutger.

The merchant Joost didn't know said, "You're sure this is wise? This girl is a Corporalnik. After what happened to your Fabrikator—"

"If it was Retvenko, I'd be worried. But Anya has a sweet disposition. She's a Healer. Not prone to aggression."

"And you've lowered the dose?"

"Yes, but we're agreed that if we have the same results as the Fabrikator, the Council will compensate me? I can't be asked to bear that expense."

When the merchant nodded, Hoede signaled to the captain. "Proceed."

The same results as the Fabrikator. Retvenko claimed Yuri had vanished. Was that what he'd meant?

"Sergeant," said the captain, "are you ready?"

The guard inside the cell replied, “Yes, sir.” He drew a knife.

Joost swallowed hard.

“First test,” said the captain.

The guard bent forward and told the boy to roll up his sleeve. The boy obeyed and stuck out his arm, popping the thumb of his other hand into his mouth. *Too old for that,* thought Joost. But the boy must be very scared. Joost had slept with a sock bear until he was nearly fourteen, a fact his older brothers had mocked mercilessly.

“This will sting just a bit,” said the guard.

The boy kept his thumb in his mouth and nodded, eyes wide.

“This really isn’t necessary—” said Anya.

“Quiet, please,” said Hoede.

The guard gave the boy a pat then slashed a bright red cut across his forearm. The boy started crying immediately.

Anya tried to rise from her chair, but the guard placed a stern hand on her shoulder.

“Go on, sergeant,” said Hoede. “Let her heal him.”

Anya leaned forward, taking the boy’s hand gently. “Shhhh,” she said softly. “Let me help.”

“Will it hurt?” the boy gulped.

She smiled. “Not at all. Just a little itch. Try to hold still for me?”

Joost found himself leaning closer. He’d never actually *seen* Anya heal someone.

Anya removed a handkerchief from her sleeve and wiped away the excess blood. Then her fingers brushed carefully over the boy’s wound. Joost watched in astonishment as the skin slowly seemed to reform and knit together.

A few minutes later, the boy grinned and held out his arm. It looked a bit red, but was otherwise smooth and unmarked. “Was that magic?”

Anya tapped him on the nose. “Of a sort. The same magic your own body works when given time and a bit of bandage.”

The boy looked almost disappointed.

“Good, good,” Hoede said impatiently. “Now the *parem*.”

Joost frowned. He’d never heard that word.

The captain signaled to his sergeant. “Second sequence.”

“Put out your arm,” the sergeant said to the boy once again.

The boy shook his head. “I don’t like that part.”

“Do it.”

The boy’s lower lip quivered, but he put out his arm. The guard cut him once more. Then he placed a small wax paper envelope on the table in front of Anya.

“Swallow the contents of the packet,” Hoede instructed Anya.

“What is it?” she asked, voice trembling.

“That isn’t your concern.”

“*What is it*?” she repeated.

“It’s not going to kill you. We’re going to ask you to perform some simple tasks to judge the drug’s effects. The sergeant is there to make sure you do only what you’re told and no more, understood?”

Her jaw set, but she nodded.

“No one will harm you,” said Hoede. “But remember, if you hurt the sergeant, you have no way out of that cell. The doors are locked from the outside.”

“What is that stuff?” whispered Joost.

“Don’t know,” said Rutger.

“What do you know?” he muttered.

“Enough to keep my trap shut.”

Joost scowled.

With shaking hands, Anya lifted the little wax envelope and opened the flap.

"Just let it dissolve on your tongue," said Hoede.

She tipped her head back and swallowed the powder. For a moment she sat, waiting, lips pressed together.

"Is it just *jurda*?" she asked hopefully. Joost found himself hoping, too. *Jurda* was nothing to fear, a stimulant everyone in the *stadwatch* chewed to stay awake on late watches.

"What does it taste like?" Hoede asked.

"Like *jurda* but sweeter, it—"

Anya inhaled sharply. Her hands gripped the table, her pupils dilating enough that her eyes looked nearly black. "Ohhh," she said, sighing. It was nearly a purr.

The guard tightened his grip on her shoulder.

"How do you feel?"

She stared at the mirror and smiled. Her tongue peeked through her white teeth, stained like rust. Joost felt suddenly cold.

"Just like the Fabrikator," murmured the merchant.

"Heal the boy," Hoede commanded.

She waved her hand through the air, the gesture almost dismissive, and the cut on the boy's arm sealed instantly. The blood lifted briefly from his skin in droplets of red then vanished. His skin looked perfectly smooth, all trace of blood or redness gone. The boy beamed. "That was definitely magic."

"It *feels* like magic," Anya said with that same eerie smile.

"She didn't touch him," marveled the captain.

"Anya," said Hoede. "Listen closely. We're going to tell the guard to perform the next test now."

"Mmm," hummed Anya.

"Sergeant," said Hoede. "Cut off the boy's thumb."

The boy howled and started to cry again. He shoved his hands beneath his legs to protect them.

I should stop this, Joost thought. *I should find a way to protect her, both of them.* But what then? He was a nobody, new to the *stadwatch*, new to this house. *Besides*, he discovered in a burst of shame, *I want to keep my job.*

Anya merely smiled and tilted her head back so she was looking at the sergeant. "Shoot the glass."

"What did she say?" asked the merchant.

"Sergeant!" the captain barked out.

"Shoot the glass," Anya repeated. The sergeant's face went slack. He cocked his head to one side as if listening to a distant melody, then unslung his rifle and aimed at the observation window.

"Get down!" someone yelled.

Joost threw himself to the ground, covering his head as the rapid hammer of gunfire filled his ears and bits of glass rained down on his hands and back. His thoughts were a panicked clamor. His mind tried to deny it, but he knew what he'd just seen. Anya had commanded the sergeant to shoot the glass. She'd *made* him do it. But that couldn't be. Grisha Corporalki specialized in the human body. They could stop your heart, slow your breathing, snap your bones. They couldn't get inside your head.

For a moment there was silence. Then Joost was on his feet with everyone else, reaching for his rifle. Hoede and the captain shouted at the same time.

"Subdue her!"

“Shoot her!”

“Do you know how much money she’s worth?” Hoede retorted. “Someone restrain her! Do not shoot!”

Anya raised her hands, red sleeves spread wide. “Wait,” she said.

Joost’s panic vanished. He knew he’d been frightened, but his fear was a distant thing. He was filled with expectation. He wasn’t sure what was coming, or when, only that it would arrive and that it was essential he be ready to meet it. It might be bad or good. He didn’t really care. His heart was free of worry and desire. He longed for nothing, wanted for nothing, his mind silent, his breath steady. He only needed to *wait.*

He saw Anya rise and pick up the little boy. He heard her crooning tenderly to him, some Ravkan lullaby.

“Open the door and come in, Hoede,” she said. Joost heard the words, understood them, forgot them.

Hoede walked to the door and slid the bolt free. He entered the steel cell.

“Do as you’re told, and this will be over quickly, *ja*?” Anya murmured with a smile. Her eyes were black and bottomless pools. Her skin was alight, glowing, incandescent. A thought flickered through Joost’s mind—*beautiful as the moon.*

Anya shifted the boy’s weight in her arms. “Don’t look,” she murmured against his hair. “Now,” she said to Hoede. “Pick up the knife.”

2
Inej

Kaz Brekker didn't need a reason. Those were the words whispered on the streets of Ketterdam, in the taverns and coffeehouses, in the dark and bleeding alleys of the pleasure district known as the Barrel. The boy they called Dirtyhands didn't need a reason any more than he needed permission—to break a leg, sever an alliance, or change a man's fortunes with the turn of a card.

Of course they were wrong, Inej considered as she crossed the bridge over the black waters of the Beurscanal to the deserted main square that fronted the Exchange. Every act of violence was deliberate, and every favor came with enough strings attached to stage a puppet show. Kaz *always* had his reasons. Inej could just never be sure they were good ones. Especially tonight.

Inej checked her knives, silently reciting their names as she always did when she thought there might be trouble. It was a practical habit, but a comfort, too. The blades were her companions. She liked knowing they were ready for whatever the night might bring.

She saw Kaz and the others gathered near the great stone arch that marked the eastern entrance to the Exchange. Three words had been carved into the rock above them: *Enjent, Voorhent, Almhent.* Industry, Integrity, Prosperity.

She kept close to the shuttered storefronts that lined the square, avoiding the pockets of flickering gaslight cast by the streetlamps. As she moved, she inventoried the crew Kaz had brought with him: Dirix, Rotty, Muzzen and Keeg, Anika and Pim, and his chosen seconds for tonight's parlay, Jesper and Big Bolliger. They jostled and bumped each other, laughing, stamping their feet against the cold snap that had surprised the city this week, the last gasp of winter before spring began in earnest. They were all bruisers and brawlers, culled from the younger members of the Dregs, the people Kaz trusted most. Inej noted the glint of knives tucked into their belts, lead pipes, weighted chains, axe handles studded with rusty nails, and here and there, the oily gleam of a gun barrel. She slipped silently into their ranks, scanning the shadows near the Exchange for signs of Black Tip spies.

"Three ships!" Jesper was saying. "The Shu sent them. They were just sitting in First Harbor, cannons out, red flags flying, stuffed to the sails with gold."

Big Bolliger gave a low whistle. "Would have liked to see that."

"Would have liked to *steal* that," replied Jesper. "Half the Merchant Council was down there flapping and squawking, trying to figure out what to do."

"Don't they want the Shu paying their debts?" Big Bolliger asked.

Kaz shook his head, dark hair glinting in the lamplight. He was a collection of hard lines and tailored edges—sharp jaw, lean build, wool coat snug across his shoulders. "Yes and no," he said in his rock salt rasp. "It's always good to have a country in debt to you. Makes for friendlier negotiations."

"Maybe the Shu are done being friendly," said Jesper. "They didn't have to send all that

treasure at once. You think they stuck that trade ambassador?"

Kaz's eyes found Inej unerringly in the crowd. Ketterdam had been buzzing about the assassination of the ambassador for weeks. It had nearly destroyed Kerch-Zemeni relations and sent the Merchant Council into an uproar. The Zemeni blamed the Kerch. The Kerch suspected the Shu. Kaz didn't care who was responsible; the murder fascinated him because he couldn't figure out how it had been accomplished. In one of the busiest corridors of the Stadhall, in full view of more than a dozen government officials, the Zemeni trade ambassador had stepped into a washroom. No one else had entered or left, but when his aide knocked on the door a few minutes later, there had been no answer. When they'd broken down the door, they'd found the ambassador face down on the white tiles, a knife in his back, the sink still running.

Kaz had sent Inej to investigate the premises after hours. The washroom had no other entrance, no windows or vents, and even Inej hadn't mastered the art of squeezing herself through the plumbing. Yet the Zemeni ambassador was dead. Kaz hated a puzzle he couldn't solve, and he and Inej had concocted a hundred theories to account for the murder—none of which satisfied. But they had more pressing problems tonight.

She saw him signal to Jesper and Big Bolliger to divest themselves of weapons. Street law dictated that for a parlay of this kind each lieutenant be seconded by two of his foot soldiers and that they all be unarmed. *Parlay.* The word felt like a deception—strangely prim, an antique. No matter what street law decreed, this night smelled like violence.

"Go on, give those guns over," Dirix said to Jesper.

With a great sigh, Jesper removed the gun belts at his hips. She had to admit he looked less himself without them. He was a Zemeni sharpshooter—long-limbed, brown-skinned, constantly in motion. He pressed his lips to the pearl handles of his prized revolvers, bestowing each with a mournful kiss.

"Take good care of my babies," Jesper said as he handed them over to Dirix. "If I see a single scratch or nick on those handles, I'll spell *forgive me* on your chest in bullet holes."

"You wouldn't waste the ammo."

"And he'd be dead halfway through *forgive*," Big Bolliger said as he dropped a hatchet, a switchblade, and his preferred weapon, a thick chain weighted with a heavy padlock, into Rotty's expectant hands.

Jesper rolled his eyes. "It's about sending a message. What's the point of a dead guy with *forg* written on his chest?"

"Compromise," Kaz said. "*I'm sorry* does the trick and uses fewer bullets."

Dirix laughed, but Inej noted that he cradled Jesper's revolvers very gently.

"What about that?" Jesper asked, gesturing to Kaz's walking stick.

Kaz's laugh was low and humorless. "Who'd deny a poor cripple his cane?"

"If the cripple is you, then any man with sense."

"Then it's a good thing we're meeting Geels." Kaz drew a watch from his vest pocket. "It's almost midnight."

Inej turned her gaze to the Exchange. It was little more than a large rectangular courtyard surrounded by warehouses and shipping offices. But during the day, it was the heart of Ketterdam, bustling with wealthy merchers buying and selling shares in the trade voyages that passed through the city's ports. Now it was nearly twelve bells, and the Exchange was deserted but for the guards who patrolled the perimeter and the rooftop. They'd been bribed to look the other way during tonight's parlay.

The Exchange was one of the few remaining parts of the city that hadn't been divvied up and claimed in the ceaseless skirmishes between Ketterdam's rival gangs. It was supposed to be neutral territory. But it didn't *feel* neutral to Inej. It felt like the hush of the woods before the snare yanks tight and the rabbit starts to scream. It felt like a trap.

“This is a mistake,” she said. Big Bolliger startled; he hadn’t known she was standing there. Inej heard the name the Dregs preferred for her whispered among their ranks—*the Wraith.* “Geels is up to something.”

“Of course he is,” said Kaz. His voice had the rough, abraded texture of stone against stone. Inej always wondered if he’d sounded that way as a little boy. If he’d ever been a little boy.

“Then why come here tonight?”

“Because this is the way Per Haskell wants it.”

Old man, old ways, Inej thought but didn’t say, and she knew the other Dregs were thinking the same thing.

“He’s going to get us all killed,” she said.

Jesper stretched his long arms overhead and grinned, his teeth white against his dark skin. He had yet to give up his rifle, and the silhouette of it across his back made him resemble a gawky, long-limbed bird. “Statistically, he’ll probably only get *some* of us killed.”

“It’s not something to joke about,” she replied. The look Kaz cast her was amused. She knew how she sounded—stern, fussy, like an old crone making dire pronouncements from her porch. She didn’t like it, but she also knew she was right. Besides, old women must know something, or they wouldn’t live to gather wrinkles and yell from their front stoops.

“Jesper isn’t making a joke, Inej,” said Kaz. “He’s figuring the odds.”

Big Bolliger cracked his huge knuckles. “Well, I’ve got lager and a skillet of eggs waiting for me at the Kooperom, so I can’t be the one to die tonight.”

“Care to place a wager?” Jesper asked.

“I’m not going to bet on my own death.”

Kaz flipped his hat onto his head and ran his gloved fingers along the brim in a quick salute. “Why not, Bolliger? We do it every day.”

He was right. Inej’s debt to Per Haskell meant she gambled her life every time she took on a new job or assignment, every time she left her room at the Slat. Tonight was no different.

Kaz struck his walking stick against the cobblestones as the bells from the Church of Barter began to chime. The group fell silent. The time for talk was done. “Geels isn’t smart, but he’s just bright enough to be trouble,” said Kaz. “No matter what you hear, you don’t join the fray unless I give the command. Stay sharp.” Then he gave Inej a quick nod. “And stay hidden.”

“No mourners,” Jesper said as he tossed his rifle to Rotty.

“No funerals,” the rest of the Dregs murmured in reply. Among them, it passed for “good luck.”

Before Inej could melt into the shadows, Kaz tapped her arm with his crow’s head cane. “Keep a watch on the rooftop guards. Geels may have them in his pocket.”

“Then—” Inej began, but Kaz was already gone.

Inej threw up her hands in frustration. She had a hundred questions, but as usual, Kaz was keeping a stranglehold on the answers.

She jogged toward the canal-facing wall of the Exchange. Only the lieutenants and their seconds were allowed to enter during the parlay. But just in case the Black Tips got any ideas, the other Dregs would be waiting right outside the eastern arch with weapons at the ready. She knew Geels would have his own crew of heavily armed Black Tips gathered at the western entrance.

Inej would find her own way in. The rules of fair play among the gangs were from Per Haskell’s time. Besides, she was the Wraith—the only law that applied to her was gravity, and some days she defied that, too.

The lower level of the Exchange was dedicated to windowless warehouses, so Inej located a drainpipe to shinny up. Something made her hesitate before she wrapped her hand around it. She drew a bonelight from her pocket and gave it a shake, casting a pale green glow over the pipe. It was slick with oil. She followed the wall, seeking another option, and found a stone cornice

bearing a statue of Kerch's three flying fishes within reach. She stood on her toes and tentatively felt along the top of the cornice. It had been covered in ground glass. *I am expected,* she thought with grim pleasure.

She'd joined up with the Dregs less than two years ago, just days after her fifteenth birthday. It had been a matter of survival, but it gratified her to know that, in that short time, she'd become someone to take precautions against. Though, if the Black Tips thought tricks like this would keep the Wraith from her goal, they were sadly mistaken.

She drew two climbing spikes from the pockets of her quilted vest and wedged first one then the other between the bricks of the wall as she hoisted herself higher, her questing feet finding the smallest holds and ridges in the stone. As a child learning the high wire, she'd gone barefoot. But the streets of Ketterdam were too cold and wet for that. After a few bad spills, she'd paid a Grisha Fabrikator working in secret out of a gin shop on the Wijinstraat to make her a pair of leather slippers with nubbly rubber soles. They were perfectly fitted to her feet and gripped any surface with surety.

On the second story of the Exchange, she hoisted herself onto a window ledge just wide enough to perch on.

Kaz had done his best to teach her, but she didn't quite have his way with breaking and entering, and it took her a few tries to finesse the lock. Finally she heard a satisfying *click*, and the window swung open on a deserted office, its walls covered in maps marked with trade routes and chalkboards listing share prices and the names of ships. She ducked inside, refastened the latch, and picked her way past the empty desks with their neat stacks of orders and tallies.

She crossed to a slender set of doors and stepped onto a balcony that overlooked the central courtyard of the Exchange. Each of the shipping offices had one. From here, callers announced new voyages and arrivals of inventory, or hung the black flag that indicated that a ship had been lost at sea with all its cargo. The floor of the Exchange would erupt into a flurry of trades, runners would spread the word throughout the city, and the price of goods, futures, and shares in outgoing voyages would rise or fall. But tonight all was silence.

A wind came in off the harbor, bringing the smell of the sea, ruffling the stray hairs that had escaped the braided coil at the nape of Inej's neck. Down in the square, she saw the sway of lamplight and heard the thump of Kaz's cane on the stones as he and his seconds made their way across the square. On the opposite side, she glimpsed another set of lanterns heading toward them. The Black Tips had arrived.

Inej raised her hood. She pulled herself onto the railing and leapt soundlessly to the neighboring balcony, then the next, tracking Kaz and the others around the square, staying as close as she could. His dark coat rippled in the salt breeze, his limp more pronounced tonight, as it always was when the weather turned cold. She could hear Jesper keeping up a lively stream of conversation, and Big Bolliger's low, rumbling chuckle.

As she drew nearer to the other side of the square, Inej saw that Geels had chosen to bring Elzinger and Oomen—exactly as she had predicted. Inej knew the strengths and weaknesses of every member of the Black Tips, not to mention Harley's Pointers, the Liddies, the Razorgulls, the Dime Lions, and every other gang working the streets of Ketterdam. It was her job to know that Geels trusted Elzinger because they'd come up through the ranks of the Black Tips together, and because Elzinger was built like a stack of boulders—nearly seven feet tall, dense with muscle, his wide, mashed-in face tucked low on a neck thick as a pylon.

She was suddenly glad Big Bolliger was with Kaz. That Kaz had chosen Jesper to be one of his seconds was no surprise. Twitchy as Jesper was, with or without his revolvers, he was at his best in a fight, and she knew he'd do anything for Kaz. She'd been less sure when Kaz had insisted on Big Bolliger as well. Big Bol was a bouncer at the Crow Club, perfectly suited to tossing out drunks and wasters, but too heavy on his feet to be much use when it came to a real tussle. Still,

at least he was tall enough to look Elzinger in the eye.

Inej didn't want to think too much on Geels' other second. Oomen made her nervous. He wasn't as physically intimidating as Elzinger. In fact, Oomen was made like a scarecrow—not scrawny, but as if beneath his clothes, his body had been put together at wrong angles. Word was he'd once crushed a man's skull with his bare hands, wiped his palms clean on his shirtfront, and kept right on drinking.

Inej tried to quiet the unease roiling through her, and listened as Geels and Kaz made small talk in the square while their seconds patted each of them down to make sure no one was carrying.

"Naughty," Jesper said as he removed a tiny knife from Elzinger's sleeve and tossed it across the square.

"Clear," declared Big Bolliger as he finished patting down Geels and moved on to Oomen.

Kaz and Geels discussed the weather, the suspicion that the Kooperom was serving watered-down drinks now that the rent had been raised—dancing around the real reason they'd come here tonight. In theory, they would chat, make their apologies, agree to respect the boundaries of Fifth Harbor, then all head out to find a drink together—at least that's what Per Haskell had insisted.

But what does Per Haskell know? Inej thought as she looked for the guards patrolling the roof above, trying to pick out their shapes in the dark. Haskell ran the Dregs, but these days, he preferred to sit in the warmth of his room, drinking lukewarm lager, building model ships, and telling long stories of his exploits to anyone who would listen. He seemed to think territory wars could be settled as they once had been: with a short scuffle and a friendly handshake. But every one of Inej's senses told her that was not how this was going to play out. Her father would have said the shadows were about their own business tonight. Something bad was going to happen here.

Kaz stood with both gloved hands resting on the carved crow's head of his cane. He looked totally at ease, his narrow face obscured by the brim of his hat. Most gang members in the Barrel loved flash: gaudy waistcoats, watch fobs studded with false gems, trousers in every print and pattern imaginable. Kaz was the exception—the picture of restraint, his dark vests and trousers simply cut and tailored along severe lines. At first, she'd thought it was a matter of taste, but she'd come to understand that it was a joke he played on the upstanding merchers. He enjoyed looking like one of them.

"I'm a business man," he'd told her. "No more, no less."

"You're a thief, Kaz."

"Isn't that what I just said?"

Now he looked like some kind of priest come to preach to a group of circus performers. A *young* priest, she thought with another pang of unease. Kaz had called Geels old and washed up, but he certainly didn't seem that way tonight. The Black Tips' lieutenant might have wrinkles creasing the corners of his eyes and burgeoning jowls beneath his sideburns, but he looked confident, experienced. Next to him Kaz looked … well, seventeen.

"Let's be fair, *ja*? All we want is a bit more scrub," Geels said, tapping the mirrored buttons of his lime-green waistcoat. "It's not fair for you to cull every spend-happy tourist stepping off a pleasure boat at Fifth Harbor."

"Fifth Harbor is ours, Geels," Kaz replied. "The Dregs get first crack at the pigeons who come looking for a little fun."

Geels shook his head. "You're a young one, Brekker," he said with an indulgent laugh. "Maybe you don't understand how these things work. The harbors belong to the city, and we have as much right to them as anyone. We've all got a living to make."

Technically, that was true. But Fifth Harbor had been useless and all but abandoned by the city

when Kaz had taken it over. He'd had it dredged, and then built out the docks and the quay, and he'd had to mortgage the Crow Club to do it. Per Haskell had railed at him and called him a fool for the expense, but eventually he'd relented. According to Kaz, the old man's exact words had been, "Take all that rope and hang yourself." But the endeavor had paid for itself in less than a year. Now Fifth Harbor offered berths to mercher ships, as well as boats from all over the world carrying tourists and soldiers eager to see the sights and sample the pleasures of Ketterdam. The Dregs got first try at all of them, steering them—and their wallets—into brothels, taverns, and gambling dens owned by the gang. Fifth Harbor had made the old man very rich, and cemented the Dregs as real players in the Barrel in a way that not even the success of the Crow Club had. But with profit came unwanted attention. Geels and the Black Tips had been making trouble for the Dregs all year, encroaching on Fifth Harbor, picking off pigeons that weren't rightfully theirs.

"Fifth Harbor is ours," Kaz repeated. "It isn't up for negotiation. You're cutting into our traffic from the docks, and you intercepted a shipment of *jurda* that should have docked two nights ago."

"Don't know what you're talking about."

"I know it comes easy, Geels, but try not to play dumb with me."

Geels took a step forward. Jesper and Big Bolliger tensed.

"Quit flexing, boy," he said. "We all know the old man doesn't have the stomach for a real brawl."

Kaz's laugh was dry as the rustle of dead leaves. "But *I'm* the one at your table, Geels, and I'm not here for a taste. You want a war, I'll make sure you eat your fill."

"And what if you're not around, Brekker? Everyone knows you're the spine of Haskell's operation—snap it and the Dregs collapse."

Jesper snorted. "Spine, stomach. What's next, spleen?"

"Shut it," Oomen snarled. The rules of parlay dictated that only the lieutenants could speak once negotiations had begun. Jesper mouthed "sorry" and elaborately pantomimed locking his lips shut.

"I'm fairly sure you're threatening me, Geels," Kaz said. "But I want to be certain before I decide what to do about it."

"Sure of yourself, aren't you, Brekker?"

"Myself and nothing else."

Geels burst out laughing and elbowed Oomen. "Listen to this cocky little piece of crap. Brekker, you don't own these streets. Kids like you are fleas. A new crop of you turns up every few years to annoy your betters until a big dog decides to scratch. And let me tell you, I'm about tired of the itch." He crossed his arms, pleasure rolling off him in smug waves. "What if I told you there are two guards with city-issue rifles pointed at you and your boys right now?"

Inej's stomach dropped. Was that what Kaz had meant when he said Geels might have the guards in his pocket?

Kaz glanced up at the roof. "Hiring city guards to do your killing? I'd say that's an expensive proposition for a gang like the Black Tips. I'm not sure I believe your coffers could support it."

Inej climbed onto the railing and launched herself from the safety of the balcony, heading for the roof. If they survived the night, she was going to kill Kaz.

There were always two guards from the *stadwatch* posted on the roof of the Exchange. A few *kruge* from the Dregs and the Black Tips had ensured they wouldn't interfere with the parlay, a common enough transaction. But Geels was implying something very different. Had he really managed to bribe city guards to play sniper for him? If so, the Dregs' odds of surviving this night had just dwindled to a knife's point.

Like most of the buildings in Ketterdam, the Exchange had a sharply gabled roof to keep off heavy rain, so the guards patrolled the rooftop via a narrow walkway that overlooked the

courtyard. Inej ignored it. It was easier going but would leave her too exposed. Instead she scaled halfway up the slick roof tiles and started crawling, her body tilted at a precarious angle, moving like a spider as she kept one eye on the guards' walkway and one ear on the conversation below. Maybe Geels was bluffing. Or maybe two guards were hunched over the railing right now with Kaz or Jesper or Big Bolliger in their sights.

"Took some doing," Geels admitted. "We're a small operation right now, and city guards don't come cheap. But it'll be worth it for the prize."

"That being me?"

"That being you."

"I'm flattered."

"The Dregs won't last a week without you."

"I'd give them a month on sheer momentum."

The thought rattled noisily around in Inej's head. *If Kaz was gone, would I stay? Or would I skip out on my debt? Take my chances with Per Haskell's enforcers?* If she didn't move faster, she might well find out.

"Smug little slum rat." Geels laughed. "I can't wait to wipe that look off your face."

"So do it," Kaz said. Inej risked a look down. His voice had changed, all humor gone.

"Should I have them put a bullet in your good leg, Brekker?"

Where are the guards? Inej thought, picking up her pace. She raced across the steep pitch of the gable. The Exchange stretched nearly the length of a city block. There was too much territory to cover.

"Stop *talking*, Geels. Tell them to shoot."

"Kaz—" said Jesper nervously.

"Go on. Find your balls and give the order."

What game was Kaz playing? Had he expected this? Had he just assumed Inej would find her way to the guards in time?

She glanced down again. Geels radiated anticipation. He took a deep breath, puffing out his chest. Inej's steps faltered, and she had to fight not to go sliding straight off the edge of the roof. *He's going to do it. I'm going to watch Kaz die.*

"Fire!" Geels shouted.

A gunshot split the air. Big Bolliger let loose a cry and crumpled to the ground.

"Damn it!" shouted Jesper, dropping to one knee beside Bolliger and pressing his hand to the bullet wound as the big man moaned. "You worthless podge!" he yelled at Geels. "You just violated neutral territory."

"Nothing to say you didn't shoot first," Geels replied. "And who's going to know? None of you are walking out of here."

Geels' voice sounded too high. He was trying to maintain his composure, but Inej could hear panic pulsing against his words, the startled wing beat of a frightened bird. Why? Moments before he'd been all bluster.

That was when Inej saw Kaz still hadn't moved. "You don't look well, Geels."

"I'm just fine," he said. But he wasn't. He looked pale and shaky. His eyes were darting right and left as if searching the shadowed walkway of the roof.

"Are you?" Kaz asked conversationally. "Things aren't going quite as planned, are they?"

"Kaz," Jesper said. "Bolliger's bleeding bad—"

"Good," Kaz said ignoring him.

"Kaz, he needs a medik!"

Kaz spared the wounded man the barest glance. "What he needs to do is stop his bellyaching and be glad I didn't have Holst take him down with a head shot."

Even from above, Inej saw Geels flinch.

“That’s the guard’s name, isn’t it?” Kaz asked. “Willem Holst and Bert Van Daal—the two city guards on duty tonight. The ones you emptied the Black Tips’ coffers to bribe?”

Geels said nothing.

“Willem Holst,” Kaz said loudly, his voice floating up to the roof, “likes to gamble almost as much as Jesper does, so your money held a lot of appeal. But Holst has much bigger problems—let’s call them urges. I won’t go into detail. A secret’s not like coin. It doesn’t keep its value in the spending. You’ll just have to trust me when I say this one would turn even your stomach. Isn’t that right, Holst?”

The response was another gunshot. It struck the cobblestones near Geels’ feet. Geels released a shocked bleat and sprang back.

This time Inej had a better chance to track the origin of the gunfire. The shot had come from somewhere near the west side of the building. If Holst was there, that meant the other guard—Bert Van Daal—would be on the east side. Had Kaz managed to neutralize him, too? Or was he counting on her? She sped over the gables.

“Just shoot him, Holst!” Geels bellowed, head tilted back, desperation sawing at his voice. “Shoot him in the head!”

Kaz snorted in disgust. “Do you really think that secret would die with me? Go on, Holst,” he called. “Put a bullet in my skull. There will be messengers sprinting to your wife and your watch captain’s door before I hit the ground.”

No shot came.

“How?” Geels said bitterly. “How did you even know who would be on duty tonight? I had to pay through the gills to get that roster. You couldn’t have outbid me.”

“Let’s say my currency carries more sway.”

“Money is money.”

“I trade in information, Geels, the things men do when they think no one is looking. Shame holds more value than coin ever can.”

He was grandstanding, Inej saw that, buying her time as she leapt over the slate shingles.

“Are you worrying about the second guard? Good old Bert Van Daal?” Kaz asked. “Maybe he’s up there right now, wondering what he should do. Shoot me? Shoot Holst? Or maybe I got to him, too, and he’s getting ready to blow a hole in your chest, Geels.” He leaned in as if he and Geels were sharing a great secret. “Why not give Van Daal the order and find out?”

Geels opened and closed his mouth like a carp, then bellowed, “Van Daal!”

Just as Van Daal parted his lips to answer, Inej slipped up behind him and placed a blade to his throat. She’d barely had time to pick out his shadow and slide down the roof tiles. Saints, Kaz liked to cut it close.

“Shhhh,” she whispered in Van Daal’s ear. She gave him a tiny jab in the side so that he could feel the point of her second dagger pressed against his kidney.

“Please,” he moaned. “I—”

“I like it when men beg,” she said. “But this isn’t the time for it.”

Below, she could see Geels’ chest rising and falling with panicked breaths. “Van Daal!” he shouted again. There was rage on his face when he turned back to Kaz. “Always one step ahead, aren’t you?”

“Geels, when it comes to you, I’d say I have a running start.”

But Geels just smiled—a tiny smile, tight and satisfied. *A victor’s smile*, Inej realized with fresh fear.

“The race isn’t over yet.” Geels reached into his jacket and pulled out a heavy black revolver.

“Finally,” Kaz said. “The big reveal. Now Jesper can stop keening over Bolliger like a wet-eyed woman.”

Jesper stared at the gun with stunned, furious eyes. “Bolliger searched him. He … Oh, Big Bol,

you idiot," he groaned.

Inej couldn't believe what she was seeing. The guard in her arms released a tiny squeak. In her anger and surprise, she'd accidentally tightened her grip. "Relax," she said, easing her hold. But, all Saints, she wanted to put a knife through something. Big Bolliger had been the one to pat down Geels. There was no way he could have missed the pistol. He'd betrayed them.

Was that why Kaz had insisted on bringing Big Bolliger here tonight—so he'd have public confirmation that Bolliger had gone over to the Black Tips? It was certainly why he'd let Holst put a bullet in Bolliger's gut. But so what? Now everyone knew Big Bol was a traitor. Kaz still had a gun pointed at his chest.

Geels smirked. "Kaz Brekker, the great escape artist. How are you going to wriggle your way out of this one?"

"Going out the same way I came in." Kaz ignored the pistol, turning his attention to the big man lying on the ground. "Do you know what your problem is, Bolliger?" He jabbed at the wound in Big Bol's stomach with the tip of his cane. "That wasn't a rhetorical question. Do you know what your biggest problem is?"

Bolliger mewled. "Noooo …"

"Give me a guess," Kaz hissed.

Big Bol said nothing, just released another trembling whimper.

"All right, I'll tell you. You're lazy. I know it. Everyone knows it. So I had to ask myself why my laziest bouncer was getting up early twice a week to walk two extra miles to Cilla's Fry for breakfast, especially when the eggs are so much better at the Kooperom. Big Bol becomes an early riser, the Black Tips start throwing their weight around Fifth Harbor and then intercept our biggest shipment of *jurda*. It wasn't a tough connection to make." He sighed and said to Geels, "This is what happens when stupid people start making big plans, *ja?*"

"Doesn't matter much now, does it?" replied Geels. "This gets ugly, I'm shooting from close range. Maybe your guards get me or my guys, but no way you're going to dodge this bullet."

Kaz stepped into the barrel of the gun so that it was pressed directly against his chest. "No way at all, Geels."

"You think I won't do it?"

"Oh, I think you'd do it gladly, with a song in your black heart. But you won't. Not tonight."

Geels' finger twitched on the trigger.

"Kaz," Jesper said. "This whole 'shoot me' thing is starting to concern me."

Oomen didn't bother to object to Jesper mouthing off this time. One man was down. Neutral territory had been violated. The sharp tang of gunpowder already hung in the air—and along with it a question, unspoken in the quiet, as if the Reaper himself awaited the answer: How much blood will be shed tonight?

In the distance a siren wailed.

"Nineteen Burstraat," Kaz said.

Geels had been shifting slightly from foot to foot; now he went very still.

"That's your girl's address, isn't it, Geels?"

Geels swallowed. "Don't have a girl."

"Oh yes, you do," crooned Kaz. "She's pretty, too. Well, pretty enough for a fink like you. Seems sweet. You love her, don't you?" Even from the rooftop, Inej could see the sheen of sweat on Geels' waxen face. "Of course you do. No one that fine should ever have looked twice at Barrel scum like you, but she's different. She finds you charming. Sure sign of madness if you ask me, but love is strange that way. Does she like to rest her pretty head on your shoulder? Listen to you talk about your day?"

Geels looked at Kaz as if he was finally seeing him for the first time. The boy he'd been talking to had been cocky, reckless, easily amused, but not frightening—not really. Now the monster was

here, dead-eyed and unafraid. Kaz Brekker was gone, and Dirtyhands had come to see the rough work done.

"She lives at Nineteen Burstraat," Kaz said in his gravelly rasp. "Three floors up, geraniums in the window boxes. There are two Dregs waiting outside her door right now, and if I don't walk out of here whole and feeling righteous, they will set that place alight from floor to rooftop. It will go up in seconds, burning from both ends with poor Elise trapped in the middle. Her blonde hair will catch first. Like the wick of a candle."

"You're bluffing," said Geels, but his pistol hand was trembling.

Kaz lifted his head and inhaled deeply. "Getting late now. You heard the siren. I smell the harbor on the wind, sea and salt, and maybe—is that smoke I smell, too?" There was pleasure in his voice.

Oh, Saints, Kaz, Inej thought miserably. *What have you done now?*

Again, Geels' finger twitched on the trigger, and Inej tensed.

"I know, Geels. I know," Kaz said sympathetically. "All that planning and scheming and bribing for nothing. That's what you're thinking right now. How bad it will feel to walk home knowing what you've lost. How angry your boss is going to be when you show up empty handed and that much poorer for it. How satisfying it would be to put a bullet in my heart. You can do it. Pull the trigger. We can all go down tonight. They can take our bodies out to the Reaper's Barge for burning, like all paupers go. Or you can take the blow to your pride, go back to Burstraat, lay your head in your girl's lap, fall asleep still breathing, and dream of revenge. It's up to you, Geels. Do we get to go home tonight?"

Geels searched Kaz's gaze, and whatever he saw there made his shoulders slump. Inej was surprised to feel a pang of pity for him. He'd walked into this place buoyed on bravado, a survivor, a champion of the Barrel. He'd leave as another victim of Kaz Brekker.

"You'll get what's coming to you someday, Brekker."

"I will," said Kaz, "if there's any justice in the world. And we all know how likely that is."

Geels let his arm drop. The pistol hung uselessly by his side.

Kaz stepped back, brushing the front of his shirt where the gun barrel had rested. "Go tell your general to keep the Black Tips out of Fifth Harbor and that we expect him to make amends for the shipment of *jurda* we lost, plus five percent for drawing steel on neutral ground and five percent more for being such a spectacular bunch of asses."

Then Kaz's cane swung in a sudden sharp arc. Geels screamed as his wrist bones shattered. The gun clattered to the paving stones.

"I stood down!" cried Geels, cradling his hand. "I stood down!"

"You draw on me again, I'll break both your wrists, and you'll have to hire someone to help you take a piss." Kaz tipped the brim of his hat up with the head of his cane. "Or maybe you can get the lovely Elise to do it for you."

Kaz crouched down beside Bolliger. The big man whimpered. "Look at me, Bolliger. Assuming you don't bleed to death tonight, you have until sunset tomorrow to get out of Ketterdam. I hear you're anywhere near the city limits, and they'll find you stuffed in a keg at Cilla's Fry." Then he looked at Geels. "You help Bolliger, or I find out he's running with the Black Tips, don't think I won't come after you."

"Please, Kaz," moaned Bolliger.

"You had a home, and you put a wrecking ball through the front room, Bolliger. Don't look for sympathy from me." He rose and checked his pocket watch. "I didn't expect this to go on so long. I'd best be on my way or poor Elise will be getting a trifle warm."

Geels shook his head. "There's something wrong with you, Brekker. I don't know what you are, but you're not made right."

Kaz cocked his head to one side. "You're from the suburbs, aren't you Geels? Came to the city

to try your luck?" He smoothed his lapel with one gloved hand. "Well, I'm the kind of bastard they only manufacture in the Barrel."

Despite the loaded gun at the Black Tips' feet, Kaz turned his back on them and limped across the cobblestones toward the eastern arch. Jesper squatted down next to Bolliger and gave him a gentle pat on the cheek. "Idiot," he said sadly, and followed Kaz out of the Exchange.

From the roof, Inej continued to watch as Oomen picked up and holstered Geels' gun and the Black Tips said a few quiet words to each other.

"Don't leave," Big Bolliger begged. "Don't leave me." He tried to cling to the cuff of Geels' trousers.

Geels shook him off. They left him curled on his side, leaking blood onto the cobblestones.

Inej plucked Van Daal's rifle from his hands before she released him. "Go home," she told the guard.

He cast a single terrified glance over his shoulder and sprinted off down the walkway. Far below, Big Bol had started trying to drag himself across the floor of the Exchange. He might be stupid enough to cross Kaz Brekker, but he'd survived this long in the Barrel, and that took will. He might make it.

Help him, a voice inside her said. Until a few moments ago, he'd been her brother in arms. It seemed wrong to leave him alone. She could go to him, offer to put him out of his misery quickly, hold his hand as he passed. She could fetch a medik to save him.

Instead, she spoke a quick prayer in the language of her Saints and began the steep climb down the outer wall. Inej pitied the boy, who might die alone with no one to comfort him in his last hours or who might live and spend his life as an exile. But the night's work wasn't yet over, and the Wraith didn't have time for traitors.

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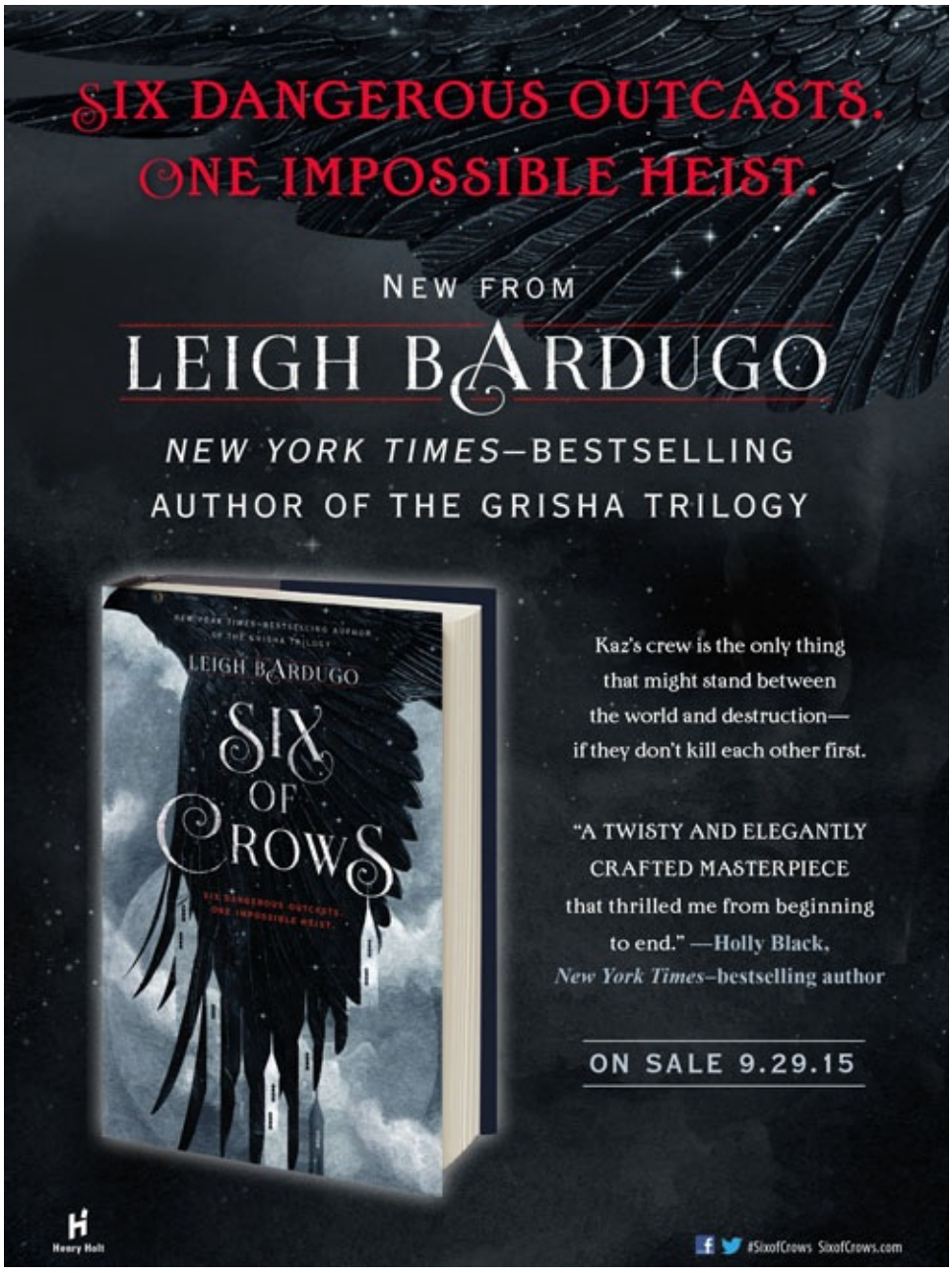
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Leigh Bardugo was born in Jerusalem, raised in Los Angeles, and graduated from Yale University. These days, she hides out in Hollywood, where she indulges her fondness for glamour, ghouls, and costuming in her other life as a makeup artist. She can occasionally be heard singing with her band, Captain Automatic. Her first book, SHADOW AND BONE, was a New York Times bestseller. You can sign up for author updates here.

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Table of Contents

Title Page
Copyright Notice

Shadow and Bone
- Dedication
- Before
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10
- Chapter 11
- Chapter 12
- Chapter 13
- Chapter 14
- Chapter 15
- Chapter 16
- Chapter 17
- Chapter 18
- Chapter 19
- Chapter 20
- Chapter 21
- Chapter 22
- After
- Acknowledgments
- Copyright Page

Siege and Storm
- Dedication
- Map
- The Grisha
- Before
- Chapter 1

Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
After
Acknowledgments
Copyright

Ruin and Rising
Before
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
After
Ruin and Rising Reading Group Gold
Map

The Grisha Orders
Dedication
Acknowledgments
A Note from the Author
Copyright

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