



The Demon in the Wood (The Grisha #0.1)

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Before he became the Darkling, he was just a lonely boy of extraordinary power. Get a look into the past that forged a brutal and brilliant leader.

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Leigh Bardugo

For the readers—thank you for wanting to know more

THE DEMON IN THE WOOD

How many were there, Eryk?

It was a stranger's voice, speaking a stranger's name. But through the haze of pain, he remembered. His mother had given him his new name on the way up the mountain, as the wind blew down from the pass, rustling the needles of the pines. The northerners will want to call you Eryk, she'd said. He'd pulled the furs up around his ears and thought, They won't want to call me anything.

He managed to open one of his eyes. He could feel the crust of blood tugging on his lid. The other must be swollen shut. Had someone broken his nose? He couldn't remember.

He was lying on a stretcher. Two men were leaning over him, and they wanted answers.

"How many?" asked the man with the red-gold beard, the Ulle.

"Six," he managed. "Maybe seven."

The other man leaned closer. Eryk had only seen Annika's father from afar, but he recognized him well enough now—his hair nearly white like hers, his eyes the same bright blue. "Fjerdan or Ravkan?"

"They spoke Ravkan," he croaked. His throat was raw. Because I was screaming when they pushed me under.

"Enough." His mother's voice, cool and hard as a diamond.

Madraya. He was embarrassed by the relief that rushed through him. You're not a child, he told himself. But he felt like one, lying there in his wet clothes, cold and helpless.

Eryk forced himself to turn his head so he could see her. His skull beat with a red rhythm, each pulse driving the pain deeper in jagged shards. He tried to blink it away.

His mother's face was creased with concern, but he recognized the watchful look in her eyes too. They were the newcomers—they were always the newcomers—and when things went bad, they were the easiest people to blame.

"We need to evacuate the camp," said Annika's father. "If they found the children last night—" His voice broke.

"We're not going anywhere," growled the Ulle. "We're going to raze that village and take ten of their children for every one of ours they took."

"We don't have the soldiers for an attack. We must use caution—"

The Ulle's voice rasped like a sword drawn from its sheath. "My son is dead. So is your daughter. My caution perished with them."

“What were you even doing out here, Eryk?” Annika’s father asked miserably.

“Swimming.” He knew how foolish that sounded.

The Ulle pointed an angry finger at him. “You never should have left the camp after dark.”

“I know,” Eryk mumbled. “We were just ... I only wanted...” He met his mother’s eyes and had to look away, the shame was so great.

“They were being children,” she said.

The Ulle turned to her. “If we’re to mount an attack, we need your strength.”

“First I see to my son.”

“His leg is nearly severed. We have Healers—”

His mother’s look was enough to silence the Ulle, even in his grief, even in his rage. Such was her power.

The Ulle gestured to his men and the stretcher was lifted. Eryk’s head spun. A wave of nausea gripped him. His mother took his hand and pressed his knuckles gently to her cheek. He had to tell her.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

This time she was the one to look away.

“The northerners will want to call you Eryk,” his mother said over the howl of the wind. It sighed down through the passes, singing its old song, promising winter,

troubled like a man tossing in his sleep.

They won't want to call me anything, he thought, but all he said was, "Why? I was supposed to be Arkady."

"If we're to be from the south, you need a southern name like Arkady. But Eryk will fit better on their tongues. They're Fjerdan here as much as Ravkan. You'll see. Now, what's your name?"

"Arkady. Eryk."

"Where are you from?"

"Balakirev."

She didn't ask the next question, the question strangers always asked: Where is your father? Of course, that one was easy because the answer never changed. He's dead. He'd once asked his mother if that was the truth, if his father was really dead.

He will be, she'd said. Before you can blink your eye. You'll outlive him by a hundred years, maybe a thousand, maybe more. He's only dust to you.

Now she said, "Again. What's your name?"

"Eryk."

"Where are you from?"

"Balakirev."

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They went on like that as they made their way up the mountain. It was a foothill really, one of the cold and silent peaks that marked the very beginnings of the Elbjén range. She'd shown him the route on a map two days ago, before she'd gone ahead to make sure they'd be welcome at the Grisha camp. Grishas were cautious about outsiders, and he and his mother could never be sure of how they would be received.

She'd left him in a tent wedged into an old hunters' blind with two days' supply of millet cake and a ration of salt to make brine for soaking it. When she'd gone, she had taken their only lantern. He hadn't had the courage to ask her to leave it with him. He was too old to be afraid of the dark. So he'd lain awake for two nights, curled beneath his furs, listening to the wolves howl, counting the minutes until morning.

When his mother had retrieved him, they'd headed up the mountain. Arkady. Eryk. Now he said his new name again and again, out loud, then inside his head, repeating it with every footfall until the name stopped being a second thought, until there was no echo and he was only Eryk. A boy from the south, a boy who would disappear in a week or a month, who would vanish beneath a new name and a new story. His mother would cut his hair or dye it or shave his head. That was how they lived, traveling from place to place. They learned what they could, then moved on and did their best to hide their tracks. The world wasn't safe for Grishas, but it was particularly dangerous for the two of them.

He was thirteen, but he'd had a hundred names, a new one for every town, camp, and city—Iosef, Anton, Stasik, Kirill. He spoke fluent Shu and Kerch, and could pass as either. But his Fjerdan was still poor and the Grisha communities this far north knew each other well, so he'd be Arkady, and the northerners would call him Eryk.

“There,” his mother said.

The camp was tucked into a shallow valley between two peaks, a cluster of low huts covered in peat, their chimneys smoking, all bunched around a long, narrow lodge of thick timber.

“We could winter with them,” she said.

He stared at her, certain he had misunderstood. “For how long?” he said at last.

“Until the thaw. The Ulle is a powerful Squaller, and he’s seen combat with these new Fjerdan witchhunters. We could stand to learn whatever he has to teach.”

Until the thaw. That could be three, maybe four months. All in one place. Eryk looked down at the little camp. Winter would be hard here—long nights, brutal cold—and the otkazat’sya village they’d skirted on the trek was uncomfortably close. But he knew the way his mother thought. Once the deep snows came, no one would venture into these mountain passes even to hunt. The camp would be secure.

Eryk didn’t much care. He would have lived next door to a garbage gully if it meant a roof over his head, hot meals, waking up in the same room every morning without his heart hammering as he tried to remember where he was.

“All right,” he said.

“All right?” She snorted. “I saw the way your face lit. Just remember, the longer we stay, the more careful you’ll have to be.” He nodded, and she glanced back at the camp. “Look, the Ulle himself has come out to greet us.”

A group of men had emerged from the long hall.

“Who are they?” Eryk asked as he trailed his mother down the path.

“They call themselves elders,” she said with a laugh. “Old men stroking their beards and congratulating one another on their wisdom.”

It was easy to recognize the Ulle among them. He was a giant of a man, his broad shoulders draped with black furs, his hair red-gold, worn plaited and past his shoulders in the way of the north. Ulle was Fjerdan for “chieftain.” They really weren’t quite Ravkan here.

“Welcome, Lena!” boomed the Ulle as he strode toward them. Eryk barely registered the name his mother had taken. To him, she was always Mama, Madraya. “How was your journey?”

“Tiring.”

“You shame me as a host. The elders would have gladly sent men and horses to fetch Eryk.”

“Neither my son nor I need coddling,” she replied. But Eryk knew there was more to it. He’d learned long ago that there was a second Ravka, a secret country of hidden caves and empty quarries, abandoned villages and forgotten freshwater springs. They were places where you could hide out from a storm or an attack, where you could enter as one person and emerge disguised as another. If the elders had sent men with his mother to retrieve him, she would have had to reveal the hunters’ blind. She never gave up a hiding place or possible escape route without good reason.

The Ulle led them to a hut and pulled back the stitched elk hides that covered the gap between the door and the crude wooden lintel. It was snug and warm inside, though it stank heavily of wet fur and something Eryk couldn’t identify.

“Please be at your ease here,” said the Ulle. “We want you to feel at home. Tonight we welcome you with a feast, but the elders are about to meet now and we would be honored if you joined us, Lena.”

“Would you?”

The Ulle looked uncomfortable. “Some of them object to having a woman at a council meeting,” he admitted. “But they were outvoted.”

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“Honesty is always best, Ulle. That way I know just how many fools I need to work to convince.”

“They are set in their ways, and you are not only a woman, but”—he cleared his throat—“they fear you are not entirely natural.”

Eryk wasn't surprised. When other Grisha saw the power that he and his mother possessed, they had only one of two responses: fear or greed. Either they ran from it or they wanted it for themselves. It's a balance, his mother always said. Fear is a powerful ally, but feed it too often, make it too strong, and it will turn on you. She had warned him to be cautious when displaying his power, to never show the full extent of what he could do. She certainly never did—she never used the Cut unless the situation was dire.

That wasn't a problem for him, he thought bitterly. He still hadn't mastered the Cut. His mother had managed it when she was half his age.

Now she lifted a brow and addressed the Ulle. “The first men to see bears thought they were monsters. My power is unfamiliar, not unnatural.”

“A bear is still dangerous,” noted the Ulle. “It still has claws and teeth to maul a man.”

“And men have spears and steel,” she said sharply. “Do not play the weak party with me, Ulle.”

Eryk saw the flash of anger that moved over the big man's face at his mother's

disrespectful tone. Then the Ulle laughed. “I like your ferocity, Lena. But have a care with the old men.”

Eryk’s mother dipped her head in acknowledgment.

“Now, Eryk,” said the Ulle, “do you think you can be comfortable here?” His eyes were merry, and Eryk knew he was expected to smile, so he attempted it.

“Der git ver rastjel,” he said, giving the traditional greeting first in Fjerdan, then in Ravkan. “We are grateful guests.”

The Ulle looked slightly amused, but he replied in the prescribed fashion. “Fel holm ve koop djet. Our home is better for it.”

“Why is there no wall around the camp?” Eryk asked.

“Does that worry you? The villagers barely know we’re here—they certainly don’t know what we are.”

Someone must, thought Eryk. That’s how we found you. That was how they always found Grisha. He and his mother followed legends, whispers, tales of sorcerers and witches, of demons in the forests. Stories like that had led them to a tribe of Squallers camped along the western shore, to Baba Anezka and her cave of mirrors, to Petyr of Brevno and Magda of the black woods.

“My son asks a good question,” said his mother. “I saw no fortifications and only one man on watch.”

“Start building walls, and people begin to wonder what you’re hiding. We keep our buildings low. We don’t raid the villagers’ fields or farms, or empty their forests of game. Better they do not notice us than that they think we have something they

want.”

Because you don’t. And you never will. It was like this wherever they went. Grisha living in camps and broken-down mines, hiding out in tunnels. Eryk had seen the island nation of Kerch, the library at Ketterdam, the grand roads and waterways. He’d seen the temples at Ahmrat Jen, and the great fort at Os Alta, protected by its famous double walls. They felt permanent, solid, a bulwark against the night. But places like this barely felt real, as if they might just slip away into nothing, vanishing without notice or regard.

“You’ll be safe here,” said the Ulle. “And if you stay until the spring, we may go to see the white tigers in the permafrost.”

“Tigers?”

“Maybe that will earn me a real smile,” the Ulle said with a wink. “My son will tell you all about them.”

Once the Ulle had said his goodbyes and departed, Eryk’s mother sat down on the edge of her sleeping pallet. It had been raised off the floor to keep out the cold, and was piled high with blankets and furs—another sign of respect.

“Well?” she asked. “What do you think?”

“Can we stay until spring?” He couldn’t hide his eagerness now. The prospect of tigers had defeated his caution.

“We’ll see. Tell me about the camp.”

Eryk heaved an irritated sigh. “Twelve huts. Eight have working chimneys—”

“Why?”

“Those are the huts for Grisha of greater status.”

“Good. What else?”

“The Ulle is rich, but his hands are callused. He does his own work. And he walks with a limp.”

“Old or new injury?”

“Old.”

“Are you guessing?”

Eryk crossed his arms. “The wear on the side of his boot shows he’s been favoring that leg a long while.”

“Go on.”

“He lied about the elders.”

His mother cocked her head to one side, her black eyes glittering. “Did he?”

“None of them voted to have you at the meeting, but the Ulle demanded it.”

“How do you know?”

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He hesitated, less sure now. “It was the sound of the Ulle’s voice, the way the elders stood apart from him as they watched us come down the hill.”

She rose and brushed the hair back from his face. “You read the flow of power the way others chart tides,” she marveled. “It will make you a great leader.” He rolled his eyes at that. “Anything else?” she asked.

“This hut smells terrible.”

She laughed. “It’s animal fat,” she said. “Probably reindeer. The northerners use it in their lamps. It could be worse. Remember the swamp near Koba?”

“I’m pretty sure that was just one smelly Heartrender.”

She gave an exaggerated shudder at the memory. “So do you think you can bear it?”

“Yes,” he said firmly. He could tolerate anything if only they could spend a whole season in one place.

“Good.” She adjusted her silver furs, then pulled a heavy garnet ring from her pack and placed it on her finger. “Wish me luck at the meeting. Will you go exploring?”

He nodded. He didn’t like the surge of nervousness that rose up in him, but there it was.

She gave his chin a quick pinch. “Be careful. Don’t let anyone—”

“I know.” The Cut wasn’t the only secret they kept.

“Just until you’re strong enough,” she cautioned. “Until you learn to defend yourself. And remember you’re—”

“Eryk,” he said. “I know. It’s my own name I’m afraid of forgetting.”

“Your true name is written here,” she said tapping his chest. “Tattooed on your heart. You don’t let just anyone read it.”

He shifted uncomfortably. “I know.”

“I know, I know,” she mimicked. “You sound like a crow cawing.” She gave him a little shove. “Be back before dark.”

The world outside seemed too bright after the dim clutch of the hut. Eryk squinted against the glare and watched his mother head toward the long hall, then made his way into the forest. These were the trees he liked best, the kind that never lost their green, that always smelled of sap. In woods like these, it felt like summer was still alive, as if a sun were buried in every rough trunk like a warm, dormant heart.

He walked north of the camp, following the slope of the hill, but as the trees began to thin, he hesitated. He could hear laughter and see a clearing a little farther on. He made himself plunge ahead.

Two girls were playing on the banks of a stream. They both had light hair and blue eyes, the Fjerdan coloring that was common close to the border.

“Careful, Sylvi!” shouted the older girl as the other hopped from rock to rock, giggling. They both fell silent when they noticed Eryk.

“Hello,” he offered, then tried, “Ajour” in Fjerdan.

“We speak Ravkan,” said the taller girl, though she had that Fjerdan lilt to her voice. She looked like she was Eryk’s age, maybe a little older. “Sylvi, stop that. Get back here.”

“No!” shrieked the younger girl happily, and launched herself into another hop over the rushing water. “Watch me, Annika!”

Eryk walked a little way upstream to where he could study the water playing in the rapids and sat down on a rock. He picked up a stick and let the tip drift in the water, feeling the tug of the current, waiting. They would approach him. They always did. But he felt more anxious than usual. He’d stopped trying to make friends in the places he and his mother visited—there was no point when they moved on so quickly. Now he wasn’t quite sure how to go about it.

A few minutes later, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sylvi hopping toward him.

“Are you Lena’s son?”

He nodded.

“You can do that thing? The same thing she can?”

“Yes.”

“Can I see?” Sylvi asked.

They started curious, but they usually ended up afraid.

“Don’t be rude, Sylvi,” chastised Annika.

Sylvi kicked a chunk of earth into the stream. “I want to see.”

“It’s okay,” said Eryk. He might as well get it over with. He lifted his hand and drew a circle of darkness in the air. It twisted and curled, its tendrils tugging at the sunlight before they faded.

“Again,” said Sylvi.

He smiled a little and repeated the gesture. He let the circle roll toward Sylvi. She poked her fingers through it and watched as her fingertips vanished. She shrieked and pulled her hand back.

“Annika, come try!”

“Leave him alone, Sylvi.”

“What’s your name?” Sylvi asked.

“Arkady,” he said. When she frowned, he amended, “Eryk.”

“I don’t like that name.”

“Me neither.”

“Why don’t you change it?”

“Maybe I will.”

“Do the thing again.”

“Stop pestering him, Sylvi.”

He created another circle but this time made it spiral larger. Annika left off any pretense of mucking around in the stream and stared. He fashioned the darkness into a disk that floated beside the rapids like a black door that might lead anywhere. Sylvi stepped toward it.

“Sylvi, don’t!” Annika shouted.

The little girl vanished into the black.

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“Sylvi!” cried Annika, running forward.

From the whirling black disk came Sylvi’s laughter. “I can’t see you!” she crowed. “Can you see me?”

“Bring her back,” snarled Annika. She lifted her hands, and the surface of the creek trembled slightly.

“She’s standing right there,” Eryk said, trying to ignore the way her words stung. He should be used to it by now. He gave a flick of his fingers. The black disk vanished, and there was Sylvi, arms held out in front of her.

She scowled. “Why’d you stop?”

Annika grabbed Sylvi in a tight hug. “Are you okay?”

“What’s the matter?” Sylvi asked, struggling to disentangle herself.

Annika’s cheeks reddened. “Nothing. I ... Sorry,” she mumbled to Eryk.

He shrugged.

“I’ve just never seen anything like that up close.”

He picked up his stick and dragged it back through the current of the stream.

“Listen,” Annika said, “I’m sorry. I—”

She was interrupted by the sounds of voices. Three boys crashed into the clearing, shoving at one another and laughing. Annika stepped away from Eryk, her shoulders tense.

“Come out to practice, Annika?” asked the tallest of the boys when he saw them. He had the same red-gold hair as the Ulle. “You certainly need it.”

Annika took Sylvi’s hand. “We were just leaving, Lev.”

The boy glanced at Eryk. “You’re the other shadow summoner, aren’t you? You came with the Black Witch.”

“Don’t use that word,” Annika snapped.

“What’s the big deal?”

“If you’d seen a drüskelle raid, you’d know. Come on, Sylvi, let’s go.”

“I don’t want to,” said Sylvi.

Lev grinned. “Don’t leave on our account.” He twisted his wrists, and two little gusts of air spiraled to life, lifting pine needles off the ground and forming tiny cyclones. They whirled over the creek, gathering water, then bounced free to spin over the forest floor like tops.

Sylvi clapped her hands and chased one down the bank. “You make one, Annika.”

“Yeah, you make one,” said Lev, exchanging a knowing glance with the other boys.

Annika flushed a deeper red. She took a breath and raised her hands. The water swelled from the creek’s surface in a shivering arc. Sylvi gave a triumphant whoop.

As Annika twisted her wrists, the water spiraled slowly left, then collapsed in a splash.

The two boys burst out laughing, but Lev just shook his head.

“Weak,” he said, “just like your father. You should spend more time training and less time playing with that runt.”

Sylvi frowned. “What’s a runt?”

Lev bent to look Sylvi in the eye and smiled. His voice was friendly, warm as honey. “You’re a runt, lapushka. Small and stunted and useless. A little otkazat’sya mistake.”

Sylvi’s lip trembled. Eryk stood, unsure of what he meant to do. His mother wouldn’t want him to get involved, particularly in a conflict with the Ulle’s son.

But before he could say a word, Annika gave Lev a hard shove. “Leave her alone.”

Lev smirked. “She shouldn’t be here. This is a Grisha camp.”

“Some people don’t show their power until later.”

“She’s otkazat’sya, and you know it. One more weakling in a family full of weaklings. She should go. Hell, you should all go. You can’t carry your own weight.”

“That isn’t your decision.”

“No, it’s my father’s decision. Maybe we should just drown the runt now. Put her out of her misery.” He took a step toward Sylvi.

“I said leave her alone.”

Annika raised her arms and, maybe because of her anger, the water whipped from the creek surface in a slash of stinging spray. But she was no match for Lev. With the barest wave of his hand, the water dissipated into mist.

“This should be fun,” he said.

He lifted his arms and a gust of air slammed through the woods, knocking Sylvi and Annika to the ground. The wind roared between the trees, snapping branches, sending them hurtling toward the girls. Sylvi screamed.

“Stop!” Eryk shouted, and before he could think better of it, a skein of darkness shot from his hands and wrapped itself around Lev. It circled the boy’s body like a snake and closed over his face.

Lev howled and the wind vanished, branches dropping harmlessly to the ground. “I can’t see!” he cried out. “Help me!”

The other boys took a hesitant step toward Eryk.

Eryk gathered the darkness in his hands and launched it at them. They screamed and tried to claw at the shadows crawling over them. One lost his footing and fell forward. The other yelped, hands waving in the air, clutching blindly at nothing.

Eryk felt the dark curling around him in black waves. He walked up behind Lev and gave him a shove toward the path. The boy swung wildly, and Eryk barely dodged his fist.

“Go back to camp and leave us alone,” he said, wishing his voice sounded deeper, more intimidating.

“Give me back my eyes, you little bastard,” wailed Lev.

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“Go!” Eryk said, giving each of the boys a nudge with his boot.

They stumbled forward, bumping into one another, grabbing at each other’s sleeves. Then they staggered down the path, arms held out before them as they careened from tree to tree.

Eryk kept the darkness swirling around their heads until they were a few hundred yards away, then he let it go. Lev released a sob. The boys stared at each other in shock, then bolted toward camp.

“I’m not done with you,” Lev yelled back at him.

Eryk’s heart was pounding. He’d had to use his power before, to show that he wouldn’t be picked on. But if his mother really meant for them to stay, he’d just made three enemies, all of them older and much bigger than he was. And he’d managed to anger the Ulle’s son. Maybe they wouldn’t be welcome to stay at the camp at all. He sighed and turned back to the sisters warily, ready for them to turn and run too.

They were both still in the dirt, staring up at him with startled eyes.

Then Sylvi said, “I want to learn to do that.” She sprang up and waggled her fingers at the nearest tree. “I am Grisha! The shadows do my bidding!”

Annika watched her dart off, her expression a little wistful. “She still thinks she can learn to be Grisha. One day she’ll figure it out.” She pressed her palms against her eyes. “It’s been so hard since we came here,” she said. “Thank you.”

He blinked in surprise. “I ... You’re welcome.”

She smiled up at him, and without thinking, he offered her his hand. It was only in the second that her fingers closed over his that he realized his mistake. As soon as his hand touched hers, her eyes widened. She drew in a sharp breath. They gazed at each other a long moment. He pulled her to her feet and dropped her hand. But the damage was done.

“You’re an amplifier,” she said.

He glanced at where Sylvi was pouncing on another helpless tree, oblivious, and gave a single, frightened nod. How could he have been so stupid? He would have to tell his mother now, and she would insist that they leave right away. If word got out, they’d both be in danger. Amplifiers were rare, hard to find, harder to hunt. Their lives would be forfeit. Even if they got away, word would spread. He could already hear his mother’s voice: Foolish, careless, callous. If you don’t value your own life, show some concern for mine.

Annika touched his sleeve. “It’s okay,” she said. “I won’t tell.”

Panic crowded in. He shook his head.

She slid her hand into his. It was hard not to pull away. He should. He was breaking his mother’s fundamental rule for keeping them both alive. Never let them touch you, she’d warned him.

“You protected Sylvi. I won’t tell. I promise.”

He looked down at their clasped hands. He liked the unfamiliar pressure of her palm against his. She didn’t seem so frightened by his power now. And she was brave. She’d defended her sister even though she knew Lev was stronger. He had so many

secrets. It felt good to share one.

“Stay,” she said. “Please?”

He didn’t say anything, but he gave her hand the barest squeeze.

Annika smiled, and to Eryk’s surprise, he found himself smiling back.

They spent the afternoon practicing by the stream while Sylvi made up songs and hunted frogs. Annika even helped Eryk with his Fjerdan. The thought that there might be more days like this seemed almost too wonderful to believe, and as it grew later, he worried over what his mother would say about what he’d done to Lev, that she would change her mind about staying. But when he got back to the hut at dusk, she wasn’t there.

He washed his hands and face of the day’s grime, then made his way to the long hall, where most of the camp were already gathered for dinner. They sat at tables that spanned the length of the lodge, eating from platters heaped with deer meat and roasted onions.

He saw his mother seated beside the Ulle at the elders’ table. They both acknowledged him with a nod.

Eryk scanned the stretch of tables and spotted Lev’s red-gold hair. His eyes narrowed when he met Eryk’s gaze. If Lev hadn’t told, it was only because he wanted to take revenge against Eryk personally. All he’d have to do was wait and set an ambush, restrain Eryk’s arms so he couldn’t summon. He probably wouldn’t even need his friends. Eryk could fight, but he was half a foot shorter than Lev.

“Eryk,” Annika called, waving him over as Sylvi bounced on the bench beside her. Maybe Eryk wasn’t such a bad name. It sounded all right when she said it.

They ate in silence for a while. The food of the north had never held much appeal for him, and he found himself moving the onions around his plate.

“You don’t like them?” Annika asked.

“They’re fine.”

“What’s your favorite food?”

He dragged his bread through the leavings of his meal. “I don’t know.”

“How can you not know?” said Sylvi.

Eryk shrugged. No one had ever asked him. “Um ... anything sweet.”

“Puddings?”

He nodded.

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“Pies?”

He nodded again. There was a cake they served in Kerch, thick with cherries and served with sweet cream, and there were Shu candies coated in sesame that he could eat by the handful. But he wasn’t supposed to talk about the places he’d traveled. He was just a boy from the south. “I like everything,” he said.

“What’s your favorite color?” asked Sylvi.

“I don’t have one.”

“How can you not have one?”

Deep blue like the True Sea. Red like the roofs of the Shu temples. The pure, buttery color of sunlight—not really yellow or gold, what would you call it? All the colors you couldn’t see in the dark.

“I never really thought about it.”

“Mine’s rainbow,” said Sylvi.

“That’s not a color.”

“Is too.”

When Sylvi turned her attention to bothering the family beside them, Annika said, “You haven’t asked where our mother is.”

“Do you want to tell me?”

“The drüskelle got her, the witchhunters. When we were still living near Overut.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Did your father die in battle?”

My father is dust. You all are. “Yes.”

Her eyes darted to a man with fair hair and bright blue eyes seated at the farthest end of the elders’ table. It was not a position of much esteem.

“Is that your father?” he asked.

Annika looked down at her plate. “You and Lev will probably be best friends by tomorrow.”

He frowned. “No we won’t.”

“Your mother is sitting next to the Ulle. You won’t be eating with me in a few days’ time.”

“Yes I will,” he said, then added, “if we stay.”

“You said you would.”

Eryk fiddled with his spoon. He should talk to his mother about what Annika had learned. He knew that.

Annika said, “Do you want to come swimming with me and Sylvi tonight?”

“It’s too cold to swim.”

“There’s a pond fed by hot springs just up from the creek.”

He glanced over to where his mother was speaking to the Ulle, her black eyes flashing. “I don’t think I should.”

Annika gave a stiff shrug. “All right,” she said.

But he could see that it wasn’t. He remembered the feeling of her hand in his. For the next few months, he could be Eryk. He could belong to this place. He could have a home, maybe even friends. And friends went on adventures. They broke rules together.

He gave Annika a nudge under the table. “What time?”

Even after the lamps were long extinguished and Eryk was certain his mother was asleep, he hesitated. His mother distrusted the vulnerability of sleep; she never really seemed to dream deeply and was always ready to leap from her bed at any sound.

But they’d spent three weeks learning to track with the hunters of the southern range. He’d studied how to walk in silence, rolling his heels, bare feet moving soundlessly over the pelt-covered floor.

It was brighter outside than inside the hut, the camp washed pale blue by the silvery light of a full moon. He waited until he was nearly to the woods to put on his boots, then headed into the trees to find his way back to the stream. He followed it for a half mile, hoping he wasn’t too late, and had even started to wonder if he’d somehow gone the wrong direction when he climbed a low knoll and the pond came into view, bigger than he’d expected, moonlight rippling over its surface.

Annika was there, floating on her back in the water, her white-blond hair spread around her head like a halo. As he watched, she turned and began gliding across the pond, silent as a ghost.

He walked down to the shore, and when her head broke the water again, he whispered, "Hello!"

She whirled, sending out little waves that lapped at the sand. "I thought you weren't coming."

"I had to wait for my mother to fall asleep," he said as he kicked off his boots and stripped down to his linen. He didn't know how he was going to explain soaked underthings to his mother, but he felt too shy to remove everything. As he plunged into the water, a giddy kind of elation rose in his chest. He dunked his head, letting the water fill his ears so that the world went quiet, then he popped back up, feeling the night air cool his damp skin. He could hear the soft rush of the stream and Annika splashing in the water just a few feet away. Until the thaw. He could do this every night if he wanted. Maybe when the pond froze, they could skate.

"Where's Sylvi?" he asked.

"She fell asleep before my father did. I didn't want to wake her."

"Too bad."

Annika squirted water from her mouth. "Quieter without her. She's decided your mother is a princess, by the way."

Eryk dunked his head again. "Princess of what?"

"Just a princess. She's really beautiful."

Eryk shrugged. He was aware of the way men looked at his mother. It was one more weapon in her arsenal.

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“What was your mother like?” he asked. The question felt strange on his lips, and he wasn’t sure it was the right one to ask.

She stirred the surface of the water with her fingertips and said, “Gentle. She used to sing us to sleep. I told her I was too old for lullabies. I regret that every night now.”

Eryk stayed quiet. This was the time to say something about his father, fallen in battle. But living or dead, he had no memories of the man to share.

“The witchhunters had these horses,” Annika said, her face tilted up to the night sky. “I know I was scared, but I swear they were big as houses.”

“They do have special breeds of horses for the drüskelle.”

“They do?”

He had to be cautious about revealing where he’d been or what he’d learned, but this felt safe enough. “They’re bred for size and demeanor. They don’t spook at fire or storms. Perfect for battle against Grisha.”

“It wasn’t a battle. It wasn’t even a fight. My father couldn’t protect us.”

“He got you and Sylvi away safely.”

“I guess.” She kicked off toward shore. “I’m going to dive!”

“Are you sure it’s deep enough?”

“I do it all the time.” She clambered out of the pond, wringing water from her shift, and scaled one of the boulders bordering the shore.

“Careful!” he called. He wasn’t sure why. Maybe his mother’s overprotectiveness was rubbing off on him.

She raised her hands, preparing to launch herself into the water, then paused.

Eryk shivered; maybe the water wasn’t as warm as he thought. “What are you waiting for?”

“Nothing,” she said, hands still held out.

A chill passed through him. It was then that he realized he could barely move his arms. He tried to lift his hands, but it was too late. The water felt thick around him. It was hardening to ice.

“What are you doing?” he asked, hoping this was some kind of game, a joke. Eryk started to tremble, his heart pounding a panicked beat as his body went cold. He could still move his legs, just barely scrape the muddy bottom of the pond with his frantically kicking toes, but his chest and his arms were held motionless, the ice pressing in around him. “Annika?”

She had climbed down from the boulder and was picking her way carefully over the frozen pond. She was shaking, her feet still bare, her shift drenched and clinging to her skin. She had a rock in her hands.

“I’m sorry,” she said. Her teeth were chattering, but her face was determined. “I need an amplifier.”

“Annika—”

“The elders would never let me hunt one. They’d give it to a powerful Grisha like Lev or his father.”

“Annika, listen to me—”

“My father can’t protect us.”

“I can protect you. We’re friends.”

She shook her head. “We’re lucky they even let us stay here.”

“What are you doing, Annika?” he pleaded, though he knew well enough.

“Yes, what are you doing, Annika?”

He turned his head as best he could. Lev was standing on the far shore.

“Go away!” she shouted.

“That little freak and I have unfinished business. So do you and I, for that matter.”

“Go back to camp, Lev.”

“Are you giving me orders?”

She ignored him, moving across the ice. It creaked underneath her feet. Annika was right: she wasn’t strong. She’d been unable to freeze the ice through.

“Do it, Annika,” Eryk said, loudly. “If I’m going to die, I don’t want Lev using my power.”

“What are you talking about?” said Lev, putting a tentative foot on the icy surface of the pond.

“Be quiet,” Annika whispered furiously.

“I’m an amplifier. And once Annika wears my bones, you won’t be able to push her or her sister around anymore.”

“Shut up,” she screamed.

Eryk saw understanding dawn on Lev’s face, and in the next minute, he was sprinting across the ice. It cracked beneath Lev’s bulk. Closer, Eryk urged silently, but Annika was already upon him.

“I’m sorry,” she moaned. “I’m so sorry.” She was crying as she brought the rock down on his head.

Pain exploded over his right temple, and his vision blurred. Don’t faint. He gave his head a shake despite the tide of pain that came with it. He saw Annika lifting the rock again. It was wet with his blood.

A gust of air struck her, sending her sliding back over the ice.

“No!” she cried. “He’s mine!”

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Lev was pounding over the ice toward Eryk. He already had a knife in his hand. Eryk knew his power would belong to whomever made the kill. That was the way amplifiers worked. Never let them touch you. Because one touch was enough to reveal it, this gift lurking inside him. It was enough to make him less a boy than a prize.

Annika was lifting the rock again. This would be the strike that broke his skull open. He knew it. Eryk concentrated on Lev's boots, the cracks spreading out from them. He stretched his legs, then brought his knees up to slam against the ice. Nothing. Despite the nausea gripping him, he did it again. His knees hit the ice from below with a painful crunch. The ice around him ruptured. Then Annika was toppling, collapsing into the water, the stone slipping from her hands.

Eryk wrenched his arms free and plunged beneath the surface. Under the water, he could see nothing but darkness. He kicked hard. He had no idea which direction he was going, but he had to make it to shore before Annika could freeze the pond again. His feet touched bottom, and he half swam, half dragged himself toward the shallows. A hand closed around his ankle.

Annika was on top of him, using her weight to hold him down. He screamed, thrashing in her arms. Then Lev was there, shoving her aside, grabbing a handful of Eryk's shirt, lifting the knife. Everyone was shouting. Eryk wasn't sure who had hold of him. A knee pressed into his chest. Someone shoved his head beneath the surface again. Water flooded up his nose and into his lungs. I'm going to die here. They'll wear my bones.

In the eerie, muffled silence of the water, he heard his mother's voice, vicious like a

whip crack. She was always asking more of him, demanding it, and now she told him to fight. She spoke his true name, the one she only used when they trained, the name tattooed on his heart. A heart that had not stopped beating. A heart that still had life.

With the last bit of his strength, he tore his arm free and lashed out blindly, furiously, with all his terror and rage, with all the hope that had been born and died this day. Let me make a mark on this world before I leave it.

The weight slid off his chest. He struggled to sit up, choking and gasping, water spilling from his mouth. He coughed and heaved, then managed to draw a thready, painful breath. He looked around.

Lev floated facedown beside him, dark blood pluming from a deep diagonal slash that ran from his hip almost straight through his chest. His shirt was torn, and it flapped backward in the water, revealing pale skin that glowed fish-belly white in the moonlight.

Annika was on his other side, sprawled in the shallows, her eyes wide and panicked. A deep gash ran from her shoulder up through the side of her throat. She had a hand pressed to her neck to try to stop the flow of blood. Her fingers and sleeve were dripping with it.

He'd finally managed to use the Cut. It had torn through them both.

"Help me," she croaked. "Please, Eryk."

"That's not my name."

He didn't move. He sat and watched as her eyes went glassy, as her hand dropped away, as at last she slumped backward, her empty gaze fastened on the moon. He watched the remaining chunks of ice bobbing on the surface slowly melt away. His

head throbbed, and he was dizzy with the pain. But his mother had taught him to think clearly, even when he was hurting, even when he wasn't so sure he wanted to go on.

They would blame him for this. No matter what Annika and Lev had intended, they would blame him. They'd put him and his mother to death and give their bones to the Ulle or some other Grisha of rank. Unless he could give them someone else to hate. That meant he needed a better wound. A killing wound.

He'd lost a lot of blood. He might not survive it, but he knew what he had to do. He knew what he could do now. The evidence was all around him.

He waited until the sky had begun to lighten. Only then did he summon the shadows and from them draw a dark blade.

When the Ulle's men woke him on the shore, he gave them the answers they needed, the truth they were only too eager to see in the corpses of their children, in deep, slicing wounds they were sure had been made by otkazat'sya swords.

He lost consciousness as they carried him to camp, and it was many long hours later that he came back to himself, this time in the snug little hut. His mother was once again beside him, but now her face was smudged with blood and ash. She smelled of bonfires. The Ulle sat in the corner, his head in his hands.

"He's awake," said his mother.

The Ulle looked up sharply and rose to his feet.

Eryk's mother pressed a cup of water to his lips. "Drink."

The Ulle towered over Eryk's bed. His features were haggard and coated in soot.

“You are all right?” he asked.

“He will be,” his mother said with conviction. “If his wounds are kept clean.”

The Ulle rubbed his weary eyes. “I’m glad, Eryk. I could not have borne another ... another death this day.”

He reached out, but Eryk’s mother grabbed his sleeve to stop him. “Let him be,” she said.

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The Ulle nodded. “We’ll need to leave here,” he said. “Word will travel after what we’ve done this night. There will be consequences.”

Eryk’s mother pressed a damp towel to his forehead. “As soon as he’s strong enough to travel, we’ll go.”

“You have a place with us, Lena. It’s safer to travel together—”

“You promised us safety once before, Ulle.”

“I thought—I believed it was mine to offer. But maybe there is no safe place for our kind. I must go see to my wife—” His voice broke. “And Lev. Forgive me,” he said, and lurched through the doorway.

There was silence in the hut. Eryk’s mother wetted the cloth again, wrung it out. “That was very smart,” she said at last. “To use the Cut on yourself.”

“She froze the lake,” he rasped.

“Clever girl. Can you take another sip of water?”

He managed it, his head spinning.

When he could find the strength, he asked, “The village?”

“They would not give up the riders who attacked you, so we killed them all.”

“All?”

“Every man, woman, and child. Then we burned their houses to the ground.”

He closed his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

She gave him the barest shake, forcing him to look at her. “I’m not. Do you understand me? I would burn a thousand villages, sacrifice a thousand lives to keep you safe. It would be us on that pyre if you hadn’t thought quickly.” Then her shoulders slumped. “But I cannot hate that boy and girl for what they tried to do. The way we live, the way we’re forced to live—it makes us desperate.”

The lamp burned low and finally sputtered out. His mother dozed.

Outside, he heard sad voices lifted in songs of mourning as the funeral pyre burned and the Grisha offered prayers for Annika, for Lev, for the otkazat’sya in the smoking ruins of the valley below.

His mother must have heard them too. “The Ulle is right,” she said. “There is no safe place. There is no haven. Not for us.”

He understood then. The Grisha lived as shadows did, passing over the surface of the world, touching nothing, forced to change their shapes and hide in corners, driven by fear as shadows were driven by the sun. No safe place. No haven.

There will be, he promised in the darkness, new words written upon his heart. I will make one.

SIX DANGEROUS OUTCASTS.

ONE IMPOSSIBLE HEIST.

Read on for an excerpt from Leigh Bardugo's

SIX OF CROWS

Available September 29, 2015

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PART 1

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 merchant 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 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 was there, 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 bleeding color from the fruit into 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 backward. 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.

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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? 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 merchant houses, tall and slender, the tidy gables of their rooftops making a dark silhouette against the night sky, their gardens and boathouses 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 smiled and Joost was 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 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.”

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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 krugé 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 round.

“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.

“It’s all right, 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 kitchen boy shook his head. "I don't like that part."

"Do it."

The boy's lower lip trembled, 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.

“Go on,” 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.

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“Like jurda but sweeter, it—”

Anya inhaled sharply. Her hands seized 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 as it was with 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 tipped 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 Beurskanal 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.

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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 parley, 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 facedown 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 parley of this kind each lieutenant be seconded by two of his foot soldiers and that they all be unarmed. Parley. 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. The Zemeni sharpshooter was 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, 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?”

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“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 merchants 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 parley.

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 brief 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 parley. 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 crew of heavily armed Black Tips gathered at the western entrance.

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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 Wijnstraat 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 jammed low on a neck thick as a pylon.

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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 merchants. 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 merchant 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.

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“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,” Geels 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. “Stomach, spine. What’s next, spleen?”

“Shut it,” Oomen snarled. The rules of parley 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 krugs from the Dregs and the Black Tips had ensured they wouldn’t interfere with the parley, 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.

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“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 pistol.

"Finally," Kaz said. "The big reveal. Now Jesper can stop keening over Bolliger like a wet-eyed woman."

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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. “Nooooo...”

“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 blond 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?

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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 sag. 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 door, 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.