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# RULE OF WOLVES

#1 NEW YORK TIMES—BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
LEIGH BARDUGO

**MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S PUBLISHING GROUP**

# **RULE OF WOLVES**

Leigh Bardugo

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**LEIGH BARDUGO** is the *New York Times*–bestselling author of *Ninth House* and the creator of the Grishaverse (coming soon to Netflix), which spans the Shadow and Bone Trilogy, the Six of Crows Duology, the King of Scars Duology, *The Language of Thorns*, and *The Lives of Saints*—with more to come. Her short stories can be found in multiple anthologies, including *The Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Leigh grew up in Southern California and graduated from Yale University. These days she lives and writes in Los Angeles.

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*To EDA, who helped me find my place among the wolves*





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RULE  
OF  
WOLVES



THE  
DEMON  
KING





MAKHI KIR-TABAN, BORN OF HEAVEN, was a queen from a long line of queens.

*And they were all fools, she thought, her pulse quickening as she read the invitation in her hand. If they hadn't been fools, I wouldn't be in this predicament right now.*

No rage showed on her face. No blood rushed to her smooth cheeks. She was a queen and conducted herself accordingly—back erect, body poised, expression composed. Her fingers did not tremble, though every muscle in her body longed to crush the elegantly lettered paper to dust.

*King Nikolai Lantsov, Grand Duke of Udova, sole sovereign of the great nation of Ravka, and Princess Ehri Kir-Taban, Daughter of Heaven, most Ethereal of the Taban Line, would welcome Queen Makhi Kir-Taban to a celebration of matrimony in the royal chapel of Os Alta.*

The wedding would take place one month from now. Enough time for Makhi's servants to pack the appropriate gowns and jewels, to assemble her royal retinue, to ready her contingent of the Tavgharad, the elite soldiers who had guarded her family since the first Taban queen took the throne. Plenty of time to make the journey over land or in the new luxury airship her engineers had constructed.

Plenty of time for a clever queen to start a war.

But right now, Makhi had to perform for the ministers arrayed before her in the council chamber. Her mother had passed only a month ago. The crown could have returned to Makhi's grandmother, but Leyti Kir-Taban was nearly eighty and was done with the troubles of running a nation. She wanted only to prune her roses and rusticate with a series of wildly handsome lovers, and so she had given Makhi her blessing and retired to the country. Makhi had been crowned scant days after her mother's funeral. Her reign was a new one, but she intended to ensure it was long. She would usher in an age of prosperity and empire for her people—and that required the support of the royal ministers currently gazing up at her, their faces full of expectation.

"I see no personal message from Ehri," she said, leaning back on her throne. She rested the invitation in her lap and allowed her brow to furrow. "It is a concern."

"We should be rejoicing," said Minister Nagh. He wore the dark green, brass-buttoned coat of the bureaucrat class—as all the ministers did, the two crossed keys of the Shu pinned at their lapels. They looked like a forest of stern trees. "Is this not the result we hoped for? A wedding to seal an alliance between our nations?"

*The result you hoped for. You would have us cower behind our mountains forever.*

"Yes," she said with a smile. "It is why we risked our precious



Princess Ehri in such a savage land. But she should have written a note to us in her hand, given some sign that all is well.”

Minister Zihun cleared her throat. “Your Most Celestial Highness, Ehri may not actually be happy, but only resigned to this. She has never wanted a public life, let alone a life led away from the only home she has ever known.”

“We are Taban. What we want is what our country needs.”

The minister bowed her head respectfully. “Of course, Your Majesty. Shall we pen your reply?”

“I will do it myself,” said the queen. “As a sign of respect. It’s best we begin this new partnership on the right foot.”

“Very good, Your Majesty,” Nagh said, as if Makhi had executed a particularly fine curtsy.

Somehow the minister’s approval made Makhi prickle even more than his opposition.

She rose and, as one, the ministers took a step back, following protocol. She descended from her throne, and her Tavgharad guards fell into step behind her as she made her way down the long hallway that led to the queen’s sanctuary. The silk train of her gown sighed against the marble floor, as fretful as one of her advisers. Makhi knew exactly how many steps it took to reach the privacy of her rooms from the council chamber. She had made the walk innumerable times with her mother, and her grandmother before that. Now she counted down—fifty-six, fifty-five—trying to release her frustration and think clearly.

She sensed Minister Yerwei behind her, though the sound of his slippered feet was masked by the rhythmic thump of Tavgharad boots. It was like being pursued by a ghost. If she told her guards to slit his throat, they would do it without hesitation. And then when she was tried for murder, as even a queen could be in Shu Han, they would give testimony against her.

When they reached the queen's sanctuary, Makhi passed beneath a gilded arch and entered a small receiving room of pale green marble. She waved off the waiting servants and turned to the Tavgharad. "Do not disturb us," she instructed.

Yerwei followed her through the sitting room and on to the music room, until they reached the grand parlor where Makhi had once sat at her mother's knee, listening to stories of the first Taban queens—warriors who, accompanied by their retinue of tame falcons, had come down from the highest mountains in the Sikurzoi to rule the Shu. *Taban yenok-yun*, they were called. The storm that stayed.

The palace had been built by those queens, and it was still a marvel of engineering and beauty. It belonged to the Taban dynasty. It belonged to the people. And for this brief moment—just a few measured steps in the march of the Taban line—it belonged to Makhi. She felt her spirits lift as they entered the Court of the Golden Wing. It was a room of gilded light and flowing water, the slender, repeating arches of its terrace framing the groomed hedges and burbling fountains of the royal gardens below, and beyond them, the plum orchards of Ahmrat Jen, the trees standing like a regiment of soldiers in tidy rows. It was winter in Ravka, but here in the Shu Han, in this blessed land, the sun still shone warm.

Makhi walked out onto the terrace. This was one of the few places she felt safe talking, away from the prying eyes and curious ears of servants and spies. A green glass table had been set with pitchers of wine and water and a platter of late figs. In the garden below, she saw her niece Akeni playing with one of the gardener's boys. If Makhi didn't conceive daughters with one of her consorts, she had decided Akeni would one day inherit the crown. She wasn't the oldest of the Taban girls, but even at eight years old she was clearly the brightest. A surprise, given that her mother had the depth of a dinner plate.

“Aunt Makhi!” Akeni shouted from below. “We found a bird’s nest!”

The gardener’s boy did not speak or look directly at the queen, but stood silently beside his playmate, eyes on his battered sandals.

“You must not touch the eggs,” Makhi called down to them. “Look but do not touch.”

“I won’t. Do you want flowers?”

“Bring me a yellow plum.”

“But they’re sour!”

“Bring one to me and I’ll tell you a story.” She watched as the children ran toward the southern wall of the garden. The fruit was high in the trees and would take time and ingenuity to reach.

“She is a good child,” said Yerwei from the archway behind her. “Perhaps too biddable to make a good queen.”

Makhi ignored him.

“Princess Ehri is alive,” he said.

She grabbed the pitcher and hurled it down onto the paving stones below.

She tore the curtains from the windows and shredded them with her fingernails.

She buried her face in the silk pillows and screamed.

She did none of those things.

Instead she tossed the invitation onto the table and removed the heavy crown from her head. It was pure platinum, thick with emeralds, and always made her neck ache. She set it beside the figs and poured herself a glass of wine. Servants were meant to attend to these needs, but she didn’t want them near her right now.

Yerwei slithered onto the balcony and helped himself to wine without asking. “Your sister is not supposed to be alive.”

Princess Ehri Kir-Taban, most beloved of the people, most precious—for reasons Makhi had never been able to grasp. She wasn’t

wise or beautiful or interesting. All she could do was simper and play the *khatuur*. And yet she was adored.

Ehri was meant to be dead. What had gone wrong? Makhi had made her plans carefully. They should have ended with both King Nikolai and Princess Ehri dead—and Fjerda blamed for the assassinations. On the pretext of avenging her beloved sister's murder, she would march into a kingless, rudderless country, claim its Grisha for the *khergud* program, and use Ravka as a base for waging war with the Fjerdans.

She had chosen her agent well: Mayu Kir-Kaat was a member of Princess Ehri's own Tavgharad. She was young, a talented fighter and swordswoman, and most importantly, she was vulnerable. Her twin brother had vanished from his military unit and his family had been told that the young man had been killed in action. But Mayu had guessed the truth: He'd been selected to become one of the *khergud*, inducted into the Iron Heart program that would make him stronger and more lethal, and not entirely human. Mayu had begged that he be released before his conversion could take place and returned to service as an ordinary soldier.

Queen Makhi knew the process of becoming *khergud*—of having Grisha steel fused to one's bones or mechanical wings attached to one's back—was painful. But there was talk that the process did something else, that the soldiers brought into the program emerged changed in terrible ways, that the *khergud* lost some fundamental part of themselves through the conversion, as if the pain burned away a piece of what had made them human. And of course, Mayu Kir-Kaat didn't want that for her brother. They were twins, *kebben*. There was no closer bond. Mayu would take her own life and the life of a king to save him.

Queen Makhi set down her wine and poured herself a glass of

water instead. She needed a clear head for what was to come. Her nursemaid had once told her that she'd been meant to be a twin, that her brother had been brought into the world stillborn. "You ate his strength," she'd whispered, and even then, Makhi had known that she would one day be a queen. What might have happened had her brother been born? Who might Makhi have been?

It made no difference now.

Ravka's king was still very much alive.

And so was her sister.

This was bad. But Queen Makhi couldn't be sure of how bad. Did Nikolai Lantsov know of the plot against him? Had Mayu lost her nerve and told Princess Ehri of the true plan? No. It couldn't be. She refused to believe it. The bond of the *kebben* was too strong for that.

"This invitation feels like a trap," she said.

"Most marriages are."

"Spare me your wit, Yerwei. If King Nikolai knows—"

"What can the king prove?"

"Ehri might have much to say. Depending on what she knows."

"Your sister is a gentle soul. She would never believe you capable of such subterfuge, and she would certainly never speak against you."

Makhi swatted the invitation. "Then explain this!"

"Perhaps she fell in love. I hear the king is quite charming."

"Don't be absurd."

Princess Ehri had taken Mayu's place in the Tavgharad. Mayu had masqueraded as Princess Ehri. Mayu's task was to get close to King Nikolai, murder him, then take her own life. As far as Princess Ehri knew, that would be the end of it. But in the invasion that would ensue, lives would invariably be lost, and the Tavgharad had orders to make sure Ehri was one of the casualties. They had been assigned to Ehri's household, but they followed the queen's orders alone. Makhi's

ministers would never know of the plan she had put into place. So what had gone wrong?

“You must attend this wedding,” Yerwei lectured. “All of your ministers will expect it. This is the realization of their plans for peace. They think you should be thrilled.”

“Did I not seem thrilled enough for your liking?”

“You were as you always were, a perfect queen. Only I saw the signs.”

“Men who see too much have a way of losing their eyes.”

“And queens who trust too little have a way of losing their thrones.”

Makhi’s head snapped around. “What do you mean by that?”

Only Yerwei knew the truth—and not just the details of her plan to murder the Ravkan king and her own sister. He had served as personal physician to her mother and her grandmother. He had been a witness on her mother’s deathbed when Queen Keyen Kir-Taban, Born of Heaven, had chosen Ehri as her heir instead of Makhi. It was the right of a Taban queen to choose her successor, but it was almost always the oldest daughter. It had been that way for hundreds of years. Makhi was *meant* to be queen. She had been born for it, raised for it. She was as strong as a member of the Tavgharad, a skilled horsewoman, a brilliant strategist, cunning as a spider. And yet. Her mother had chosen Ehri. Soft, sweet, beloved Ehri, whom the people adored.

“Promise me,” her mother had said. “Promise me you will abide by my wishes. Swear it on the Six Soldiers.”

“I promise,” Makhi had whispered.

Yerwei had heard it all. He was her mother’s longest-serving adviser, so old Makhi had no idea how many years he’d been on this earth. He never seemed to age. She’d looked to him, to his watery

eyes in his wizened face, wondering if he'd told her mother of the work they'd pursued together, the secret experiments, the birth of the *khergud* program. All of that would end with Ehri on the throne.

"But Ehri does not want to rule—" Makhi had attempted.

"Only because she has always assumed you would."

Makhi had taken her mother's hand in hers. "But I should. I have studied. I have trained."

"And yet no lesson has ever taught you kindness. No tutor has ever taught you mercy. You have a heart hungry for war and I do not know why."

"It is the falcon's heart," Makhi had said proudly. "The heart of the Han."

"It is the falcon's will. That is a different thing. Swear to me that you will do this. You are a Taban. We want what the country needs, and this nation needs Ehri."

Makhi had not wept or argued; she'd only given her vow.

Then her mother had breathed her last. Makhi said her prayers to the Six Soldiers, lit candles for the fallen Taban queens. She'd tidied her hair and brushed her hands over the silk of her robes. She would have to wear blue soon, the color of mourning. And she had so much to mourn—the loss of her mother, the loss of her crown.

"Will you tell Ehri or shall I?" she'd asked Yerwei.

"Tell her what?"

"My mother—"

"I heard nothing. I'm glad she went peacefully."

That was the way their pact had been formed over her mother's cooling corpse. And how a new queen had been made.

Now Makhi leaned her arms on the balcony and breathed in the scents from the garden—jasmine, sweet oranges. She listened to the laughter of her niece and the gardener's boy. When she'd taken her

sister's crown, she hadn't realized how little it would solve, that she would be forever competing with kind, oblivious Ehri. Only one thing would end that suffering.

"I will see my sister wed. But first I must send a message."

Yerwei moved closer. "What is it you intend? You know your ministers will read the note, even if it is sealed."

"I'm not a fool."

"One can be foolish without being a fool. If—"

Yerwei's sentence broke without warning.

"What is it?" asked Makhi, following his gaze.

A shadow was moving over the plum orchards beyond the palace wall. Makhi looked up, expecting to see an airship, but the skies were clear. The shadow kept growing, spreading like a stain, speeding toward them. The trees it touched toppled, their branches turning black, then vanishing, leaving nothing behind but gray earth and a curl of smoke.

"What is this?" Yerwei gasped.

"Akeni!" the queen screamed. "Akeni, get down from the tree! Come away from there right now!"

"I'm picking plums!" the girl shouted, laughing.

"I said right now!"

Akeni couldn't see beyond the walls, this black tide of death that came on without a sound.

"Guards!" the queen yelled. "Help her!"

But it was too late. The shadow slid over the palace wall, turning the golden bricks black and descending over the plum tree. It was as if a dark veil descended over Akeni and the gardener's boy, silencing their laughter.

"No!" Makhi cried.

"My queen," said Yerwei urgently. "You must come away."

But the blight had stopped, right on the edge of the fountain,



clear as the mark of high tide on the sand. All it had touched lay gray and wasted. All that lay beyond was lush and green and full of life.

“Akeni,” the queen whispered on a sob.

Only the wind answered, blowing in off the orchard, scattering the last, faint tendrils of shadow. Nothing remained but the sweet smell of flowers, happy and unknowing, their faces turned to the sun.



NINA TASTED THE SALT AIR on her tongue, letting the sounds of the marketplace wash over her—the call of vendors hawking their wares, the gulls in the Djerholm harbor, the shouts of sailors aboard their ships. She glanced up to the cliff top where the Ice Court loomed above it all, its high white walls gleaming bright as exposed bone, and she restrained a shiver. It was good to be out in the open, away from the cloistered rooms of the White Island, but she felt as if the ancient building was watching her, as if she could hear it whisper, *I know what you are. You do not belong here.*

“Kindly shut up,” she muttered.

“Hmm?” said Hanne as they made their way down the quay.

“Nothing,” Nina replied hastily.

Talking to inanimate structures was not a good sign. She’d been

cooped up too long, not just in the Ice Court but in Mila Jandersdat's body, her face and form tailored to keep her true identity secret. Nina cast another baleful glance at the Ice Court. Its walls were said to be impenetrable, never breached by an attacking army. But her friends had breached it just fine. They'd blown a hole in those grand walls with one of Fjerda's own tanks. Now? Nina was more like a mouse—a big blond mouse in too-heavy skirts—nibbling away at the Ice Court's foundation.

She paused at a wool vendor's stall, the racks crowded with the traditional vests and scarves worn for Vinetkälla. Despite her best intentions, Nina had been charmed by Djerholm from the first time she'd seen it. It was tidy in the way only a Fjerdan town could be, its houses and businesses painted in pink and blue and yellow, the buildings snug against the water, huddled close together as if for warmth. Most cities Nina had seen—how many had there been? how many languages had she spoken in them?—were built around a town square or a high street, but not Djerholm. Its lifeblood was salt water and its market faced the sea, sprawled across the quay, shops and carts and stalls offering fresh fish, dried meats, dough wound around hot irons and cooked over coals, then dusted with sugar. The stone halls of the Ice Court were imperious and cold, but here there was mess and life.

Everywhere Nina looked there were reminders of Djel, his sacred ash boughs woven into knots and hearts in preparation for the winter parties of Vinetkälla. In Ravka, they would be readying for the Feast of Sankt Nikolai. And for war. That was the knowledge that sat heavy on her chest every night when she lay down to sleep, that crept up to twine around her throat and choke the breath from her every day. Her people were in danger and she didn't know how to help them. Instead she was browsing nubbly hats and scarves behind enemy lines.

Hanne was beside her, bundled in a thistle-colored coat that made her tawny skin glow despite the overcast day, an elegant knit cap tucked over her shorn hair to avoid drawing attention. As much as Nina hated the confines of the Ice Court, Hanne was suffering even more. She needed to run, to ride; she needed the fresh smell of snow and pine, and the comfort of the woods. She'd come to the Ice Court with Nina willingly, but there was no question that the long days of polite conversation over tedious meals had taken their toll. Even this little bit of freedom—a trip to the market with parents and guards in tow—was enough to bring color to her cheeks and shine to her eyes again.

“Mila! Hanne!” called Ylva. “Don’t go too far.”

Hanne rolled her eyes and lifted a ball of blue wool from the vendor’s cart. “Like we’re children.”

Nina glanced behind her. Hanne’s parents, Jarl and Ylva Brum, trailed them by only a few yards, drawing admiring glances as they walked along the quay—both of them tall and lean, Ylva in warm brown wool and red fox fur, Brum in the black uniform that filled Nina with loathing, the silver wolf of the *drüskelle* emblazoned on his sleeve. Two young witchhunters followed, their faces clean-shaven, their golden hair worn long. Only when they had completed their training and heard the words of Djel at Hringkälla would they be permitted to grow beards. And then off into the world they would merrily go to murder Grisha.

“Papa, they’re setting up for some kind of show,” Hanne said, gesturing farther down the quay to where a makeshift stage had been erected. “Can we go watch?”

Brum frowned slightly. “It isn’t one of those Kerch troupes, is it? With their masks and lewd jokes?”

*If only*, Nina thought glumly. She longed for the wild streets of Ketterdam. She’d take a hundred bawdy, raucous performances of

the Komedie Brute over the five interminable acts of Fjerdan opera she'd been forced to sit through the previous night. Hanne had kept jabbing her in the side to prevent Nina from nodding off.

"You're starting to snore," Hanne had whispered, tears leaking down her cheeks as she tried to keep from laughing.

When Ylva saw her daughter's red face and wet eyes, she had patted Hanne's knee. "It *is* a moving piece, isn't it?"

All Hanne had been able to do was nod and squeeze Nina's hand.

"Oh, Jarl," Ylva said to her husband now. "I'm sure it will be perfectly wholesome."

"Very well." Brum relented and they made their way toward the stage, leaving the disappointed wool seller behind. "But you'd be surprised at the turn this place has taken. Corruption. Heresy. Right here in our capital. You see?" He pointed to a burned-out storefront as they passed. It looked like it had once been a butcher shop, but now the windows were broken and the walls stained with soot.

"Only two nights ago, this shop was raided. They found an altar to the supposed Sun Saint and one to . . . what's her name? Linnea of the Waters?"

"Leoni," Hanne corrected softly.

Nina had heard about the raid through her contacts in the Hringa, a network of spies dedicated to liberating Grisha throughout Fjerda. The butcher's wares had been thrown into the street, the cupboards and shelves stripped to unearth hidden relics—a finger bone from the Sun Saint, an icon painted in an amateurish hand that clearly showed beautiful Leoni with her hair in coiled braids, arms raised to pull poison from a river and save a town.

"It's worse than just the worship of the Saints," Brum continued, jabbing a finger at the air as if it had personally offended him. "They're claiming Grisha are the favored children of Djel. That their powers are actually a sign of his blessing."

Those words put an ache in Nina's heart. Matthias had said as much. Before he died. Her friendship with Hanne had helped to heal that wound. This mission, this purpose had helped, but the pain was still there and she suspected it always would be. His life had been stolen from him, and Matthias had never had the chance to find his own purpose. *I served it, my love. I protected you. To the very end.*

Nina swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat and forced herself to say, "Hanne, should we get a honeywater?" She would have preferred wine, maybe something stronger, but Fjerdan women weren't permitted alcohol, certainly not in public.

The honeywater seller smiled at them, his jaw dropping when he caught sight of Brum's uniform. "Commander Brum!" he said. "Some hot drinks for your family? To fortify you on this chilly day?"

The man was broad-shouldered and thick-necked, with a long ginger mustache. His wrists were tattooed with circles of waves that might have indicated a former sailor. Or something more.

Nina felt a strange sense of doubling as she watched Jarl Brum shake the vendor's hand. Nearly two years ago, only a few yards from where they stood now, she had fought this man. She had faced the *drüskelle* commander as her true self, as Nina Zenik, the drug *jurda parem* thick in her blood. That drug had allowed her to take on hundreds of soldiers, had made her impervious to bullets, and had forever altered her Grisha gift, granting her power over the dead rather than the living. She had spared Brum's life that day, though she'd taken his scalp. Nina was the reason for his bald head and the scar that ran across the base of his skull like the fat pink tail of a rat.

Matthias had pleaded mercy—for his people, for the man who had been a second father to him. Nina still wasn't sure if she'd done the right thing by granting it. If she had killed Brum, she would never have met Hanne. She might never have come back to Fjerda. Matthias might still be alive. When she thought too much about the

past, she got lost in it, in all the things that might have been. And she couldn't afford that. Despite the false name she bore and the false face she wore thanks to Genya's expert tailoring, Nina was Grisha, a soldier of the Second Army, and a spy for Ravka.

*So pay attention, Zenik*, she scolded herself.

Brum tried to pay the honeywater vendor, but the man refused to take his coin. "A gift for Vinetkälla, Commander. May your nights be short and your cup always full."

A cheerful burst of flutes and drums sounded from the stage, signaling the start of the performance, and the curtain lifted, revealing a painted cliff top and a miniature marketplace below. The crowd burst into delighted applause. They were looking at Djerholm, the very city where they stood, and a banner that read THE STORY OF THE ICE COURT.

"You see, Jarl," said Ylva. "No lewd japes. A properly patriotic tale."

Brum seemed distracted, checking his pocket watch. *What are you waiting for?* Nina wondered. Diplomatic talks between Fjerda and Ravka were still proceeding, and Fjerda had not yet declared war. But Nina felt sure battle was inevitable. Brum would settle for nothing less. She'd passed on what little intelligence she'd been able to gather eavesdropping at doors and over dinners. It wasn't enough.

Cymbals crashed to start the tale of Egmond, the prodigy who had designed and built extraordinary castles and grand buildings when he was only a child. The acrobats pulled at long skeins of silk, creating a towering mansion of gray spires and glittering arches. The audience clapped enthusiastically, but an actor with a haughty face—a nobleman who didn't want to pay for his fanciful new home—cursed Egmond, and the handsome young architect was bound in chains, to be dragged off to the old fort that had once stood on the cliff top above the harbor.

The scene changed to Egmond in his cell as a great storm arrived on a roll of thundering drums. Blue ripples of silk cascaded over the stage, embodying the flood that had engulfed the fort with the king and queen of Fjerda inside it.

Working undercover wasn't simply a question of mastering a language or learning a few local customs, so Nina knew her Fjerdan myths and legends well. This was the part of the story where Egmond was meant to place his hand on the roots of a tree that had poked through his cell wall, and with Djel's help, use the strength of the sacred ash to buttress the walls of the fort, save the king and queen, and build the foundation for the mighty Ice Court.

Instead three figures walked onto the stage—a woman engulfed in red paper roses, a young girl in a white wig with antlers around her neck, and a woman with black hair in a blue gown.

“What is this?” growled Brum.

But the gasp from the audience said it all: Sankta Lizabeta of the Roses, the Sun Saint Alina Starkov, and—an excellent touch if Nina did say so herself—the Stormwitch, Zoya Nazyalensky, had entered the play.

The Saints placed their hands on Egmond's shoulders, then against the prison cell walls, and the twisted bits of fabric meant to symbolize Djel's ash began to expand and unfurl, like roots uncoiling through the earth.

“No more of this,” Brum said loudly, his voice carrying over the crowd. He sounded calm enough, but Nina heard the edge in his voice as he stepped forward. The two *drüskelle* followed, already reaching for the clubs and whips at their belts. “The weather is turning. The play can continue later.”

“Leave them be!” shouted a man from the crowd.

A child began to cry.

“Is this part of the play?” asked a confused woman.



“We should go,” Ylva said, trying to herd Hanne and Nina away.

But the crowd was too close around them, pushing toward the stage.

“You will disperse,” Brum said with authority. “Or you will be arrested and fined.”

Suddenly, thunder sounded—real thunder, not the tinny drums of the performers. Dark clouds moved in over the harbor so quickly it seemed as if dusk was falling. The sea was suddenly alive, the water forming whitecaps, rolling in swells that set the ships’ masts swaying.

“Djel is angry,” said someone in the crowd.

“The Saints are angry,” called someone else.

“You will *disperse!*” Brum said, shouting over the rumble of the oncoming storm.

“Look!” a voice cried.

A wave was racing toward them from the harbor, looming higher and higher. Instead of breaking against the sea wall, it leapt the quay. It towered over the crowd, a wall of seething water. The people screamed. The wave seemed to twist in the air, then crashed down onto the quay—directly into Brum and his soldiers, sending them sprawling across the cobblestones in a rush of water.

The crowd gasped, then burst into laughter.

“Jarl!” cried Ylva, trying to go to him.

Hanne held her back. “Stay here, Mama. He will not want to be seen as weak.”

“Sankta Zoya!” someone yelled. “She brought the storm!”

A few people in the crowd went to their knees.

“The Saints!” another voice said. “They see and they protect the faithful.”

The sea roiled and the waves seemed to dance.

Brum stumbled to his feet, his face red, his clothes soaked with seawater. “Get up,” he snarled, yanking his young soldiers to their

feet. Then he was in the crowd, pulling the penitent up by the collars of their shirts. “Get off your knees or I will arrest you all for sedition and heresy!”

“Do you think we went too far?” Hanne whispered, sliding her hand into Nina’s and giving it a squeeze.

“Not far enough,” murmured Nina.

Because the performance and even the wave had only been a distraction. The play had been staged by the Hringa network. The wave had arrived courtesy of a Tidemaker undercover in one of the harbor boats. But now as Jarl Brum and his men rampaged through the crowd, the honeywater vendor, who had slipped into an alley when the play began, gave a quick wave of his hands, parting the clouds.

Sunlight poured from the sky onto the butcher shop that had been raided a few nights before. The wall looked blank at first, but then the vendor uncorked the bottle Nina had slipped into his cart. He gusted a cloud of ammonia at the paint and a message appeared, as if by magic, scrawled across the storefront: *Linholmenn fe Djel ner werre peje.*

*The Children of Djel are among you.*

It was a cheap party trick, one she and the other orphans had used to send each other secret messages. But as Nina had learned not so long ago in Ketterdam, a good con was really about spectacle. All around her she could see the people of Djerholm gaping at the message emblazoned on the storefront, pointing to the sea that had now calmed, to the clouds that were rolling back into place as the honeywater vendor casually wiped his hands and returned to his stall.

Would it matter? Nina didn’t know, but little miracles like these had been happening all over Fjerda. In Hjar, a damaged fishing boat had been about to sink when the bay froze solid and the sailors were able to walk safely back to shore, their catch intact. The next morning,

a mural of Sankt Vladimir's sacred lighthouse had appeared on the church wall.

In Felsted, an apple orchard had burst into full fruit despite the cold weather, as if Sankt Feliks had laid a warming hand upon the trees. The branches had been found festooned with ash boughs—a symbol of the blessing of Djel.

Half the town of Kjerek had fallen ill with firepox, a near-certain death sentence. Except the morning after a farmer witnessed a vision of Sankta Anastasia hovering above the town well with a wreath of ash leaves in her hair, the townspeople had woken free from sickness, their skin clear of sores, their fevers gone.

Miracle after miracle created by the Hringa and Second Army spies. Tidemakers had frozen the bay, but they'd also created the storm to wreck the fishing boat. Squallers had brought on the early frost in Felsted, but Sun Soldiers had made the trees bloom. And while Hringa agents hadn't created the firepox, they had made sure Grisha Corporalki had been there to heal the victims. As for the vision of Anastasia, it was amazing what a little theatrical lighting and a red wig could do.

Then there was the strange blight that had struck north of Djerholm. Nina didn't know where that had come from, a natural phenomenon or the work of some rogue Hringa operative. But she did know there'd been murmurs it was the work of the Starless Saint, retribution for the religious raids and arrests by Brum's men.

At first Nina had doubted that their miracles were making any difference at all, had feared that their efforts amounted to little more than childish pranks that would lead to nothing. But the fact that Brum had been devoting more and more resources to attempting to root out worship of the Saints gave her hope.

Brum stomped back to them, his face a mask of rage. It was hard to take him too seriously when he was soaked to the bone and it

looked like a fish might wriggle out from one of his boots. Still Nina kept her head down, her eyes averted, and her face expressionless. Brum was dangerous now, a mine waiting to detonate. It was one thing to be hated or confronted, quite another to be laughed at. But that was what Nina wanted, for Fjerda to stop seeing Brum and his *driiskelle* as men to be feared and to acknowledge them for what they were: scared bullies worthy of scorn, not adulation.

“I’ll see my family back to the Ice Court,” he muttered to his soldiers. “Get names. All of the performers, everyone who was in the marketplace.”

“But the crowd—”

Brum’s blue eyes narrowed. “*Names*. This stinks of the Hringsa. If there are Grisha in my streets, in my capital, I will find out.”

*There are Grisha in your house*, Nina thought gleefully.

“Don’t get cocky,” murmured Hanne.

“Too late.”

They climbed into the roomy coach. The king and queen had gifted Brum one of the noisy new vehicles that didn’t require horses, but Ylva preferred a coach that didn’t belch black smoke and wasn’t likely to break down on the steep climb to the Ice Court.

“Jarl,” Ylva attempted once they were ensconced in the velvet seats. “What is the harm? The more you react to these theatrics, the more emboldened they will be.”

Nina expected Brum to explode, but he was silent for a long time, staring out the window at the gray sea below.

When he spoke again, his voice was measured, his anger leashed. “I should have held my temper.” He reached out and clasped Ylva’s hand.

Nina saw the effect that small gesture had on Hanne, the troubled, guilty look that clouded her eyes. It was easy for Nina to hate Brum, to see him as nothing but a villain who needed to be destroyed. But

he was Hanne's father, and in moments like these, when he was kind, when he was reasonable and gentle, he seemed less like a monster than a man doing his best for his country.

"But this is not a matter of a few people making trouble in the marketplace," Brum continued wearily. "If the people begin to see our enemies as Saints—"

"There are Fjerdan Saints," offered Hanne, almost hopefully.

"But they are not Grisha."

Nina bit her tongue. Maybe they were and maybe they weren't. Sënj Egmond, the great architect, was said to have prayed to Djel to buttress the Ice Court against the storm. But there were other stories that claimed he'd prayed to the Saints. And there were some who believed that Egmond's miracles had nothing to do with divine intervention, that they had simply been the result of his Grisha gifts, that he had been a talented Fabrikator who could manipulate metal and stone at will.

"The Fjerdan Saints were holy men," said Brum. "They were favored by Djel, not . . . these demons. But it's more than that. Did you recognize the third Saint flouncing across that stage? That was Zoya Nazyalensky. General of the Second Army. There is nothing holy or natural about that woman."

"A woman serves as a general?" Hanne asked innocently.

"If you can call a creature like that a woman. She is everything repugnant and foul. The Grisha *are* Ravka. Fjerdans worshipping these false Saints . . . They are giving their allegiance to a foreign power, a power with whom we are about to be at war. This new religion is more of a threat than any battlefield victory could be. If we lose the people, we lose the fight before it even begins."

*If I do my job right,* thought Nina.

She had to hope that the common people of Fjerda didn't hate Grisha more than they loved their own sons and daughters, that

most of them knew someone who had vanished—a friend, a neighbor, even a relative. A woman willing to leave livelihood and family behind for fear of having her power discovered. A boy snatched from his home in the night to face torture and death at the hands of Brum’s witchhunters. Maybe with her little miracles, Nina could give Fjerda something to rally around, a reason to question the hate and fear that had been Brum’s weapons for so long.

“The Apparat’s presence here undermines all we’ve worked for,” Brum went on. “How can I purge our towns and cities of foreign influence when there is a heretic at the very heart of our government? We look like the worst of hypocrites, and he has spies in every alcove.”

Ylva shuddered. “He has a most unnerving way about him.”

“It’s all for show. The beard. The dark robes. He likes to terrify the ladies with his strange pronouncements and his skulking, but he’s little more than a squawking bird. And we need him if we’re to put Demidov on the throne. The priest’s backing will matter to the Ravkans.”

“He smells of graveyards,” said Hanne.

“It’s only incense.” Brum drummed his fingers on the windowsill. “It’s hard to tell what the man really believes. He says the Ravkan king is possessed by demons, that Vadik Demidov was anointed by the Saints themselves to rule.”

“Where did Demidov come from anyway?” Nina said. “I so hope we’ll get to meet him.”

“We keep him safe in case any Ravkan assassins have a mind to take a shot at him.”

*Pity that.*

“Is he really a Lantsov?” she pushed.

“He has more claim to the crown than that bastard Nikolai.”

The coach jolted to a halt and they descended, but before Nina’s

feet had even touched the gravel path, a soldier was running up to Brum, a folded paper in hand. Nina glimpsed the royal seal—silver wax and the crowned Grimjer wolf.

Brum broke the seal and read the note, and when he looked up, his expression made Nina’s stomach sink. Despite his wet clothes and the humiliation he’d suffered at the harbor, he was beaming.

“It’s time,” he said.

Nina saw Ylva smile ruefully. “You’ll be leaving us, then. And I will wait every night with fear in my heart.”

“There is nothing to fear,” Brum said, tucking the paper into his coat pocket. “They cannot stand against us. Finally, our moment has come.”

He was right. The Fjerdans had tanks. They had Grisha captives addicted to *parem*. Victory was assured. Especially if Ravka was stranded without allies. *I should be there. I belong in that fight.*

“Will you be traveling far?” Nina asked.

“Not at all,” said Brum. “Mila, you look so frightened! Have you so little faith in me?”

Nina forced herself to smile. “No, sir. I only fear for your safety as we all do. Here,” she said, “let me take your coats so everyone can get inside and be warm. You should have every moment together as a family before Commander Brum leaves.”

“What a blessing you are, Mila,” Ylva said fondly.

Nina took her coat, and Hanne’s, and Brum’s, her hand already snaking into the pocket where he’d placed the note.

War was coming.

She needed to get a message to her king.





NIKOLAI TRIED TO STEADY his nervous mount with a pat to the horse's withers. His groom had suggested it wasn't appropriate for a king to ride out on a horse named Punchline, but Nikolai had a soft spot for the piebald pony with crooked ears. He certainly wasn't the prettiest horse in the royal stables, but he could run for miles without tiring and he had the steady disposition of a lump of rock. Usually. Right now he could barely keep still, hooves dancing left and right as he tugged at his reins. Punchline didn't like this place. And Nikolai couldn't blame him.

"Tell me I'm not seeing what I think I'm seeing," he said, meager hope in his heart.

"What do you think you're seeing?" asked Tamar.

"Mass destruction. Certain doom."

"Not entirely certain," said Zoya.

Nikolai cut her a glance. She'd tied back her black hair with a dark blue ribbon. It was eminently practical, but it had the unfortunate effect of making him want to untie it. "Do I detect optimism in my most pessimistic general?"

"*Likely* doom," Zoya corrected, pulling gently on her white mare's reins. All the horses were nervous.

Dawn crept over Yaryenosh, bathing the town's rooftops and streets in rosy light. In the pastures beyond, Nikolai could see a herd of ponies, their winter coats shaggy, stamping their hooves in the cold. It would have been a quaint scene, a dreamy landscape for some hack painter to sell off to a rich merchant with a surfeit of cash and a dearth of taste—if it hadn't been for the dead, ashy soil that stained the countryside like a blot of spilled ink. The blight stretched from the paddocks of the horse farm in the distance all the way to the edges of the town below.

"Two miles?" Nikolai speculated, trying to determine the extent of the damage.

"At least," said Tolya, peering through a folding long glass. "Maybe three."

"Twice the size of the incident near Balakirev."

"It's getting worse," said Tamar.

"We can't say that yet," protested Tolya. Like his sister, he wore an olive drab uniform, his huge bronze arms exposed to display his sun tattoos, despite the winter chill. "It's not necessarily a pattern."

Tamar snorted. "This is Ravka. It's always getting worse."

"It's a pattern." Zoya's blue eyes scanned the horizon. "But is it *his* pattern?"

"Is it even possible?" Tolya asked. "We've had him locked in the sun cell since he . . . returned."

*Returned.* There was something quaint about the word. As if the Darkling had simply been vacationing on the Wandering Isle,

sketching ruined castles, sampling the local stews. Not brought back to life by an ancient ritual orchestrated by a bloodthirsty Saint with a penchant for bees.

“I try not to underestimate our illustrious prisoner,” said Nikolai. “And as for what’s possible . . .” Well, the word had lost its meaning. He had met Saints, witnessed their destruction, nearly died himself, and become host to a demon. He’d seen a man long dead resurrected, and he was fairly sure the spirit of an ancient dragon was lurking inside the woman next to him. If *possible* was a river, it had long since leapt its banks and become a flood.

“Look,” said Tolya. “Smoke.”

“And riders,” added Tamar. “Seems like trouble.”

At the fringes of town near where the blight had struck, Nikolai could see a gathering of men on horseback. Angry voices carried on the wind.

“Those are Suli wagons,” said Zoya, the words hard and clipped.

A shot rang out.

They all shared the briefest glance, and then they were charging down the hill to the valley below.

Two groups of people stood in the shade of a large cedar tree, mere footsteps from where the blight had bled all life from the land. They were on the edge of a Suli encampment, and Nikolai saw the way the wagons had been arranged not merely for convenience but for defense. There was no child in sight. They’d been ready for a possible attack. Maybe because they always had to be ready. The old laws restricting Suli land ownership and travel had been abolished even before his father’s time, but prejudice was harder to wipe from the books. And it was always worse when times got hard. The mob—there was no other word for it, their rifles and fevered eyes made that clear—confronting the Suli was testimony to that.

“Stand down!” Nikolai shouted as they galloped nearer. But only a couple of people turned toward him.

Tolya charged ahead and drove his massive warhorse between the two groups. “Lay down your arms in the name of the king!” he bel-lowed. He looked like a warrior Saint come to life from the pages of a book.

“Very impressive,” said Nikolai.

“Show-off,” said Tamar.

“Don’t be petty. Being the size of an oak should have some benefits.”

Both the townspeople and the Suli took a step back, mouths agape at the sight of a giant, uniformed Shu man with tattooed arms in their midst. Nikolai recognized Kyril Mirov, the local governor. He’d made good money trading salt cod and producing the new transport vehicles rapidly replacing carriages and carts. He had no noble blood in him, but plenty of ambition. He wanted to be taken seriously as a leader, and that meant he felt he had something to prove. Always worrisome.

Nikolai took the opportunity Tolya had given him. “Good morn-ing,” he said happily. “Are we all gathering for an early breakfast?”

The townspeople fell into deep bows. The Suli did not. They rec-ognized no king.

“Your Highness,” said Mirov. He was a lean man with jowls like melted wax. “I had no idea you were in the area. I would have ridden out to greet you.”

“What’s happening here?” Nikolai said calmly, keeping accusation from his voice.

“Look what they did to our fields!” cried one of Mirov’s men. “What they did to the town! Ten houses vanished like smoke. Two families gone, and Gavosh the weaver as well.”

*Vanished like smoke.* They'd had the same reports from other parts of Ravka: a blight that struck out of nowhere, a tide of shadow that enveloped towns, farmland, ports, each thing it touched dissolving into nothing with no more ceremony than a candle guttering out. In its wake, the blight left fields and forests leached of all life. *Kilyklava*, he'd heard it called—vampire, after a creature from myth.

“That doesn't explain why your guns are drawn,” Nikolai said mildly. “Something terrible has happened here. But it's not the work of the Suli.”

“Their camp was untouched,” said Mirov, and Nikolai didn't like the measured sound of his voice. It was one thing to calm a snapping dog, another to try to reason with a man who had dug himself a tidy trench and fortified it. “This . . . thing, this horror struck just days after they arrived on our land.”

“*Your* land,” said a Suli man standing at the center of the group. “There were Suli in every country this side of the True Sea before they even had names.”

“And what did you build here?” asked a butcher in a dirty apron. “Nothing. These are our homes, our businesses, our pastures and livestock.”

“They're a cursed people,” said Mirov as if citing a fact—last year's rainfall, the price of wheat. “Everyone knows it.”

“I hate to be left out of a party,” said Nikolai, “but I know no such thing, and this blight has struck elsewhere. It is a natural phenomenon, one my Materialki are studying and will find a solution to.” A heady combination of lies and optimism, but a bit of exaggeration never hurt anyone.

“They're trespassing on Count Nerenski's land.”

Nikolai let the mantle of Lantsov authority fall over him. “I am Ravka's king. The count holds these lands at my discretion. I say these people are welcome here and under my protection.”

“So says the bastard king,” grumbled the butcher.

A hush fell.

Zoya clenched her fists and thunder rolled over the fields.

But Nikolai held up a hand. This was not a war they would win with force.

“Could you repeat that?” he asked.

The butcher’s cheeks were red, his brow furrowed. The man might well keel over from heart failure if his ignorance didn’t kill him first. “I said you are a bastard and not fit to sit that fancy horse.”

“Did you hear that, Punchline? He called you fancy.” Nikolai turned his attention back to the butcher. “You say I am a bastard. Why? Because our enemies do?”

An uncomfortable murmur passed through the crowd. A shuffling of feet. But no one spoke. *Good.*

“Do you call Fjerda your master now?” His voice rang out over the gathered townspeople, the Suli. “Will you learn to speak their tongue? Will you bow to their pureblood king and queen when their tanks roll over Ravka’s borders?”

“No!” cried Mirov. He spat on the ground. “Never!”

One down.

“Fjerda has loaded your guns with lies about my parentage. They hope you will turn your weapons on me, on your countrymen who stand at our borders even now, ready to defend this land. They hope you will do the bloody work of war for them.”

Of course, Nikolai was the liar here. But kings did what they wished; bastards did what they must.

“I’m no traitor,” snarled the butcher.

“You sure sound like one,” said Mirov.

The butcher thrust his chest out. “I fought for the Eighteenth Regiment and so will my son.”

“I bet you had quite a few Fjerdans running,” said Nikolai.

“Damn right I did,” said the butcher.

But the man behind him was less convinced. “I don’t want my children fighting in another war. Put them witches out front.”

Now Zoya let lightning crackle through the air around them. “The Grisha will lead the charge and I will take the first bullet if I have to.”

Mirov’s men took a step back.

“I should thank you,” Nikolai said with a smile. “When Zoya takes it into her head to be heroic, she can be quite frightening.”

“I’ll say,” squeaked the butcher.

“People died here,” said Mirov, trying to regain some authority. “Someone has to answer for—”

“Who answers for the drought?” asked Zoya. Her voice cut through the air like a well-honed blade. “For earthquakes? For hurricanes? Is this who we are? Creatures who weep at the first sign of trouble? Or are we Ravkan—practical, modern, no longer prisoners of superstition?”

Some of the townspeople looked resentful, but others appeared downright chastised. In another life Zoya would have made a terrifying governess—straight-backed, sour-faced, and perfectly capable of making every man present wet his trousers in fear. But a Suli woman was staring at Zoya, her expression speculative, and his general, who could usually be counted upon to meet any insolent look with a glare powerful enough to scorch forests, was either oblivious or deliberately ignoring her.

“*Khaj pa ve*,” the woman said. “*Khaj pa ve*.”

Though Nikolai was curious, he had more pressing matters to attend to. “I know it is little comfort, but we should discuss what aid the crown can offer in recompense for your lost land and homes. I will—”



“I’ll speak to the governor,” Zoya said briskly.

Nikolai had intended to talk with Mirov himself, since the man’s interest in status might make him susceptible to attention from royalty. But Zoya was already directing her mount his way.

“Be charming,” he warned her under his breath.

She flashed him a warm smile and a wink. “I will.”

“That was very convincing.”

The smile vanished in an instant. “I’ve had to watch you smarm all over Ravka for years. I’ve learned a few tricks.”

“I don’t smarm.”

“Occasionally you smarm,” said Tolya.

“Yes,” conceded Nikolai. “But it’s endearing.”

He watched Zoya slide down from her horse and lead Mirov away. The man looked nearly slack-jawed, a frequent side effect of Zoya’s beauty and general air of murderousness. Perhaps there were some things more intoxicating than status for Mirov after all.

But Zoya hadn’t been pressing an advantage with Mirov. She was running away. She hadn’t wanted that Suli woman to confront her, and that wasn’t like his general. At least, it hadn’t been. Since she’d lost Juris, since their battle on the Fold, Zoya had changed. It was like he was viewing her from a distance, like she’d taken a step away from everyone and everything. And yet she was sharp as always, armor firmly in place, a woman who moved through the world with precision and grace, and little time for mercy.

He turned his attention to the Suli. “For your safety, it might be best if you moved on tonight.”

Their leader bristled. “Whatever this horror is, we had nothing to do with it.”

“I know that, but when night falls, cooler heads may not prevail.”

“Is this what protection from Ravka’s king looks like? A command to scurry into the shadows?”

“It’s not an order, it’s a suggestion. I can station armed men here to defend your camp, but I don’t think you’d welcome their presence.”

“You would be right.”

Nikolai didn’t want to leave these people with no place to shelter. “If you’d like, I can send word to Countess Gretsina to open her fields to you.”

“She would welcome Suli on her lands?”

“She will or she won’t get any of the new threshers we’re distributing to farms.”

“This king deals in both bullets and blackmail.”

“This king rules men, not Saints. Sometimes more than prayer is required.”

The man released a huff of laughter. “On that we can agree.”

“Tell me,” said Nikolai to the woman beside the Suli leader, attempting to keep his voice casual. “You said something to General Nazyalensky.”

“*Nazyalensky*,” she said with a laugh.

Nikolai’s brows rose. “Yes. What did you say to her?”

“*Yej menina enu jebra zheji, yepa Korol Rezni.*”

The Suli man laughed. “She said her words were for the general and not for you, King of—”

“I understood that part just fine,” said Nikolai. *Korol Rezni*. King of Scars. Of the many things he’d been called, it certainly wasn’t among the worst, but at the sound of those words, the demon in him stirred. *Easy now, we’ve reached an understanding, you and I*. Though the demon wasn’t much for logic.

Over the next hour, Nikolai and Tamar interviewed the Suli who were willing to describe the blight to them, then reconvened with Tolya and Zoya.

“Well?” he asked, as they rode back to the hilltop.

“Same as near Balakirev,” said Tolya. “A blot of shadow rolling over the countryside, like night coming on too quickly. Everything the shadow touches succumbs to blight—livestock, property, even people dissolve into smoke, leaving behind nothing but barren earth.”

“Pilgrims came through only a day ago,” said Zoya. “Followers of the Starless One. They claim this is punishment for the reign of a faithless king.”

“How unfair. I have plenty of faith,” Nikolai objected.

Tolya raised a brow. “In what?”

“Good engineering and better whiskey. Did Mirov and his friends break bread with the pilgrims and give them a fair hearing for their treason?”

“No,” Zoya said with some satisfaction. “Enough of them remember the war and the Darkling’s destruction of Novokribirsk. They chased those black-clad fanatics out of town.”

“They do love a mob in Yaryenosh. What did that woman say to you?”

“No idea,” said Zoya. “I don’t speak Suli.”

Tamar peered at her. “You *looked* like you understood her. You looked like you couldn’t wait to be out of her sight.”

So Nikolai hadn’t been the only one to notice.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Zoya said. “There was work to be done.”

Tolya bobbed his head at Nikolai. “The Suli aren’t fond of you, are they?”

“I’m not sure they have reason to be,” said Nikolai. “They shouldn’t have to live in fear within our borders. I haven’t worked hard enough to secure their safety.” Another item to add to his list of failures. Since taking the throne, he’d contended with too many enemies on the field—the Darkling, the Fjerdans, the Shu, *jurda parem*, the damned demon living inside him.

“We all live in fear.” Zoya nudged her horse into a gallop.

“I guess that’s one way to change the subject,” said Tolya.

They followed in her wake, and as they crested the hill, Tamar looked back at the wound the blight had left on the fields. “The Starless are right about one thing. There’s a connection to the Darkling.”

“I’m afraid so,” said Nikolai. “We’ve all seen the sands of the Fold. Dead and gray. Just like the areas struck by this blight. I thought that when the Shadow Fold collapsed and the darkness was dispelled, the land it covered might heal itself.”

“But nothing has ever grown there,” said Tolya. “It’s cursed land.”

For once, Nikolai couldn’t brush away that word as mere superstition. The Tula Valley had been the site of some of the holiest land in Ravka, where Sankt Feliks had supposedly cultivated his orchard—or the thorn wood, depending on which story you believed. It was also the location of the first *obisbaya*, a ritual meant to separate beast from man. But the Darkling had tainted all that. His attempt to create his own amplifiers and his use of *merzost* to do it had made a mockery of his power, twisting it into a dark territory crowded with monsters. Sometimes Nikolai wondered if they’d ever be free of that legacy.

*Not if you don’t face your part in it.* It was time they acknowledged the ugly truth of what this blight meant.

“There’s no other explanation,” he said. “The Fold is expanding. And we caused it.”

“You don’t know that—” Tamar began.

“We do,” said Zoya. Her voice was cold.

Nikolai remembered the earthquakes that had been felt throughout Ravka and beyond when the boundaries of the Fold had ruptured. Elizaveta had been defeated. Three Saints, Grisha of infinite

power, had died violently. Nikolai's attempt to endure the *obisbaya* and rid himself of his demon had failed. The Darkling's power lived on inside him, and now the man himself walked the earth once more. Of course there were bound to be consequences.

"We'll take soil samples," he continued. "But we know what's happening here."

"Fine. You're to blame," said Tamar. "How do we stop it?"

"Kill the Darkling," said Zoya.

Tolya rolled his eyes. "That's your answer to everything."

Zoya shrugged. "How do we know if we don't try?"

"And what about the demon trapped inside the king?" asked Tamar.

Zoya scowled. "Details."

"We could attempt the *obisbaya* again," Tolya suggested. "I found a new text that—"

"It nearly killed him last time," Zoya snapped.

"Details," said Nikolai. "We'll have to consider it."

"After the wedding," said Zoya.

"Yes," said Nikolai, trying to summon some enthusiasm. "After the wedding."

With her eyes on the horizon, Zoya said, "Please tell me you've made progress with Princess Ehri."

"Contemplating jabbing a thorn through my heart again is easier than wooing a princess."

"It certainly requires more finesse," Zoya said. "Which you have in abundance."

"That doesn't quite sound like a compliment."

"It isn't. You have more charm than sense. But while that makes you irritating, it should also be of use in delicate matters of diplomacy."

“Honestly, I’ve barely had a chance to speak with her.” He’d meant to invite her to his Saint’s day feast, but somehow he’d never gotten around to it. Nikolai knew he should talk to her. He *must* if he had any hope of seeing his plans for the future come to fruition. But he’d been avoiding spending time with the princess since that disastrous night when Isaak had died and the woman everyone had believed to be Ehri was revealed as an assassin. Since then, the real Princess Ehri had been sequestered in luxurious quarters that were still very much a prison. Her Tavgharad guards had been kept in the most hospitable part of the dungeons beneath the old stables, and the assassin—the girl who had driven a knife into Isaak’s heart, thinking she was killing a king—was under lock and key, still healing from her wounds. As for Nikolai’s other prisoner? Well, he had a very unique cell of his own.

“Ehri is softening,” Nikolai continued. “But she’s stubborn.”

“A good trait for a queen,” said Zoya.

“Do you think so?”

Nikolai watched Zoya’s face. He couldn’t help watching. Her glance at him was so swift he might have imagined it, a flash of blue, the sky glimpsed through trees. And the meaning of that glance? Something. Nothing. He’d have more luck trying to tell his fortune in the clouds.

Zoya kept her reins in one hand as she adjusted her gloves. “In less than a month, Queen Makhi will arrive, expecting a grand celebration. Without the presumed bride’s cooperation, you’re going to find yourself in the middle of an international incident.”

“He may well anyway,” said Tamar.

“Yes, but if the wedding doesn’t happen, Nikolai won’t have to worry about the Fjerdans or the Shu or the Fold.”

“I won’t?”

“No, because Genya will have murdered you. Do you have any idea how much work she’s put into planning this grand event?”

Nikolai sighed. “It will happen. I’ve already had a new suit made.”

“A suit,” Zoya said, casting her eyes heavenward. “You’ll be very well-dressed at your funeral. Talk to Ehri. *Charm* her.”

She was right, and that vexed him more than anything. He was grateful to see a rider approaching from camp, though the messenger’s grim expression instantly set Nikolai’s heart racing. No one ever rode that fast when the news was good.

“What is it?” Nikolai asked as the rider drew alongside them.

“A flyer arrived from Os Alta, Your Majesty,” the messenger said on a gasp. “We’ve had a message from the Termite.” He handed Nikolai a sealed missive.

He saw Zoya lean forward in her saddle and knew she wanted to snatch the paper right out of his hands. Nina Zenik’s code name was Termite.

Nikolai’s eyes scanned the page. He had hoped they’d have more time. But Nina had at least given them a fighting chance.

“We need to get back to camp. Ride ahead and have them ready two of our flyers,” Nikolai told the messenger, who vanished in a cloud of dust.

“This is it, isn’t it?” asked Zoya.

“Fjerda is on the march. Tamar, you’ll need to get word to David and our Fabrikators, and I’ll send a flyer to our contacts in the west as well.”

“The missiles aren’t usable yet,” said Tamar.

“No,” said Nikolai. “But the Fjerdans aren’t going to wait.” He turned to Zoya. “Hiram Schenck is in Os Kervo. You know what to do. We have only one chance to get this right.”



“Are we ready?” Tolya asked.

“Hardly,” said Tamar. “But we’ll give them hell anyway.”

The demon in Nikolai roused at the thought. War was like fire—sudden, hungry, and easiest to stop before it had taken hold. He would do all he could do to contain this blaze. He feared for his country and for himself. He’d be a fool not to. But some part of him, maybe the privateer, maybe the demon, maybe the prince who had clawed his way to the throne, was itching for a fight.

“Think of it as throwing a party,” he said, giving his reins a snap. “When the guests show up, you find out who your real friends are.”





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