Sol Koroleva

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Summary

A long time ago in an orphanage bordering the Unsea which was once called Keramzin there was a lonely girl who became a soldier, then a saint, later a queen, then, much later, a lonely girl again.
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By the window a girl and a boy prayed for a better year: for fresher bread, for Ana Kuya to hold her temper, for the Grisha not to separate them. The boy and the girl came from different fathers and different mothers but they were all they had in the world.

They came from the same, tiny village in the southern border, which had been ravaged by Shu bandits and destroyed the previous lives they had left behind. The first casualty of war was always innocence.

Bored inside the orphanage, the boy and the girl entertained themselves by putting on plays, hunting for mice and making fun of the older children who thought themselves superior.

The Grisha Examiners came during winter, when the cold froze the ground and the snow piled high over the children’s heads. The boy and the girl watched from the upper floor as the first one came. A tall young man in a purple *kefta* with a gentle face and kind eyes. He saw the boy and the girl, acknowledging them with a nod. The second was an older man in a blue *kefta* who looked bored to arrive at an isolated, dilapidated orphanage. The last Grisha was an elderly matron in a stunning red *kefta*. It was clear she was the leader from her cold presence as if she were the Tsarista herself.

The girl and the boy peered at the room below. Ana Kuya was talking to the three figures. The young man in purple noticed them first, the rest followed his gaze. “Alina, Malyen, come down here,” Ana Kuya said. Her face seemed pleasant but there was an unmistakable edge to her voice.

“Are they witches?” the boy whispered.

“Quiet!” the girl hissed back.

Ana Kuya gestured them forward, “Do you know who these people are?” Before the boy could say something stupid the girl blurted “You’re Grisha.” The boy seemed shocked at her outspokenness but the old woman in red smiled with arrogance. “Yes, we practice the Small Science. With our abilities we keep this kingdom secure from Shu and Fjerdan savages.”

The boy was mesmerized by the woman, his eyes widening at her every word. The girl seemed less captivated.

“Not everyone is gifted with the Small Science,” the old woman continued, “That’s why we are here. If one or both of you has the gift, you’ll come back with us to a special children’s school where Grisha learn their abilities.”

The young man in purple took note of the boy and girl’s clasped hands. “Would you like that? You would have whatever your heart’s desire, all you need is to hold out your wrists,” he coaxed.

The older man in blue suddenly rose from his chair, “Let’s get this over with Lyudmila. I’d like to go home.” He approached the children and gently but firmly pried their hands apart.

The boy was tested first. The man in purple picks up the girl and holds her against him, kicking
and thrashing. “She isn’t going to hurt your friend,” he murmers but even he is starting to sound exhausted.

The boy was terrified but allowed the woman to touch his wrist. The woman, Lyudmila sighed “Poor boy doesn’t have the abilities,” she said, trying and failing to sound sorrowful or sympathetic. “Move onto the girl.”

Without hesitation the man in purple hands over the girl and picks up the boy. When he began to wail, he moved into the kitchen, the boys crying fading into a distance. The girl was not cooperating. The older man in blue had to restrain her so Lyudmila could hold her wrist.

The old woman felt something, a sudden rushing answer she wasn’t expecting. Certainly not from an orphaned girl. But it was hard to be certain with the girl struggling.

When the girl grew tired and briefly stopped fighting, she seized the chance. This time a call rose to answer her. The entire room exploded into a blazing golden light and swelled with heat. The old woman and her companion stared in shock first at each other, then the girl.

The young man in purple ran back into the room, the other child forgotten. “What was that?” he said with wild eyes. He glanced at the corner of the room, Ana Kuya was trembling and seemed on the verge of tears. The man in blue whispered, “She lit up. She summoned light.”

The importance of his statement dawned. “We have to get to the Little Palace immediately. The Darkling will want to see her.”

Once again the boy and the girl were separated. This time they were afraid it would be permanent. Pried away from one another, they could only shout each other’s name.

Ana Kuya seized the boy to prevent him from going to the troika. “Alina! Alina!” the boy screamed, his face wet with tears. The man in blue seized the girl, dragging her from the orphanage kicking and screaming.

The girl cried at the man in blue, begging him not to take her away from the only good thing in her life. But the Grisha Examiners had no sympathy for the whims of a little girl and the troika pulled off.

“Mal!” the girl yelled back, but her voice was far, far away.
Chapter 2

Lyudmila Pavlova didn’t believe in legends or tall tales. She has seen much in her forty years as a soldier in the Second Army. Lyudmila always prided herself at being above peasant superstitions; allowing the Small Science to guide and teach her throughout many obstacles in life. Subduing a ten-year-old brat was not how her day was supposed to be going.

The little monster kept attempting to get out of the troika, back to that hellhole of an orphanage. After Abram held her down, Lyudmila slowed her heartbeat until she became unconscious. Lazar, the Materialki, offered to hold the girl. Asleep, she appeared more as a sweet, innocent child than a terror.

“Abram, you should watch over the child until the Darkling returns to Os Alta. She is an Etherealki after all,” said Lyudmila. Abram, the man in the blue kefta, gave her an icy glare but nodded, conceding her point. Lazar was uncharacteristically silent. The pause lengthened, leaving the three in their own thoughts.

Lyudmila knew what they were all thinking: the reality of finding a Sun Summoner. It would be like finding the Tsar riding the Firebird playing a balalaika. She debated whether or not to send word ahead to the Little Palace, but it was too likely to fall in the hands of Fjerdan spies or Shu assassins. No, they won’t be safe until they’re behind the walls of Os Alta; still hours away.

It was going to be a long ride.

As soon as Alina woke up, a pair of concerned brown eyes stared back at her. She cried out in surprise and the young man in the purple kefta suppressed a laugh. “No need to be frightened myshka, we’re not going to eat you.” Myshka, little mouse; Alina wasn’t reassured by the stranger. “Then what are you going to do to me?” she asked, a slight tremor in her voice.

“Don’t worry myshka, we only took you because you are special. I know you’re scared now but once we get to the capital, you’ll be safe and happy. The Darkling will be interested in meeting you.” When she continued to be silent he added, “You don’t have to fear him, Alina, he protects and defends Ravka. All else is peasant superstitions.”

In Keramzin, Ana Kuya hadn’t been the superstitious type either. When one of the older children told how Darkling’s where born from the goddess of Death herself, Ana Kuya gave him such a vicious beating, he couldn’t chew properly for a week. Still, she and Mal had heard stories even before they became orphans.

“If I don’t have to fear the Darkling, why do you all look afraid?” The adults exchange glances, it was the young man in purple who answered her in a clipped, sweet voice. “You’re very unique myshka, it won’t be long until the entire world knows about you. Only we can protect you, you have to trust us.”

But Alina frowned and said, “I don’t even know your names.” The man in purple smiled in relief, she was complacent enough. Alina learned his name was Lazar, the old woman who put her to
sleep was Lyudmila and the other man in blue was Abram. She was woken up, Lazar explained, because they were nearing the Little Palace.

The Little Palace really wasn’t that little, she thought. It looked like passing into another world. Everywhere she saw rows of buildings that looked like little houses, fountains with strange creatures on them, and pretty yellow domes on top. Her eyes clung to every fascinating thing. Mal once told her Os Alta was called the city of dreams but she hadn't believed him. Just another fantasy to make their lonely lives bearable.

It looked nothing like Keramzin and it looked nothing like the village she grew up in. This place must be made from the gods’ own hands, she thought, how can something so beautiful exist in a country of beggars, thieves and orphans?

The older man – Abram, looked at the girl, a little smile playing on his lips. “Impressive eh? Grisha are prized here in Ravka,” a hint of pride in his voice.

When they reached the entrance there were strange, black-clothed servants waiting for them. Lazar carried her into the corridors, the other two Grisha sandwiched between them. They went left and right, one hallway after the next until Alina didn’t bother keeping track of where they were going.

He stopped in front of an open doorway and set her down. Only he went inside with her, Abram and Lyudmila lingered outside the doorway. Alina noticed the large room, its fireplace, the golden carvings – but all she really cared about was the bed, she needed sleep.

“The Darkling is in Balakirev right now but he’ll return in a few hours. The servants will provide whatever you wish so there’s no need to leave your rooms,” Lazar said.

“Wait!” she protested. She grabbed hold of his long sleeve. “What will happen to me now?” she whispered, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Lazar stepped closer to the girl and tried to reassure her. “Whatever you want to happen. When Grisha come here, they want for nothing because they serve their country. You can be one of the greatest soldiers Ravka has ever seen but first you have to be brave,” he wiped her tears with his own kefta, “Can you do that?” Alina nodded.

“Good, then rest.” He rose and gently closed the door behind him. When she tried to follow the door wouldn’t open, it was locked. Why lock the door? But she was too tired to think about it. Alina peeled of her coat and boots, and fell into bed.
The Grisha Examiners were walking down the gilded stairs of the Little Palace when a charcoal-clad servant approached the older woman in red. “Colonel Pavlova, the Darkling has returned from Balakirev,” the servant glanced at Abram and Lazar, “he requests an interview with all of you.”

The man bowed and dismissed himself. Lyudmila’s eyes could only follow the man’s retreating figure. *He knows about the girl. The Darkling knows what we’ve kept from him.*

Lazar was the first to voice her thoughts. “Surely he’ll understand why it was urgent to get her behind palace walls. Yet I wonder how could he have known so quickly.”

“Are you stupid?” Abram replied, a hint of irritation in his voice. It was an open secret that the Darkling spied on high-ranking Grisha. Lyudmila couldn’t help being irritated, they’ve always had an absurd rivalry between them and the old woman did not suffer fools.

“Quiet both of you,” she hissed, “Let me do the talking—”

“A poor choice, really. None of you possess a talent for public speaking.” A crisp, smooth voice echoed at the end of a hallway. The Darkling barely raised his voice but the command prompted them to silence.

The three Grisha quickly bowed, “*Moi Soverenyi,*” they echoed. Lyudmila and the others shivered in anticipation.

The Darkling’s quartz gray eyes slid to Lazar. “The girl trusts you the most, yes?”

Lazar nodded.

“If what you say about this girl is true, bring her to me,” ordered the Darkling. Lazar didn’t need to be told twice and walked away to retrieve the little brat – Alina.

She wondered what would happen to her and Abram. They’ve served the Second Army faithfully for many years now, but the Darkling wasn’t known for mercy.

The Darkling looked at Abram for a long time, then glanced back at Lyudmila. “I’d like to think if I had a Sun Summoner in my own country I’d be aware of it,” his voice sounded calm, but she knew what laid simmering beneath his façade – rage.

Even as a young soldier in the Second Army, she understood that the Darkling was an entity all to himself. Commanding the Second Army as if they were his subjects and not the Kings. In her fifty-three years, she’s seen four kings rise and fall to Death’s shadow, but the Darkling remained constant.

Abram suddenly turned submissive. “The girl was difficult to restrain – and time wasn’t on our side. The sooner we arrived to Os Alta, the less likely she would be kidnapped by the Shu or Fjerdans.” He was stammering at this point, his composure dissolving faster than quicksand.

Lyudmila jumped to his defense, “*Moi Soverenyi,* what Abram meant –” He lifted a hand to silence her.

“Do not,” the Darkling warned, his features contorted in fury, “patronize me, Colonel Pavlova. Lazar Beznikov is still young, and I believe he’ll learn from his mistakes. But you two should’ve
known better than to take such action on my behalf.” The Darkling voice suddenly turned bemused, “The King is in need of two more Grisha to West Ravka. You will both leave tomorrow morning to deliver the supplies.”

Cold understating swept over her – half of the supplies didn’t make it to Os Kervo. Lyudmila and Abram were receiving a death sentence. Her legs gave way, and she slid to the floor. Abram’s grip on her arm tightened painfully, trying to keep her from shattering completely.

The Darkling cocked his head to one side, a small smile playing around his lips. Then the smile disappeared, replaced by something unrecognizable. “Now both of you, get out of my sight.”

Alina could barely listen to Lazar’s precautions or advice. Her eyes were begging to close and she had consciously remember to keep them open. All she wanted was sleep, and possibly more chocolates a servant gave her earlier.

“Don’t forget to bow – are you listening?” Even she could tell his patience was wearing thin. She didn’t want him mad at her, he was kinder to her than the others.

“Where is the red woman and man in blue?” she asked. It wasn’t that she was being childish ignoring their proper names. She was very mature for ten years old, at least Alina thought so. More mature than Mal and others at Keramzin. Besides, the man and woman only referred to her as “the brat,” whatever that meant.

Lazar stared at the glittery ceilings above his head and doesn’t answer her question for a long time. “I’m not sure,” he finally says. For once, his voice is less than kind. “But that doesn’t matter now. The needs of the many exceed the needs of a few.”

They came to a set of double doors with a sun in eclipse etched into them. The terse silence only made her more fearful that their short time together was coming to an end.

She wasn’t sure what Lazar truly meant but was too afraid to ask. Instead she said, “Are you coming with me?” Alina hated how desperate and small she sounded. Lazar’s smile was sad. “I can’t myshka, I have business elsewhere but we may see each other from time to time.” He opened the elongated, wooden doors and she walked in alone. On impulse, she turned back, “Thank you,” she whispered. The young man in purple paused and looked at her in pity or sympathy, she wasn't sure which. ”May the saints be with you,” he replied before closing completely. Alina wondered if she would ever see him again.

In the middle of the room stood a young man, about the same age as Lazar except his kefta was black instead of the reds, blues and purples she had seen. She took a deep breath and clutched her tiny hands into fists, refusing to let the Darkling rule over her with fear. “I was expecting you to be older,” she blurted out. The young man in black paused, and Alina wondered if she had already doomed herself.

“And I wasn’t expecting you at all,” he replied with the ghost of a smile.

His gray eyes flickered down to what she was wearing, “Are you really an orphan?” The Darkling’s voice was kind but Alina couldn’t help but flinch. He gestured for her to come to him and she did, warily. He reached out for her hand and she felt something within her rise.

It wasn’t like the old woman in Keramzin. Alina wanted to answer the Darkling’s call. Something desperate and yearning roared to the surface and she was blinded by a sudden light. He immediately let go of her taking the light with him.
The Darkling kept staring at her and for once, his expression wasn’t unreadable. He picked her up and set her down a purple chaise, only then did she realize she was shaking.

“Don’t be afraid, I felt it too,” something about his voice calmed her. Everything inside her told her to trust him. The Darkling crouched down to her eye level, “I apologize. Everything has happened too fast for you.”

“I don’t want to be coddled,” she said.

“You’re a child solnyshko, that’s what children are for.”

“My name is not solnyshko,” she replied, which earned her another of his half smiles. The Darkling took her hands in his. His hands were long and pale and seemed too large compared to hers. “Alina,” he said, his voice serious, “would you like to go back to your room? I promise to explain everything about your situation.”

She held out her arms to him, “I also want those sweet chocolates I had earlier.” The Darkling picked her up and chuckled. “Anything you wish, and it’s yours.”

Alina was starting to think this man wasn’t as frightening as everyone thought.
Chapter 4

Alina Starkov sat by her window, the view overlooking the gardens of the Little Palace. Even though it was winter, it was still an impressive sight – the sun illuminated the white brittle trees and the snow looked like those tiny crystals Ana Kuya wore around her neck.

*It’s all my fault,* she thought to herself. Not once did Alina feel tempted to share her secret, not even with Mal. Her earliest memories consisted of playing with strands of light and her father saying never to do that again. She remembered because it was her fifth birthday.

*People like you and I are different,* her father would say, *if anyone found out they would turn against us. Why do you think we had to flee?*

*But isn’t it wrong to hoard knowledge, Baba?* she would ask innocently. She always got a dismissive sound in response. From that point on she learned how to keep secrets. Adults are always inclined to believe the best in children and to think they are incapable of deception.

When her parents died in a Shu raid she shamefully hoped her secret would die with them. But that mean-looking old woman pried it out of her. The woman in red reopened old wounds: all her grief and loneliness laid out before them.

Whenever she saw the Darkling again, Alina thought, she would ask to visit Mal – or at least write to him every single day.

Now she was expected to be ready for school. In Keramzin, Ana Kuya gave lessons in grammar, mathematics, history and religion. Alina and Mal feigned sickness as often as they could. They told the other children it was to avoid her temper, but really, they just wanted to spend the afternoons skipping stones at Trivka’s Pond.

But now instead of playing games with Mal, she was expected to bathe and get ready for school as if it were the most important day of her life.

The *kefta* she was given was black. Its size was too small on her and the cuff’s thread was fraying, as if the *kefta* was made in a rush. Alina was too nervous to ask why nobody seemed to like her because none of the servants spoke a word; they didn’t even look her in the eye. She was quite good at keeping herself hidden underneath scarves and coats too big for her, (hand-me-downs from the older orphans) but the *kefta* was anything but inconspicuous.

One of the older servants made a gesture to follow her. Alina struggled to keep up with her long stride. She was never good at making friends, but perhaps this school will be different. Maybe the boys and girls here will be kinder than the ones at Keramzin.

Her first new friend she met while walking into the classroom. When she walked in, the students kept staring at her like she had a bird’s nest on her head. Alina’s face flushed with embarrassment and rushed to the nearest seat. Across her sat a red-haired boy who seemed distracted playing with his eraser than paying attention to her.

“Hello,” she said politely, “my name is Alina, what’s yours?”

The red-haired boy stopped and looked at her as if she interrupted him doing something important. Which he wasn’t.

“Harshaw,” the boy replied, and went back to playing with his erasers.
Well at least he doesn’t stare like the other boys and girls, she thought. The schoolteacher droned on about multiplication charts but Alina didn’t pay any attention. She kept replaying in her mind everyone staring at her. She was so stupid to think the Little Palace would be different from Keramzin. Without Mal, nothing in her life went right.

When the schoolteacher dismissed the class for lunch and recess, she was one of the last people to leave. She just had to hold her tears until she had some food. And chocolates for comfort.

Someone poked her in the back, it was Harshaw.

“If you want to cry, go behind the rosebushes. Nobody goes there this time of year,” Harshaw said. And at that moment Alina did burst into tears. Harshaw looked stricken – he was probably deciding to leave her, she thought miserably.

Instead he said, “Please don’t cry, I hate making girls cry.” At that Alina eventually did stop crying and stared at the strange, red-haired boy.

“Do you usually make other girls cry?” she asked. He shrugged, but for the first time he appeared uncomfortable. “Once, but that’s because I told Zoya she wasn’t pretty. She’s hated me ever since.”

Alina smiled, she didn’t know who Zoya was, but at least he was being honest. Maybe Harshaw could become her new friend after all. “I don’t feel like crying anymore,” she declared.

“Good. Do you want to play by the pond? I’m wondering if I swallow one of the fish – will I start to glow?”

Crazy, her first thoughts whispered. But her other thoughts were more doubtful and lenient, He’s not crazy – he’s just a little out there.

She was willing to take that risk. She nodded, her head eagerly, “Yes.”
Chapter 5

When the Darkling found her playing in the pond, Harshaw was attempting to catch one of the glowing fish. When his twinkling hazel eyes caught his presence, the red-haired boy turned milky white and started to tremble. *Why is he so scared all the sudden?*

“Come, Alina,” the Darkling ordered. She sent a final glace to Harshaw, “I’ll see you tomorrow,” she called out. Harshaw didn’t glance back up at her. How strange. The servants also looked at her like that. She hoped he would continue to be her friend.

He motioned for her to walk by his side. Alina had short, chubby legs, so she struggled to keep up with the Darkling’s long strides. Alina tried to stay quiet, ignoring the questions desperate to get out of her mouth.

*Where are we going? Why are we so far away from the palace? Why did Harshaw look so scared?*

The Darkling led her through a maze of twists and turns in the wooded forest. Even though she knew they couldn’t be far from the Little Palace, it was like stepping into another land.

The woods, unlike the Little Palace, didn’t try to hide its true nature behind golden domes and sparkling fountains. Its ugliness was bare for anyone to see. The tree branches looked more like twisted vines, the frozen ground cracked under her weight and the atmosphere was drained of all vibrant colors.

The Darkling must have noticed her discomfort because he frowned and said, “I’m sorry solnyshko, but Baghra prefers to live away from the Little Palace. She doesn’t like being at court.”

Alina stood very still when she saw their destination. Her fingers had gone clammy and her stomach churned in on itself.

The isolated cabin looked out of place in the middle of the woods. The Darkling walked up the steps and strode inside without knocking. The place felt like an oven and it didn’t help that she was wearing a black kefta, trapping all that heat in her body.

Baghra, as she would find out, didn’t like much of anything. She was an old woman like Lyudmila Pavlova, but unlike the lieutenant who aged with grace, Baghra was something else entirely.

Baghra’s face was smooth and taut over the sharp angles on her face. Her back was straight and her raven black hair was untouched by gray. And yet she seemed to carry the invisible burden of an old woman. Her dark eyes were filled with curiosity, hostility and something else Alina couldn’t pinpoint. Baghra’s black eyes finally met hers.

“Well get in, both of you! You’re letting all the heat out!” she snapped. Alina thought she heard a bemused snort from the Darkling. She must have imagined it.

The cabin inside looked like any another traditional Ravkan home. At the center of the room was a roaring fire and she could make out a narrow bed, a basin and a cauldron for cooking. The old woman caught her looking around, “Not impressed, girl?” Baghra taunted. Alina squirmed away from her. She didn’t know why the Darkling took her here but she wanted to go back to Harshaw and whatever ridiculous game he’d come up with next.

“Baghra has an acquired taste, you shouldn’t take any of her comments to heart,” the Darkling
advised. He and Baghra stared at each other for a long time, an unspoken communication Alina couldn’t fully comprehend.

It was the Darkling who spoke first, “I want you to train her – like the others. But if she is unable to become fully proficient don’t push her. Let her have a childhood.”

Baghra’s eyes narrowed, “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” As if realizing there was a third person in the cabin, both turned their eyes on her. Baghra motioned her bony hands towards Alina, “Well come here girl, I’m not getting any younger.”

The Darkling started to walk away from the cabin. “Wait!” Alina grabbed the sleeve of his black _kefta_, one matching her own. “When are you coming back?” She hated how small her voice sounded; small and desperate. The Darkling’s gray eyes turned slowly to hers, drifting to where her hand gripped his sleeve.

The Darkling stepped closer to her and said, his voice so low only she could hear, “I have duties to fulfill for the King. Someday you will share the burden but for now you must start your training.” He paused briefly, studying her expression. He took her hands and squeezed them for emphasis. “You understand, solnyshko?”

She nodded. With that, he stood up and walked out the cabin without a second glance.

“Don’t get too over-attached girl, he has far more important things to do than entertaining a lonely girl,” for once, Baghra’s voice was less than a sneer and almost gentle.

Alina didn’t know how to respond.

“Are you mute, girl?”

“No.”

Her expression changed. “Hmph. You’re technically still a child but why didn’t they test you earlier?”

“I didn’t live in Ravka then.” Alina responded without thinking then mentally winced at giving away such information. Except for Mal, nobody knew of her family’s origins. “Starkov” wasn’t even her last name – just a Ravkan version of it.

Baghra looked at her with eyes so bleak that she shivered, despite the warmth of the room. Her expression was unreadable but Alina knew that the old woman’s perception of her had changed. She knew something about her family that Alina could never take back.

“Well girl,” she finally said, “for your sake, I hope you’re smarter than you look.”

Training was a disaster. Whatever she had done with the Darkling and Lieutenant Pavlova had deserted her. Baghra’s demands to conjure that light on her own proved fruitless. Alina tried to hold her tears of frustration as Baghra scolded, rebuked and even slapped her hand once. By the time she was dismissed for the evening it took all her self-control not to sigh in relief.

One of the Darkling’s _oprichniki_ had escorted her to the Little Palace, but she didn’t bother talking. Everyone treated her differently. She didn’t belong here. She should be back a Keramzin with Mal, taunting Ana Kuya, pulling pranks on the older orphans.

She suddenly became miserable at the thought of having to return to the old cabin every day after classes. Another reminder of her uselessness. At least she could write to Mal.
To lose an old life and gain a new one in the blink of an eye is a burden all orphans must share.
Chapter 6

Six months later

“Let me see him.”

“No.”

“If it’s too dangerous, then let him visit here. Please.”

“No.”

“But –”

“Did you not understand the first time?” he snapped. Alina froze, she’d never heard him so irritated before. He always talked to her in a calm and soothing voice, called her dushenka – to her infinite annoyance – and gave her sweets every day after her classes.

“You are the only one of your kind,” he explained to her on the first night. “Etherealnik are not meant to be alone. It will be much more difficult for you.”

Anxiety clouded her thoughts. She was sick and tired being told how special she was. Even her chocolates now tasted dull in her mouth.

“But what about you?” she blurted, maybe it was better if she kept her mouth shut, “There’s no one else like you either.”

He cocked his head to one side and smiled slightly, gray eyes unfathomably bright. “I’m glad Pavlova was wrong about you, you’re a quick one.” Alina flushed at the compliment and stood a little taller.

That was months ago, but it still gave Alina a surge of pride that he thought her clever. The only times – she noticed – he seemed to lose his patience was discussing anything to do with her life before she became Grisha (later her teachers would point out that grisha are born, not made) and that included Mal.

The Darkling heaved a long sigh and clasped her shoulders delicately, “If your friend has stopped writing, you have to accept that. Sometimes people change for the worse and clearly, he didn’t deserve a friend as loyal as you.”

A little fear ebbed out of her. Everything the Darkling said made sense, everything in her wanted to believe him. She was the Sun Summoner after all, and Mal would always be another nameless otkazat’sya. A dark part of her whispered she was once otkazat’sya herself. The abandoned. The orphaned.

When they first came to Keramzin together, before they became best friends, Alina had the biggest crush on Malyen Oretsev. How could she not? Dimpled cheeks with wavy brown hair, he looked like Ivan Tsarevich, a hero in many of Ana Kuya’s stories.

Sometimes she imagined herself as the princess in those tales. In Ana Kuya’s stories, the boy and the girl always lived happily ever after, no matter the obstacles.

Alina was seven years old when she experienced a feeling she later identified as heartache (she preferred that over heartbreak, it was too cliché). Olga Krupskaya was tall and slender, her golden
hair kept in a tight bun as if she were a married woman. The blonde girl held her head high and
laughed proud like any aristocrat. Too arrogant, acting as if she were older than fifteen with a
fortune to her name. Too old for Mal, but he loved her nonetheless or at least as much as children
can be in love.

Olga later joined the First Army and she was never spoken of again, but from then on Alina
learned she would never have Mal as a husband. Instead she swallowed her heart and had him as
a friend, and in time he became her very best friend. She never mourned the loss at what could
have been after that.

Mal could be entitled and clueless at times, but he was also unflinchingly loyal with an easy sense
of humor. He would never abandon her because of distance… Or would he? What would he do in
her position?

“Can I at least send a goodbye letter? Before all of this,” she gestured her arms wildly in the air.
'All of this' being the party decorations set up for her eleventh birthday celebration. Alina couldn't
recall her exact date of birth, but she remembered it was in the summer so it was close enough.

The party was more for them than for her. She was the symbol of hope, an excuse for the common
people to celebrate, she was told. Which was strange since she had never been outside the Little
Palace. If it were up to her she would spend the day exploring Os Alta and eating a lot of *ptichye
moloko* with Harshaw. At least it gave her a break from her miserable lessons with Baghra.

The Darkling studied her as if she were a curious girl, to make such an odd request. But he
inclined his head and said: “Of course. Better to cut loose ends now and move on.”

She only shrugged in agreement, though it left a sour taste in her mouth.

Later that evening after her playmates Marie and Nadia left for the night, she wrote her final letter
to Mal. Her words were too large and ill-formed, they didn’t even join properly into cursive. It
was becoming long and drawn out so she finished with:

*I don’t know if you even cared enough to open my other letters so I won’t bother you anymore.
Thank you for everything. Maybe in another lifetime we can meet in the meadow.*

Brushing off angry tears, she stared at her bed. She wished she could blot out every memory of
Mal and her parents. They had all moved on, but she was still stuck to the frozen ground crying
their names.

It was time to let them go.

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The morning after her eleventh birthday, Alina made her way down the lake path to Baghra’s
cottage. She counted eleven steps and knocked the door eleven times. She slowly breathed in and
out eleven times before Baghra opened the creaky wooden door.

“What is your sad little heart pining for today, girl?” the raven-haired woman said by way of
greeting.

Despite Alina’s pleas, the Darkling insisted she visit Baghra after her classroom lessons every day.
Which meant no more after school games with Harshaw. At least she could still eat her lunches
with him.

This was a waste of time. She didn’t even want to be here. The room was too hot, some of the
furniture looked centuries old and she detected a faint smell of rotting cabbage. Alina wouldn't be
surprised if the raven-haired woman was a witch, like in Ana Kuya’s stories where an old hag ate disobedient girls outside the woods of Duva.

“What’s so terrible about your life?” Baghra taunted, “Spoiled and pampered just like all the others – in time you’ll end up even worse, I’m sure – and quickly forget your old life.”

Shame flowed through her, sour and thick. Everything the old woman said was true, and she hated her even more for it.

“And being the Darkling’s pet never hurt anyone,” Baghra concluded.

“I’m not his pet,” Alina said. Her voice sounded pathetic even to her own ears.

Baghra stood up suddenly, too quick for an old woman. With surprising speed, she crossed over the wooden cottage floors to Alina, one hand gripping her face, the other on Alina’s wrists.

“You will be,” the old woman emphasized, “You. Will. Be.”

No. No. No. Light erupted of out her and Baghra’s cottage became a suffocating inferno. Too slowly, Baghra let her fingers drop one at a time, taking the light with it. Except…

That time summoning light didn’t feel like before. It was different than with the Darkling or the woman in red. There was no call to answer. Baghra visibly jumped back and had an unreadable expression. She made a quick gesture to follow her and they went outside by the lakeshore.

Turning to face her, Baghra said, “Again.”

Alina looked at her hands in confusion. She had never been able to conjure light on her own. Wasn’t that Baghra’s doing? The woman was an amplifier, after all

“I don’t have all day, girl,” she snapped.

Looking towards the lakeshore, everything in her mind clicked.

The first time she used her power she was afraid the grisha back in Keramzin would separate her from Mal – which they did. The second time she used her power she was terrified of what the Darkling would punish her - which he didn’t. And just now she was frightened of becoming the matryoshka dolls she and Marie played with, (Nadia claimed she was too old for ‘childish’ nesting dolls.) Beautiful on the outside, but no matter how many layers you took away, each doll was empty on the inside.

She channeled all her fear, her anger, her hatred. It made her strong. It made her feel powerful. She was alive because of her past, not despite it.

Come to me, she called out. I will never leave you in the dark again, she promised.

Warmth engulfed her body. For the first time in forever she felt truly alive and it was glorious. Her power set her free. It felt like an eternity though she knew it had to have been a couple of seconds.

Through the dimming light Alina’s squinted her eyes and could barely make out Baghra. The old woman watched her calmly, black eyes unblinking. Alina held her breath, afraid to make a sound.

“Hmph. Took you long enough, girl. Now our real work begins.”
Chapter 7

Three years later

There was no better punishment than being forced to spend time at parties with people she did not like. Alina hated parties, it was a fact set in stone. Looking back, she took her isolation for granted. The Darkling kept her sheltered and secluded when she was first brought to the Little Palace almost three years ago, limiting her contact with outsiders. In other terms, anyone who was not grisha

Alina stood by the railing of the balcony, overlooking the spectators below. Winter was gradually turning into Spring, yet some of the ice had stubbornly refused to thaw. Even the weather was far more interesting than what was going on below.

Genya quietly came by her side and shook her head softly, her false curls bouncing. "You shouldn't be here."

And you shouldn't be leaving the queen's side. Of course, but that would be too harsh. Alina didn't enjoy cruelty and the last thing Genya needed was a reminder of her status.

"I couldn't refuse a royal invitation," she replied dryly.

"You know that's not what I meant," the red-haired girl sighed deeply. "Sometimes, I wish I could make you understand."

Neither of them said anything after that and it became a tranquil silence. Eventually, Genya returned to tend to the Queen. They were never particularly close, especially after the red-haired girl began wearing white, but there was a camaraderie Alina missed.

Although she was meant it as a joke, she truly wished she could refuse the King's invitation to court. It was for the King's second son's departure to a university overseas. She thought it odd celebrating leaving Ravka, but then again, she had heard rumors about Prince Nikolai's true heritage as long as she could remember living at the palace. A small part of her empathized with the prince. Alina knew what it was like being the subject of gossip.

Anyone who was anyone fought their way to celebrate the King's newfound happiness: priests, boyars, high-ranking mistresses... it was a headache remembering them all and they got easily offended when Alina couldn't recall who was who. She very nearly hated them all.

At least the initial introductions had worn off and nobody asked her to do her little trick. As if she were a circus animal for their entertainment. She had seen the Darkling suffer similar shame with far more grace. They outranked most of the party guests but the few who asked about her, he would deflect their attention. But now he left to attend to the King, along with other higher ranking grisha, a few boyars and an old priest who kept staring at her when the Darkling wasn't looking.

Feigning interest at the food indoors, her eyes scanned the gilded crowds for another redhead. Sometimes she envied Harshaw at how easily he slipped through the crowds during these kinds of events. Even though he was an Inferni - and a powerful one at that - at the end of the day, to the Second Army Harshaw was still replaceable.

She was not.
Look, her dark thoughts hissed, look how much you are not like the others. You don't belong here. Alina shoved those thoughts away to the corners of her mind. They always came back, no matter what.

"You are not fooling anyone," a crisp voice said behind her, "No eclair can be that interesting."

Alina turned to the young man who spoke and gave him a withering look. She did not care if her act convinced others or not.

The young man sighed, "You aren't mute, are you? I had hoped for a good jest." He paused, considering his words, "On second thought, it would be nice for someone listening to me for once."

"Sorry to bore you," Alina droned. She felt him coming closer behind so she turned to face him. The young man couldn't be much older than her, a few years perhaps - dirty blond hair, long nose and wide eyes - he looked like a fox. The too-clever fox, one of Ana Kuya's stories.

His face was crinkled like he smiled a lot, but his eyes carried a weight of sadness and longing. At the corner of her eye, she saw a buzz of assembled guests making their way towards them. Strange, she had already been introduced to them earlier.

It wasn't until the guests wished the young man good fortune and left muttering sobachka behind their backs did she realize to whom she was speaking to. The King's second son, Prince Nikolai Lantsov, Grand Duke of Udova.

The Lantsov prince had sought her out. It was not a random meeting, she was sure of that.

"Your Grace," she murmured softly and bowed her head.

The Prince inclined his chin slightly. Alina supposed that was honor enough. The golden-haired man studied her under the glittering lights. She looked down at her black kefta, it wasn't in her place to initiate conversation but she hated awkwardness.

"I wasn't expecting you to be so modest and plain," the Prince declared.

"What?" Alina blurted, shaken from her trance.

"You see everyone here, yes?" he continued unfazed, "Ravkan nobility dress extravagantly to display their status." He gestured to a middle-aged woman covered in jewels, then to a round-faced boy with a high gorlatnaya hat. "Sometimes, I like to play a game. Tell apart one's status based on what they wear."

He grinned devilishly, though his eyes lacked warmth, "I'll start. That woman from earlier, with all her rubies and sapphires? The prince leaned closer, as if they were sharing a secret. Alina stiffened, he smelled like powder and malmsey wine. "Her husband is seventy-three and on his deathbed." Well, he was morbid.

"However," he continued, "poor woman is also past her prime and she knows he will turn everything over to his mistress and be left with nothing. The jewels are her way of saying 'I am here tonight and I matter.'"

I don't like this game. She felt helpless. The Darkling had always been there with her during these conversations and had gotten used to remaining quiet and speaking only when spoken to.

"Forgive me, but I'm a bit dense. You're going to have to be more specific." Her voice sounded breathless but curiously strong which she was proud of. The Prince laughed in amusement, too
lasting to be real. Her eyes scanned for a plausible escape. Then she saw the flash of a white kefta. Genya.

Prince Nikolai stepped to her left side, blocking her view of the red-haired girl. Damn him. He's shrewd. And wily.

"I'm too old to play games," she said softly. He still didn't move away.

"Who says we ever stop?"

"Some don't get the luxury to keep playing." This was the longest she had ever held a conversation with someone at events like this and it felt like a circus.

The blonde-haired youth laughed, and for the first time, it sounded genuine. "I can see why he kept you hidden for so long. A part of me thinks I could have loved you, if only we meet under different circumstances. Such a shame, Alina Starkov."

There was only one he the prince could be referring to. His comment resonated and her mind delved to decipher its meaning. The Lantsov prince was only a few years older than she, but his eighteen years to her fourteen made a mountain of difference. She felt her cheeks flush at the thought and hurried on.

"If you say so, Your Grace."

His stare was too penetrating for propriety and Alina wondered how to be rid of him. Sensing her discomfort, the young prince backed away and bowed. "Forgive me, I have kept you from your friend far too long." The prince withdrew, the crowd parting around him.

Damn him, she thought. Up until that moment everyone had been ignoring her, she only drew attention when she was at the Darkling's side. She clenched the folds of her black kefta behind her back, lest anyone see that she was unhinged and... something else. Prince Nikolai looked back, and for once his expression was read. It was anticipation.

A flash of red and white suddenly jumped to her side. Genya. The red-haired girl led her away from the onlookers and into the private rooms. After a terse silence, Alina waited for her to speak. Genya's amber eyes stared back at her, waiting for her to speak. I will not, Alina thought, she led me away, she will speak first. "Be careful with powerful men," the red-haired girl said too quietly. Alina nodded, but her mind was still fixed on Prince Nikolai. How could she be careful if she felt like a pawn in a chess game? She was not a player in her own right.

Noticing her continued silence, Genya said: "I could sneak up some syrniki, if you want," her tone was too cheerful to be real, "I once did a favor for the cook's daughter and now she brings me sweets whenever I ask for them." Alina flushed with embarrassment. She hated the pitiful tone in Genya's voice, but she nodded anyway, if only to make her shut up.

The red-haired girl smiled in triumph, "Good. In exchange, I get to doll you up. You look pale, and those circles under your eyes don't do you any favors."

Alina chuckled and pushed her, not with enough force, but enough for her friend to notice.

"You're terrible."

The two girls exchanged insults until her syrniki was brought by a servant girl. Despite Genya's attempts, her first remark crept back and left her dessert tasting bland.

Be careful with powerful men.
Chapter 8

The boy and the girl are in a cart, riding back with Ana Kuya. The boy is smiling, laughing and asking about everything he sees.

The horse plods along, twitching its shaggy mane as they climb the hill. Halfway up, the boy and the girl pass a family the side of the road. The husband is whistling as they go, the wife and children trudge along, their head bent carrying a variety of items. Blocks of salt, spices, textiles.

“Are they very poor?” The girl asks Ana Kuya.

“Not for this village, they’re not.”

“Then why doesn’t he buy cattle?”

“He doesn’t need animals,” says Ana Kuya. “He has a wife and children.”

“I’m going to marry Alina,” the boy declared.

“You will carry the spices,” was the girl’s reply.

After a moment of silence, the girl looks over her shoulder.

The man and his family are gone.

Instead, she passes a stunning raven-haired peasant woman sitting along the road. The raven-haired woman was not really a woman – still a girl – but she noticed the raven-haired woman’s body had a slight bump, her grey eyes dead. Blood was pooling between her thighs.

Robbers and rapists did not care she was with child, the girl thought. The raven-haired woman was a beauty, and beauty among peasant girls was a curse.

Ana Kuya missed nothing. “That’s what happens to orphan girls who do not have the benefit of the Duke’s protection. That is why you must keep him in your prayers every night.”

How strange. Alina had not thought about Mal or Keramzin in years. They were like a memory from a dream. Did it happen, or was she suddenly grasping at straws for any memories of her old life?

“The King is dead,” Ivan’s voice echoed through the throne room, dozens of soldiers from the Second Army lined up neatly before them.

Alina snapped to attention, her dream or memory once again forgotten.

“Long live the King,” the other Grisha repeated.

Alina Starkov resisted the urge to stare too at the Darkling’s shadow throne. She still felt
conflicted and resented the conflict inside her. The Darkling had no true legitimacy but the King and his heir, Prince Vasily were incompetent to rule.

The Crown Prince was notorious for spending fortunes on horse races and Fjerdan whores. The King acted like a child and his philandering was an open secret. The Darkling was what was best for Ravka, she knew that. And yet…

The plot to execute the Lantsov’s was kept secret from her until very near the end. That was what made her angry. The fact that everyone around her still treated her patronizingly as if she was ignorant of the world. Yes, she had lived a comfortable life and her sufferings were less than other comrades, but her experiences were still her own. It upset her that they belittle it.

Genya later admitted the Darkling began his plans as soon as she arrived in the Little Palace six years ago. Six years of plotting and careful maneuverings. Even if Alina was loyal to the remaining Tsarist First Army – which she wasn’t – by the time she found out it was too late to do anything but watch.

Watch as First Army soldiers and generals – still loyal to their Tsar – get their hearts pulverized by Heartrenders, have the air sucked out of their lungs by Squallers, drowned in the lake by Tidemakers, poisoned by Alkemi. The commanders she held no pity for, but the soldiers… their faces were unlined and innocent. Alina covered those blank staring eyes, the names escaping her.

Watch the crown prince dragged from his bed. Not his own, but from a brothel in Os Alta. Alina wondered how much of his mind was still in place when the axe came down.

Watch as twenty-seven coffins left the Grand Palace to be buried in Sankta Anastasia’s Cathedral, the Queen’s included. She held no love for the Queen after what had happened to Genya, but Alina thought it was unnecessary to strangle her in her sleep.

She asked the Darkling in private why not exile? A place isolated where she would grow to old age without Genya would have been fitting, Alina thought wryly.

Better yet, the Convent for Sankta Marya, patron saint of youth and protector of virgins. The Darkling did not appreciate her sense of irony.

The only member of the royal family she had not heard from was the second son. The Darkling’s booming voice broke her thoughts on the fox-faced prince.

“Today is the end of the Lantsov dynasty. At this very moment, our enemies lie to the Ravkan people while secretly supporting the treacherous First Army. This new era which we have built, upon which we stand will bring an end to the boyars, the priests, and all those who wish Ravka to remain in a perpetual dark age!”

A cheer went up among the Grisha. They’re eager for this, she realized. The Darkling offered them an end to powerlessness, an end to weakness beyond Ravka’s borders.

Underneath his beautiful words was a certainty that every single aspect of their lives will change from now on. Although how quickly that change would occur, Alina did not know.

She would be lying to herself if she said she was not hungry for change too. The Border Wars had killed her parents and led her to a decrepit orphanage. Under the Darkling’s terms, there will be no more borders. No more wars.

But at what price?
“Alina, do you know what Ivan told me before the coronation? My men have spotted Morozova’s herd. The key to the Shadow Fold is finally within our grasp.”

The Darkling turned his head, gray eyes lingering on her face. It felt almost as though he was assessing Alina’s reaction more than a genuine desire to look at her.

“Come with me in the war room. I could use a second opinion planning our trip north.”

Alina did not know what to make of it. She offered him a small, shy smile, the type of smiles that always seemed to satisfy him. She was certain she was blushing. Good.

Now, more than ever, Alina had to present herself as the naïve, lonely girl.

When the coronation was over the Darkling announced their trip north to hunt Morozova’s legendary stag.

One week into the Darkling’s reign, she was summoned from the training rooms. Politely excusing herself from another rematch with Harshaw, she headed towards the throne room.

Did he need to discuss their upcoming trip?

Or another midnight picnic?

She jokingly mentioned it to him once and it became a sort of tradition to have one every full moon. But two moons have passed, and the tradition seemed broken.

When the gilded doors opened, Alina paused in her steps before recovering. She strode into the shadowed throne room with exuberated confidence.

There were two thrones on that dais. Equal in height. One pitch black, the other a brilliant gold. Not even the previous queen had such status.

It’s nothing, she told herself. The Darkling needed a strategic marriage for his reign to continue in the long run. A Grand Duchess, a Shu princess, or even a Kerch banker’s daughter. Certainly not an her, who, however gifted, was still an orphan, a commoner, and a foreigner.

All she remembered of her origins was the language she shared with her parents. A lyrical sound with clipped edges, whose consonants flowed from one sentence to the other.

Don’t be selfish and overthink things that aren’t about you, she chided herself. Even as she noticed the sun patterns on the golden throne.

“Sergeant Alina Starkov, commander of the 2nd division of Inferni,” a guard announced.

The Darkling – no, the King – acknowledged her with a nod. The soldiers followed suit and saluted in respect.

She recognized their First Army uniforms. Low ranking, probably common foot soldiers.

Saints, what if the Darkling asks her to kill them? As a sign of loyalty?

“Sergeant Starkov. I would like you to meet the new recruitment of trackers. One of the best from
the First Army.”

Alina was slightly taken aback. The Darkling only addressed her so formally in public. She spun on her heel to salute the new men under her command.

“I look forward to having you all as my comrades,” her voice boomed with all the authority of a squad commander. “Glory to Ravka! Glory to the heroes!”

“Glory to Ravka! Glory to the heroes!” they repeated.

She glanced at the otkazat’sya soldiers, all of them appeared her age – a few slightly older, all of them scarred yet strong. All were on one knee and heads bent down in respect of her. The Sun Summoner. Daughter of Ravka. Sol Koroleva, Sun Queen. She had heard many titles throughout the years.

But the one most important to her was a sergeant in the Second Army.

One of them she noticed, gave her a hesitant glance, as if trying to have a quick look when he thought she wasn’t looking. When Alina turned her head to the brown-haired boy, his face shot downward.

There was something familiar about that tracker.

“Well, then,” the Darkling’s smooth voice drew her attention, “Now that we are all acquainted with one another, we can plan our hunt for the stag in three days’ time. Do not disappoint us.”

Alina noted he said us, and not me. It was the first time he issued commands in the plural.

The First Army soldiers gave one last salute. At the Darkling’s dismissal, they stood upright. Out of curiosity, she glanced at the one soldier who was curious enough to look at her.

Her heart lumped in her throat. It couldn’t be. Six years had passed since she left Keramzin, but she would recognize that face anywhere.

His warm brown eyes were jaded. That face was once full, now it was hollow from hunger. And his dimpled smile – that brilliant smile that always managed the cheer Alina up whenever the older orphans bullied her – was now set into a serious line.

Alina kept her face carefully blank as the soldiers marched away. The gilded doors closed behind them.

Make rabbits out of rocks, the serfs at Keramzin would say. She never thought she would see him again.

Mal.

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