

The Demon in the Wood

Darkling, prequel

by Leigh Bardugo, 1975–

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How many were there, Eryk?

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

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

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

“How many?” asked the man with the red-gold beard, the *Ulle*.

“Six,” he managed. “Maybe seven.”

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

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

“Enough.” His mother’s voice, cool and hard as a diamond.

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

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

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

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

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

“We don’t have the soldiers for an attack. We must use caution—”

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

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

“Swimming.” He knew how foolish that sounded.

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

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

“They were being children,” she said.

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

“First I see to my son.”

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

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

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

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

This time she was the one to look away.

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

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

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

“Arkady. Eryk.”

“Where are you from?”

“Balakirev.”

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

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

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

“Eryk.”

“Where are you from?”

“Balakirev.”

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

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

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

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

“There,” his mother said.

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

“We could winter with them,” she said.

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

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

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

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

“All right,” he said.

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

A group of men had emerged from the long hall.

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

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

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

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

“Tiring.”

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

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

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

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

“Would you?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Eryk saw the flash of anger that moved over the big man’s face at his mother’s disrespectful tone. Then the *Ulle* laughed. “I like your ferocity, Lena. But have a care with the old men.”

Eryk’s mother dipped her head in acknowledgment.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Start building walls, and people begin to wonder what you’re hiding. We keep our buildings low. We don’t raid the villagers’ fields or farms, or empty their forests

of game. Better they do not notice us than that they think we have something they want.”

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

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

“Tigers?”

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

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

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

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

“We'll see. Tell me about the camp.”

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

“Why?”

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

“Good. What else?”

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

“Old or new injury?”

“Old.”

“Are you guessing?”

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

“Go on.”

“He lied about the elders.”

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

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

“How do you know?”

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

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

“This hut smells terrible.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He shifted uncomfortably. “I know.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Hello,” he offered, then tried, “*Ajor*” in Fjerdan.

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

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

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

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

“Are you Lena’s son?”

He nodded.

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

“Yes.”

“Can I see?” Sylvi asked.

They started curious, but they usually ended up afraid.

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

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

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

“Again,” said Sylvi.

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

“Annika, come try!”

“Leave him alone, Sylvi.”

“What’s your name?” Sylvi asked.

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

“I don’t like that name.”

“Me neither.”

“Why don’t you change it?”

“Maybe I will.”

“Do the thing again.”

“Stop pestering him, Sylvi.”

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

“Sylvi, don’t!” Annika shouted.

The little girl vanished into the black.

“Sylvi!” cried Annika, running forward.

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

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

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

She scowled. “Why’d you stop?”

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

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

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

He shrugged.

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

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

"Listen," Annika said, "I'm sorry. I—"

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

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

Annika took Sylvi's hand. "We were just leaving, Lev."

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

"Don't use that word," Annika snapped.

"What's the big deal?"

"If you'd seen a *drüskelle* raid, you'd know. Come on, Sylvi, let's go."

"I don't want to," said Sylvi.

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

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

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

Annika flushed a deeper red. She took a breath and raised her hands. The water swelled from the creek's surface in a shivering arc. Sylvi gave a triumphant whoop. As Annika twisted her wrists, the water spiraled slowly left, then collapsed in a splash.

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

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

Sylvi frowned. "What's a runt?"

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

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

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

Lev smirked. "She shouldn't be here. This is a Grisha camp."

"Some people don't show their power until later."

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

"That isn't your decision."

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

"I said *leave her alone*."

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

"This should be fun," he said.

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

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

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

The other boys took a hesitant step toward Eryk.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm not done with you," Lev yelled back at him.

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

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

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

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

He blinked in surprise. "I... You're welcome."

She smiled up at him, and without thinking, he offered her his hand. It was only in the second that her fingers closed over his that he realized his mistake. As soon as his hand touched hers, her eyes widened. She drew in a sharp breath.

They gazed at each other a long moment. He pulled her to her feet and dropped her hand. But the damage was done.

"You're an amplifier," she said.

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

Annika touched his sleeve. "It's okay," she said. "I won't tell."

Panic crowded in. He shook his head.

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

"You protected Sylvi. I won't tell. I promise."

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

"Stay," she said. "Please?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You don't like them?" Annika asked.

"They're fine."

"What's your favorite food?"

He dragged his bread through the leavings of his meal. "I don't know."

"How can you not know?" said Sylvi.

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

"Puddings?"

He nodded.

"Pies?"

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

"What's your favorite color?" asked Sylvi.

"I don't have one."

"How can you not have one?"

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

"I never really thought about it."

"Mine's rainbow," said Sylvi.

"That's not a color."

"Is too."

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

"Do you want to tell me?"

"The *drüskelle* got her, the witchhunters. When we were still living near Overut."

"I'm sorry."

"Did your father die in battle?"

My father is dust. You all are. "Yes."

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

"Is that your father?" he asked.

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

He frowned. "No we won't."

"Your mother is sitting next to the *Ulle*. You won't be eating with me in a few days' time."

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

"You said you would."

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

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

"It's too cold to swim."

"There's a pond fed by hot springs just up from the creek."

He glanced over to where his mother was speaking to the *Ulle*, her black eyes flashing. "I don't think I should."

Annika gave a stiff shrug. "All right," she said.

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where's Sylvi?" he asked.

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

"Too bad."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“They do?”

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

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

“He got you and Sylvi away safely.”

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

“Are you sure it’s deep enough?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Annika—”

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

“Annika, listen to me—”

“My father can’t protect us.”

“I can protect you. We’re friends.”

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

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

“Yes, what are you doing, Annika?”

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

“Go away!” she shouted.

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

“Go back to camp, Lev.”

“Are you giving me orders?”

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

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

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

“Be quiet,” Annika whispered furiously.

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

“Shut up,” she screamed.

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

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

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

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

“No!” she cried. “He's mine!”

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

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

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

Annika was on top of him, using her weight to hold him down. He screamed, thrashing in her arms. Then Lev was there, shoving her aside, grabbing a handful of Eryk's shirt, lifting the knife. Everyone was shouting. Eryk wasn't sure who had hold of him. A knee pressed into his chest. Someone shoved his head beneath the

surface again. Water flooded up his nose and into his lungs. *I'm going to die here. They'll wear my bones.*

In the eerie, muffled silence of the water, he heard his mother's voice, vicious like a whip crack. She was always asking more of him, demanding it, and now she told him to fight. She spoke his true name, the one she only used when they trained, the name tattooed on his heart. A heart that had not stopped beating. A heart that still had life.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's not my name."

He didn't move. He sat and watched as her eyes went glassy, as her hand dropped away, as at last she slumped backward, her empty gaze fastened on the moon. He watched the remaining chunks of ice bobbing on the surface slowly melt away. His head throbbed, and he was dizzy with the pain. But his mother had taught him to think clearly, even when he was hurting, even when he wasn't so sure he wanted to go on.

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

“He’s awake,” said his mother.

The *Ulle* looked up sharply and rose to his feet.

Eryk’s mother pressed a cup of water to his lips. “Drink.”

The *Ulle* towered over Eryk’s bed. His features were haggard and coated in soot. “You are all right?” he asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You promised us safety once before, *Ulle*.”

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

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

“She froze the lake,” he rasped.

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

He managed it, his head spinning.

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

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

“All?”

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

He closed his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

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

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

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

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

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

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



