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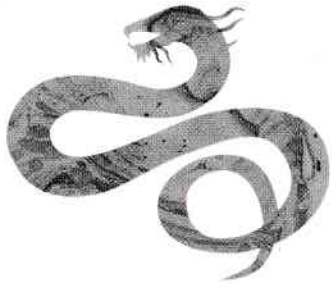

Leigh Bardugo

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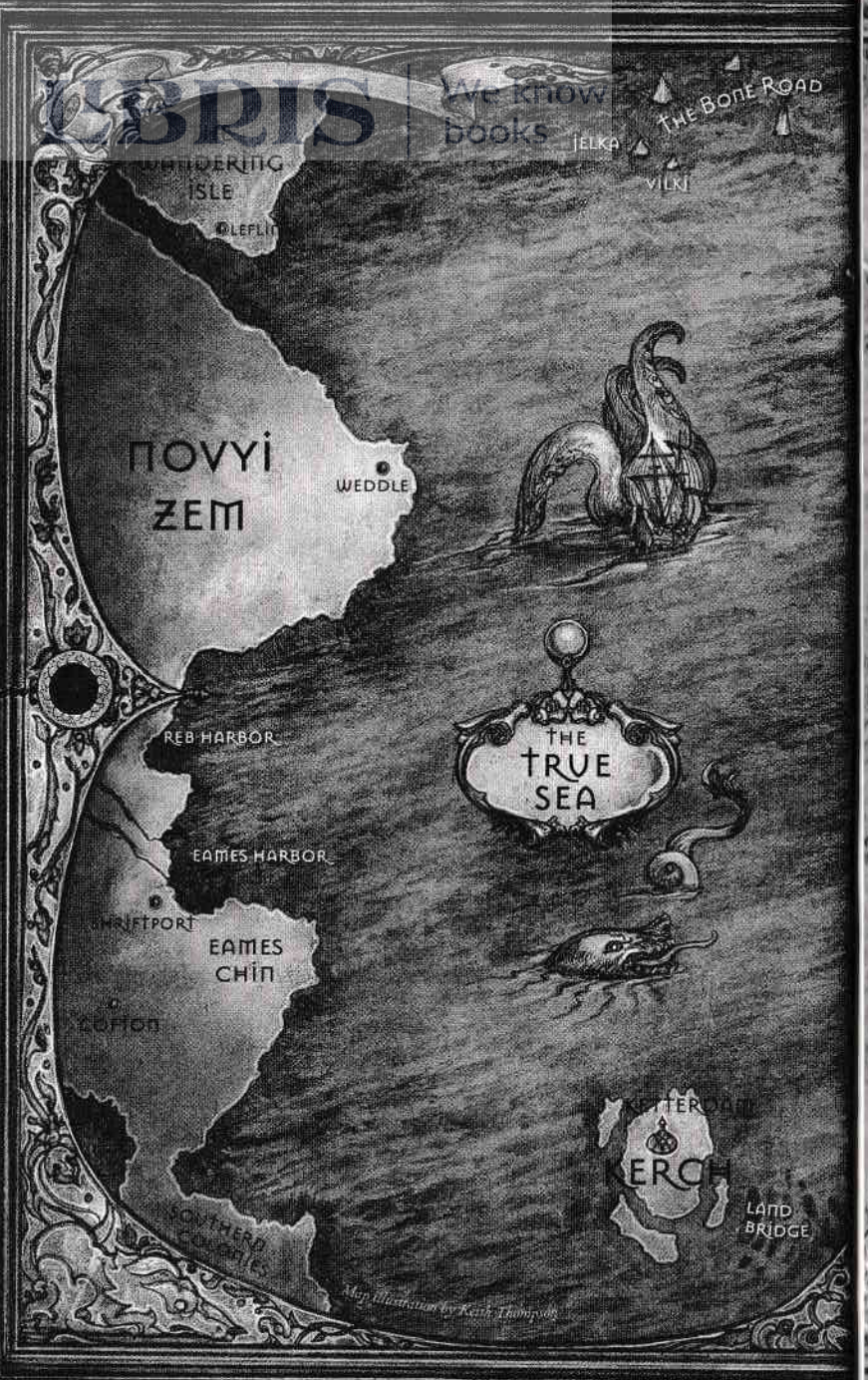

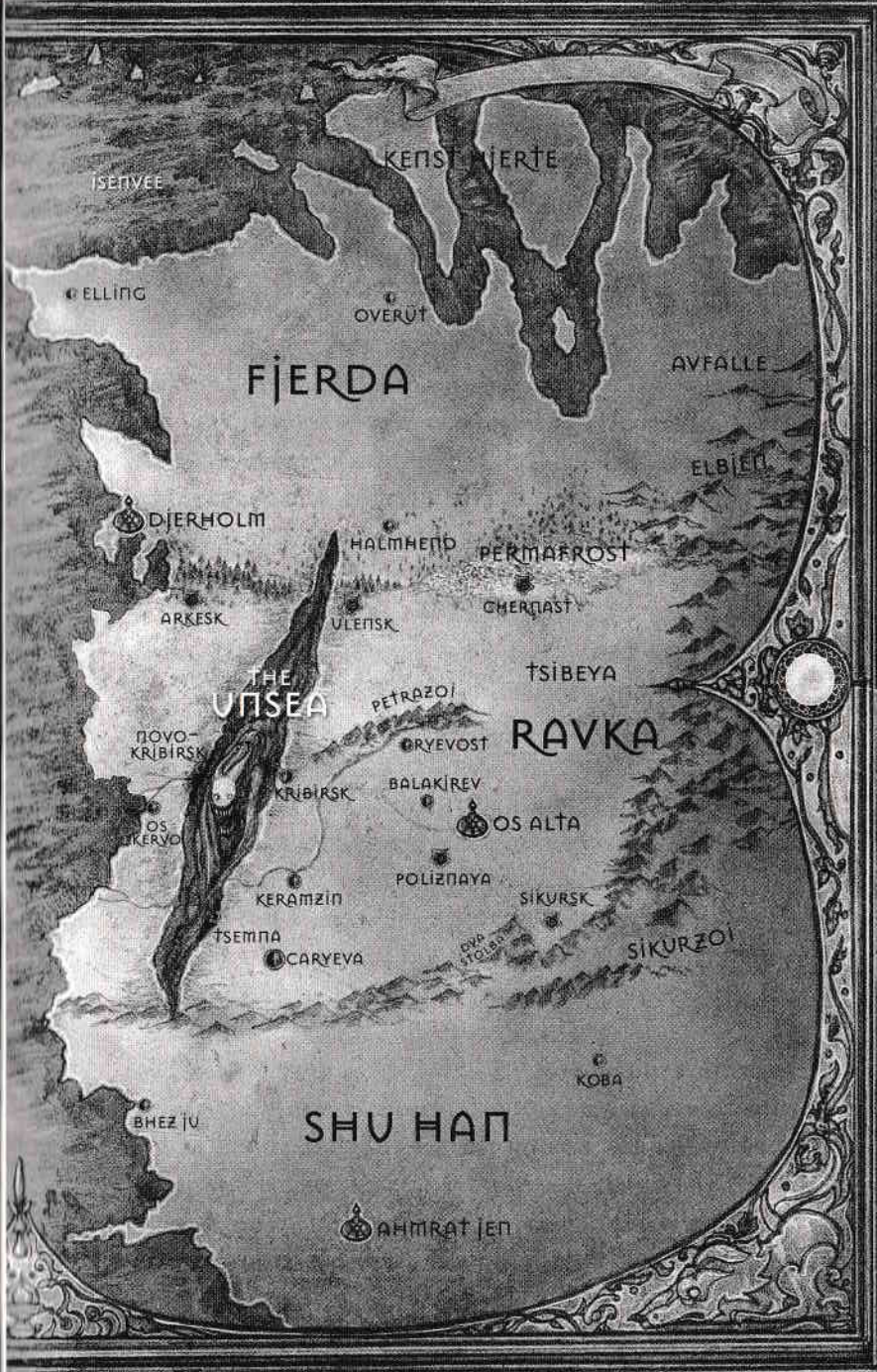

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Before



The boy and the girl had once dreamed of ships, long ago, before they'd ever seen the True Sea. They were the vessels of stories, magic ships with masts hewn from sweet cedar and sails spun by maidens from thread of pure gold. Their crews were white mice who sang songs and scrubbed the decks with their pink tails.

The *Verrhader* was not a magic ship. It was a Kerch trader, its hold bursting with millet and molasses. It stank of unwashed bodies and the raw onions the sailors claimed would prevent scurvy. Its crew spat and swore and gambled for rum rations. The bread the boy and the girl were given spilled weevils, and their cabin was a cramped closet they were forced to share with two other passengers and a barrel of salt cod.

They didn't mind. They grew used to the clang of bells sounding the hour, the cry of the gulls, the unintelligible gabble of Kerch. The ship was their kingdom, and the sea a vast moat that kept their enemies at bay.

The boy took to life aboard ship as easily as he took to everything else. He learned to tie knots and mend sails, and as his wounds healed, he worked the lines beside the crew. He abandoned his shoes and climbed barefoot and fearless in the rigging. The sailors marvelled at the way he spotted dolphins, schools of rays, brightly striped

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tigerfish, the way he sensed the place a whale would breach the moment before its broad, pebbled back broke the waves. They claimed they'd be rich if they just had a bit of his luck.

The girl made them nervous.

Three days out to sea, the captain asked her to remain belowdecks as much as possible. He blamed it on the crew's superstition, claimed that they thought women aboard ship would bring ill winds. This was true, but the sailors might have welcomed a laughing, happy girl, a girl who told jokes or tried her hand at the tin whistle.

This girl stood quiet and unmoving by the rail, clutching her scarf around her neck, frozen like a figurehead carved from white wood. This girl screamed in her sleep and woke the men dozing in the foretop.

So the girl spent her days haunting the dark belly of the ship. She counted barrels of molasses, studied the captain's charts. At night, she slipped into the shelter of the boy's arms as they stood together on deck, picking out constellations from the vast spill of stars: the Hunter, the Scholar, the Three Foolish Sons, the bright spokes of the Spinning Wheel, the Southern Palace with its six crooked spires.

She kept him there as long as she could, telling stories, asking questions. Because she knew when she slept, she would dream. Sometimes she dreamed of broken skiffs with black sails and decks slick with blood, of people crying out in the darkness. But worse were the dreams of a pale prince who pressed his lips to her neck, who placed his hands on the collar that circled her throat and called forth her power in a blaze of bright sunlight.

When she dreamed of him, she woke shaking, the

echo of her power still vibrating through her, the feeling of the light still warm on her skin.

The boy held her tighter, murmured soft words to lull her to sleep.

"It's only a nightmare," he whispered. "The dreams will stop."

He didn't understand. The dreams were the only place it was safe to use her power now, and she longed for them.

On the day the *Verrhader* made land, the boy and girl stood at the rail together, watching as the coast of Novyi Zem drew closer.

They drifted into harbour through an orchard of weathered masts and bound sails. There were sleek sloops and little junks from the rocky coasts of the Shu Han, armed warships and pleasure schooners, fat merchantmen and Fjerdan whalers. A bloated prison galley bound for the southern colonies flew the red-tipped banner that warned there were murderers aboard. As they floated by, the girl could have sworn she heard the clink of chains.

The *Verrhader* found its berth. The gangway was lowered. The dockworkers and crew shouted their greetings, tied off ropes, prepared the cargo.

The boy and the girl scanned the docks, searching for a flash of Heartrender crimson or Summoner blue, for the glint of sunlight off Ravkan guns.

It was time. The boy slid his hand into hers. His palm was rough and calloused from the days he'd spent working the lines. When their feet hit the planks of the quay, the ground seemed to buck and roll beneath them.

The sailors laughed. "*Vaarwel, fentomen!*" they cried.

The boy and girl walked forward, and took their first rolling steps in the new world.

Please, the girl prayed silently to any Saints who might be listening, *let us be safe here. Let us be home.*

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Chapter 1



Two weeks we'd been in Cofton, and I was still getting lost. The town lay inland, west of the Novyi Zem coast, miles from the harbour where we'd landed. Soon we would go further, deep into the wilds of the Zemeni frontier. Maybe then we'd begin to feel safe.

I checked the little map I'd drawn for myself and retraced my steps. Mal and I met every day after work to walk back to the boarding house together, but today I'd got completely lost when I'd detoured to buy our dinner. The calf and collard pies were stuffed in my satchel and giving off a very peculiar smell. The shopkeeper had claimed they were a Zemeni delicacy, though I had my doubts. It didn't much matter. Everything tasted like ashes to me lately.

Mal and I had come to Cofton to find work that would finance our trip west. It was the centre of the *jurda* trade, surrounded by fields of the little orange flowers that people chewed by the bushel. The stimulant was considered a luxury in Ravka, but some of the sailors aboard the *Verrbader* had used it to stay awake on long watches. Zemeni men liked to tuck the dried blooms between lip and gum, and even the women carried them in embroidered pouches that dangled from their wrists. Each store window I passed advertised different brands:

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Brightleaf, Shade, Dhoka, the Burly. I saw a beautifully dressed girl in petticoats lean over and spit a stream of rust-coloured juice right into one of the brass spittoons that sat outside every shop door. I stifled a gag. That was one Zemeni custom I didn't think I could get used to.

With a sigh of relief, I turned onto the city's main thoroughfare. At least now I knew where I was. Cofton still didn't feel quite real to me. There was something raw and unfinished about it. Most of the streets were unpaved, and I always felt as if the flat-roofed buildings with their flimsy wooden walls might tip over at any minute. And yet they all had glass windows. The women dressed in velvet and lace. The shop displays overflowed with sweets and baubles and all manner of finery instead of rifles, knives, and tin cookpots. Here, even the beggars wore shoes. This was what a country looked like when it wasn't under siege.

As I passed a gin shop, I caught a flash of crimson out of the corner of my eye. *Corporalki.* Instantly, I drew back, pressing myself into the shadowy space between two buildings, heart hammering, my hand already reaching for the pistol at my hip.

Dagger first, I reminded myself, sliding the blade from my sleeve. *Try not to draw attention. Pistol if you must. Power as a last resort.* Not for the first time, I missed the Fabrikator-made gloves that I'd had to leave behind in Ravka. They'd been lined with mirrors that gave me an easy way to blind opponents in a hand-to-hand fight – and a nice alternative to slicing someone in half with the Cut. But if I'd been spotted by a Corporalnik Heartrender, I might not have a choice in the matter. They were the Darkling's favoured soldiers and could stop my heart or crush my lungs without ever landing a blow.

I waited, my grip slippery on the dagger's handle, then finally dared to peek around the wall. I saw a cart piled high with barrels. The driver had stopped to talk to a woman whose daughter danced impatiently beside her, fluttering and twirling in her dark red skirt.

Just a little girl. Not a Corporalnik in sight. I sank against the building and took a deep breath, trying to calm down.

It won't always be this way, I told myself. *The longer you're free, the easier it will get.*

One day I would wake from a sleep free of nightmares, walk down a street unafraid. Until then, I kept my flimsy dagger close and wished for the sure heft of Grisha steel in my palm.

I pushed my way back into the bustling thoroughfare and clutched at the scarf around my neck, drawing it tighter. It had become a nervous habit. Beneath it lay Morozova's collar, the most powerful amplifier ever known, as well as the only means of identifying me. Without it, I was just another dirty, underfed, Ravkan refugee.

I wasn't sure what I would do when the weather turned. I couldn't very well walk around in scarves and high-necked coats when summer came. But by then, hopefully, Mal and I would be far from crowded towns and unwanted questions. We'd be on our own for the first time since we'd fled Ravka. The thought sent a nervous flutter through me.

I crossed the street, dodging wagons and horses, still scanning the crowd, sure that at any moment I would see a troop of Grisha or *oprichniki* descending on me. Or maybe it would be Shu Han mercenaries, or Fjerdan assassins, or the soldiers of the Ravkan King, or even the

Darkling himself. So many people might be hunting us. *Hunting me,* I amended. If it weren't for me, Mal would still be a tracker in the First Army, not a deserter running for his life.

A memory rose unbidden in my mind: black hair, slate eyes, the Darkling's face exultant in victory as he unleashed the power of the Fold. Then I'd snatched that victory away.

News was easy to come by in Novyi Zem, but none of it was good. Rumours had surfaced that the Darkling had somehow survived the battle on the Fold, that he had gone to ground to gather his forces before making another attempt on the Ravkan throne. I didn't want to believe it was possible, but I knew better than to underestimate him. The other stories were just as disturbing: that the Fold had begun to overflow its shores, driving refugees east and west; that a cult had risen up around a Saint who could summon the sun. I didn't want to think about it. Mal and I had a new life now. We'd left Ravka behind.

I hurried my steps, and soon I was in the square where Mal and I met every evening. I spotted him leaning against the lip of a fountain, talking with a Zemeni friend he'd met working at the warehouse. I couldn't remember his name . . . Jep, maybe? Jef?

Fed by four huge spigots, the fountain was less decorative than useful, a large basin where girls and house servants came to wash clothes. None of the washerwomen were paying much attention to the laundry, though. They were all gawking at Mal. It was hard not to. His hair had grown out of its short military cut and was starting to curl at the nape of his neck. The spray from the fountain had left his shirt damp and it clung to skin bronzed by

long days at sea. He threw his head back, laughing at something his friend had said, seemingly oblivious to the sly smiles thrown his way.

He's probably so used to it, he doesn't even notice any more, I thought irritably.

When he caught sight of me, his face broke into a grin and he waved. The washerwomen turned to look and then exchanged glances of disbelief. I knew what they saw: a scrawny girl with stringy, dull brown hair and sallow cheeks, fingers stained orange from packing *jurda.* I'd never been much to look at, and weeks of not using my power had taken their toll. I wasn't eating or sleeping well, and the nightmares didn't help. The women's faces all said the same thing: What was a boy like Mal doing with a girl like me?

I straightened and tried to ignore them as Mal threw his arm around me and drew me close. "Where were you?" he asked. "I was getting worried."

"I was waylaid by a gang of angry bears," I murmured into his shoulder.

"You got lost again?"

"I don't know where you get these ideas."

"You remember Jes, right?" he said, nodding to his friend.

"How do you go?" Jes asked in broken Ravkan, offering me his hand. His expression seemed unduly grave.

"Very well, thank you," I replied in Zemeni. He didn't return my smile, but gently patted my hand. Jes was definitely an odd one.

We chatted a short while longer, but I knew Mal could see I was getting anxious. I didn't like to be out in the open for too long. We said our goodbyes, and before