



CROOKED KINGDOM



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PART I
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RETVENKO

Retvenko leaned against the bar and tucked his nose into his dirty shot glass. The whiskey had failed to warm him. Nothing could get you warm in this Saintsforsaken city. And there was no escaping the smell, the throat-choking stew of bilge, clams, and wet stone that seemed to have soaked into his pores as if he'd been steeping in the city's essence like the world's worst cup of tea.

It was most noticeable in the Barrel, even more so in a miserable dump like this one—a squat tavern wedged into the lower floor of one of the slum's grimmest apartment buildings, its ceiling bowed by weather and shoddy construction, its beams blackened by soot from a fireplace that had long since ceased to function, the flue clogged by debris. The floor was covered in sawdust to soak up spilled lager, vomit, and whatever else the bar's patrons lost control of. Retvenko wondered how long it had been since the boards had been swept clean. He buried his nose more deeply in the glass, inhaling the sweet perfume of bad whiskey. It made his eyes water.

"You're supposed to drink it, not snort it," said the barkeep with a laugh.

Retvenko put his glass down and gazed at the man blearily. He was thick necked and barrel chested, a real bruiser. Retvenko had seen him toss more than one rowdy patron into the street, but it was hard to take him seriously dressed in the absurd fashion favored by the young men of the Barrel—a pink shirt with sleeves that looked fit to split over huge biceps, a garish red-and-orange plaid waistcoat. He looked like a dandified soft-shell crab.

“Tell me,” said Retvenko. His Kerch wasn’t good to begin with, and it was worse after a few drinks. “Why does city smell so bad? Like old soup? Like sink full of dishes?”

The barman laughed. “That’s just Ketterdam. You get used to it.”

Retvenko shook his head. He didn’t want to get used to this city or its stink. His job with Councilman Hoede had been dull, but at least his rooms had been dry and warm. As a treasured Grisha indenture, Retvenko had been kept in comfort, his belly full. He’d cursed Hoede at the time, bored with his work shepherding the merchant’s expensive cargo shipments across the sea, resenting the terms of his contract, the foolish bargain he’d made to get himself out of Ravka after the civil war. But now? Now he couldn’t help thinking of the Grisha workshop at Hoede’s house, the fire burning merrily in the grate, brown bread served with slabs of butter and thick cuts of ham. After Hoede had died, the Kerch Merchant Council had let Retvenko take on sea voyages to pay his way out of the indenture. The money was terrible, but what other options did he have? He was a Grisha Squaller in a hostile city with no skills but the gifts with which he’d been born.

“Another?” the barman asked, gesturing at Retvenko’s empty glass.

Retvenko hesitated. He shouldn’t waste his money. If he was smart with his pennies, he would only need to rent himself out for one more voyage, maybe two, and he’d have enough money to pay off his indenture and buy himself a ticket to Ravka in a

third-class berth. That was all he needed.

He was due on the docks in less than an hour. Storms had been predicted, so the crew would rely on Retvenko to master the air currents and guide the ship calmly to whatever port they needed to reach. He didn't know where and he didn't care. The captain would call coordinates; Retvenko would fill the sails or calm the skies. And then he would collect his pay. But the winds hadn't picked up yet. Maybe he could sleep through the first part of the voyage. Retvenko tapped the bar and nodded. What was a man to do? He deserved some comfort in this world.

"I am not errand boy," he muttered.

"What's that?" the barman asked as he poured out another drink.

Retvenko gave a dismissive wave. This person, this common lout, could never understand. He toiled away in obscurity. Hoping for what? An extra coin in his pocket? A warm glance from a pretty girl? He knew nothing of glory in battle, what it was to be revered.

"You Ravkan?"

Through the muzzy blur the whiskey had created, Retvenko came alert. "Why?"

"No reason. You just sound Ravkan."

Retvenko told himself to relax. Plenty of Ravkans came through Ketterdam looking for work. There was nothing on him that said Grisha. His cowardice filled him with disgust—at himself, the barman, this city.

He wanted to sit and enjoy his drink. There was no one in the bar to jump him, and despite the barman's muscles, Retvenko knew he could handle him easily. But when you were Grisha, even staying still could mean courting trouble. There had been more rumors of disappearances in Ketterdam recently—Grisha vanishing from the streets or their homes, probably snapped up by slavers and sold to the highest bidder. Retvenko would not let that happen to him, not when he was so close to buying his way back to Ravka.

He downed his whiskey, slammed a coin on the counter, and rose from the barstool. He left no tip. A man could work for a living.

Retvenko felt a little unsteady as he headed outside, and the moist stink of the air didn't help. He put his head down and set his feet toward Fourth Harbor, letting the walk clear his head. *Two more voyages*, he repeated to himself, a few more weeks at sea, a few more months in this city. He'd find a way to make it bearable. He wondered if some of his old friends might be waiting for him in Ravka. The young king was said to be handing out pardons like penny candy, eager to rebuild the Second Army, the Grisha military that had been decimated by the war.

"Just two more trips," he said to no one, stamping his boots against the spring damp. How could it be this cold and wet this late in the year? Living in this city was like being trapped in the chilly armpit of a frost giant. He passed along Grafcanal, shivering as he glimpsed Black Veil Island tucked into the water's bend. That was where the Kerch wealthy had once buried their dead, in little stone houses above water level. Some trick of the climate kept the island shrouded in shifting mists, and there were rumors that the place was haunted. Retvenko hastened his steps. He wasn't a superstitious man—when you had power like his, there was no reason to fear what might lurk in the shadows—but who liked to walk by a graveyard?

He burrowed deeper into his coat and made quick time down Havenstraat, keeping alert to the movements in every twisting alley. Soon he'd be back in Ravka, where he could stroll the streets without fear. Assuming he got his pardon.

Retvenko squirmed uncomfortably in his coat. The war had pitted Grisha against Grisha, and his side had been particularly brutal. He'd murdered former comrades, civilians, even children. But what was done could not be undone. King Nikolai needed soldiers, and Retvenko was a very good soldier.

Retvenko nodded once to the guard stashed in the little booth at the entrance to Fourth Harbor and glanced over his shoulder,

confirming he hadn't been followed. He made his way past the cargo containers to the docks, found the appropriate berth, and stood in line to register with the first mate. Retvenko recognized him from past voyages, always harried and ill-humored, scrawny neck poking from the collar of his coat. He held a thick sheaf of documents, and Retvenko glimpsed the purple wax seal of one of the members of the Kerch Merchant Council. Those seals were better than gold in this city, guaranteeing the best berths in the harbor and preferred access to the docks. And why did the councilmen garner such respect, such advantage? Because of coin. Because their missions brought profit to Ketterdam. Power meant something more in Ravka, where the elements bent to the will of the Grisha and the country was ruled by a proper king instead of a cadre of upstart merchants. Admittedly, Retvenko had tried to depose that king's father, but the point remained.

"We're not ready for the rest of the crew just yet," the first mate said as Retvenko gave his name. "You can keep warm in the harbormaster's office. We're waiting on our signal from the Council of Tides."

"Good for you," Retvenko said, unimpressed. He glanced up at one of the black obelisk towers that loomed over the harbor. If there were any chance that the high and mighty Council of Tides could see him from their watchtower, he would have let them know exactly what he thought with a few choice gestures. They were supposedly Grisha, but had they ever lifted a finger to help the other Grisha in the city? To help those down on their luck who might have welcomed a bit of kindness? "No, they have not," he answered himself.

The first mate winced. "*Gbezen*, Retvenko. Have you been drinking?"

"No."

"You stink of whiskey."

Retvenko sniffed. "Little bit whiskey."

"Just dry out. Get yourself some coffee or strong *jurda*. This

cotton has to be in Djerholm in two weeks' time, and we aren't paying you to nurse a hangover belowdecks. Understood?"

"Yes, yes," Retvenko said with a dismissive wave, already heading toward the harbormaster's office. But when he was a few steps away, he flicked his wrist. A tiny whirlwind caught the papers the first mate was holding, sending them flying over the docks.

"Damn it!" he shouted as he went scrambling over the wooden planks, trying to capture the pages of his manifest before they blew into the sea.

Retvenko smiled with grim pleasure, then felt a wave of sadness overtake him. He was a giant among men, a gifted Squaller, a great soldier, but here he was just an *employee*, a sad old Ravkan who spoke broken Kerch and drank too much. *Home*, he told himself. *Soon I'll be home*. He would get his pardon and prove himself once more. He would fight for his country. He would sleep under a roof that didn't leak and wear a blue wool *kefta* lined with silver fox fur. He would be Emil Retvenko again, not this pathetic shadow.

"There's coffee," said the clerk when Retvenko entered the harbormaster's office, gesturing toward a copper urn in the corner.

"Tea?"

"There's coffee."

This country. Retvenko filled a mug full of the dark sludge, more to warm his hands than anything. He couldn't bear the taste of it, certainly not without a healthy dose of sugar, which the harbormaster had neglected to supply.

"Wind blowing in," said the clerk as a bell clanged outside, shaken by the rising breeze.

"I have ears," Retvenko grumbled.

"Don't think it will amount to much here, but once you get out of the harbor—"

"Be silent," Retvenko said sharply. He was on his feet, listening.

"What?" said the clerk. "There's—"

Retvenko put a finger to his lips. "Someone cries out." The sound had come from where the ship was docked.

"It's just gulls. Sun's coming up soon and—"

Retvenko raised a hand, and a gust of air slammed the clerk back into the wall. "I said *be silent*."

The clerk's mouth dropped open as he hung pinned to the slats. "You're the Grisha they got for the crew?"

For Saints' sake, was Retvenko going to have to pull the air from this boy's lungs and suffocate him into quiet?

Through the waxy windows, Retvenko could see the sky beginning to turn blue as dawn arrived. He heard the squawking of gulls searching the waves for breakfast. Maybe the liquor was muddling his mind.

Retvenko let the clerk drop to the ground. He'd spilled his coffee, but he didn't want to bother with another cup.

"Told you it was nothing," said the clerk as he dragged himself to his feet. "Didn't have to get all heated up." The clerk dusted himself off and got resettled behind the desk. "I never met one of you before. Grisha." Retvenko snorted. The clerk probably had and simply didn't know it. "You get paid pretty good for the voyages?"

"Not good enough."

"I—" But whatever the clerk was going to say next was lost as the door to the office exploded in a hail of splinters.

Retvenko's hands went up to shield his face. He ducked and rolled behind the clerk's desk for cover. A woman entered the office—black hair, golden eyes. *Shu*.

The clerk reached for a shotgun Retvenko saw strapped beneath the desk. "They've come for the payroll!" he shouted. "Ain't no one taking the payroll."

Retvenko watched in shock as the gangly clerk stood like some kind of avenging warrior and opened fire. By all that was holy, nothing could motivate the Kerch like cash.

Retvenko peeked around the desk in time to see the shotgun blast strike the woman directly in the chest. She was thrown