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SHADOW AND BONE



LEIGH BARDUGO

Orion



BEFORE



The servants called them *malencki*, little ghosts, because they were the smallest and the youngest, and because they haunted the Duke's house like giggling phantoms, darting in and out of rooms, hiding in cupboards to eavesdrop, sneaking into the kitchen to steal the last of the summer peaches.

The boy and the girl had arrived within weeks of each other, two more orphans of the border wars, dirty-faced refugees plucked from the rubble of distant towns and brought to the Duke's estate to learn to read and write, and to learn a trade. The boy was short and stocky, shy but always smiling. The girl was different, and she knew it.

Huddled in the kitchen cupboard, listening to the grown-ups gossip, she heard the Duke's housekeeper, Ana Kuya, say, "She's an ugly little thing. No child should look like that. Pale and sour, like a glass of milk that's turned."

"And so skinny!" the cook replied. "Never finishes her supper."

Crouched beside the girl, the boy turned to her and whispered, "Why *don't* you eat?"

"Because everything she cooks tastes like mud."

"Tastes fine to me."

"You'll eat anything."

They bent their ears back to the crack in the cupboard doors.

A moment later the boy whispered, "I don't think you're ugly."

"Shhhh!" the girl hissed. But hidden by the deep shadows of the cupboard, she smiled.



In the summer, they endured long hours of chores followed by even longer hours of lessons in stifling classrooms. When the heat was at its worst, they escaped into the woods to hunt for birds' nests or swim in the muddy little creek, or they would lie for hours in their meadow, watching the sun pass slowly overhead, speculating on where they would build their dairy farm and whether they would have two white cows or three. In the winter, the Duke left for his city house in Os Alta, and as the days grew shorter and colder, the teachers grew lax in their duties, preferring to sit by the fire and play cards or drink *kvas*. Bored and trapped indoors, the older children doled out more frequent beatings. So the boy and the girl hid in the disused rooms of the estate, putting on plays for the mice and trying to keep warm.

On the day the Grisha Examiners came, the boy and the girl were perched in the window seat of a dusty upstairs bedroom, hoping to catch a glimpse of the mail coach. Instead, they saw a sleigh, a troika pulled by three black horses, pass through the white stone gates onto the estate. They watched its silent progress through the snow to the Duke's front door.

Three figures emerged in elegant fur hats and heavy wool *kefta*: one in crimson, one in darkest blue and one in vibrant purple.

"Grisha!" the girl whispered.

"Quick!" said the boy.

In an instant, they had shaken off their shoes and were running silently down the hall, slipping through the empty music room and darting behind a column in the gallery that overlooked the sitting room where Ana Kuya liked to receive guests.

Ana Kuya was already there, bird-like in her black dress, pouring tea from the samovar, her large key ring jangling at her waist.

"There are just the two this year then?" said a woman's low voice.

They peered through the railing of the balcony to the room below. Two of the Grisha sat by the fire: a handsome man in blue and a woman in red robes with a haughty, refined air. The third, a young blond man, ambled about the room, stretching his legs.

"Yes," said Ana Kuya. "A boy and a girl, the youngest here by quite a bit. Both around eight, we think."

"You think?" asked the man in blue.

"When the parents are deceased . . ."

"We understand," said the woman. "We are, of course, great admirers of your institution. We only wish more of the nobility took an interest in the common people."

"Our Duke is a very great man," said Ana Kuya.

Up in the balcony, the boy and the girl nodded sagely to each other. Their benefactor, Duke Keramsov, was a celebrated war hero and a friend to the people. When he had returned from the front lines, he had

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converted his estate into an orphanage and a home for war widows. They were told to keep him nightly in their prayers.

“And what are they like, these children?” asked the woman.

“The girl has some talent for drawing. The boy is most at home in the meadow and the wood.”

“But what are they *like*?” repeated the woman.

Ana Kuya pursed her withered lips. “What are they like? They are undisciplined, contrary, far too attached to each other. They—”

“They are listening to every word we say,” said the young man in purple.

The boy and the girl jumped in surprise. He was staring directly at their hiding spot. They shrank behind the column, but it was too late.

Ana Kuya’s voice lashed out like a whip. “Alina Starkov! Malyen Oretsev! Come down here at once!”

Reluctantly, Alina and Mal made their way down the narrow spiral staircase at the end of the gallery. When they reached the bottom, the woman in red rose from her chair and gestured them forward.

“Do you know who we are?” the woman asked. Her hair was steel grey. Her face lined, but beautiful.

“You’re witches!” blurted Mal.

“Witches?” she snarled. She whirled on Ana Kuya. “Is that what you teach at this school? Superstition and lies?”

Ana Kuya flushed with embarrassment. The woman in red turned back to Mal and Alina, her dark eyes blazing. “We are not witches. We are practitioners of the Small Science. We keep this country and this kingdom safe.”

“As does the First Army,” Ana Kuya said quietly, an unmistakable edge to her voice.

The woman in red stiffened, but after a moment she conceded, “As does the King’s Army.”

The young man in purple smiled and knelt before the children. He said gently, “When the leaves change colour, do you call it magic? What about when you cut your hand and it heals? And when you put a pot of water on the stove and it boils, is it magic then?”

Mal shook his head, his eyes wide.

But Alina frowned and said, “Anyone can boil water.”

Ana Kuya sighed in exasperation, but the woman in red laughed.

“You’re very right. Anyone can boil water. But not just anyone can master the Small Science. That’s why we’ve come to test you.” She turned to Ana Kuya. “Leave us now.”

“Wait!” exclaimed Mal. “What happens if we’re Grisha? What happens to us?”

The woman in red looked down at them. “If, by some small chance, *one* of you is Grisha, then that lucky child will go to a special school where Grisha learn to use their talents.”

“You will have the finest clothes, the finest food, whatever your heart desires,” said the man in purple. “Would you like that?”

“It is the greatest way that you may serve your King,” said Ana Kuya, still hovering by the door.

“That is very true,” said the woman in red, pleased and willing to make peace.

The boy and the girl glanced at each other and, because the adults were not paying close attention, they

did not see the girl reach out to clasp the boy's hand or the look that passed between them. The Duke would have recognised that look. He had spent long years on the ravaged northern borders, where the villages were constantly under siege and the peasants fought their battles with little aid from the King or anyone else. He had seen a woman, barefoot and unflinching in her doorway, face down a row of bayonets. He knew the look of a man defending his home with nothing but a rock in his hand.



CHAPTER I



Standing on the edge of a crowded road, I looked down onto the rolling fields and abandoned farms of the Tula Valley and got my first glimpse of the Shadow Fold. My regiment was two weeks' march from the military encampment at Poliznaya and the autumn sun was warm overhead, but I shivered in my coat as I eyed the haze that lay like a dirty smudge on the horizon.

A heavy shoulder slammed into me from behind. I stumbled and nearly pitched face-first into the muddy road.

"Hey!" shouted the soldier. "Watch yourself!"

"Why don't you watch your fat feet?" I snapped, and took some satisfaction from the surprise that came over his broad face. People, particularly big men carrying big rifles, don't expect lip from a scrawny thing like me. They always look a bit dazed when they get it.

The soldier got over the novelty quickly and gave me a dirty look as he adjusted the pack on his back, then disappeared into the caravan of horses, men, carts and wagons streaming over the crest of the hill and into the valley below.

I quickened my steps, trying to peer over the crowd. I'd lost sight of the yellow flag of the surveyors' cart hours ago, and I knew I was far behind.

As I walked, I took in the green and gold smells of the autumn wood, the soft breeze at my back. We were on the Vy, the wide road that had once led all the way from Os Alta to the wealthy port cities on Ravka's western coast. But that was before the Shadow Fold.

Somewhere in the crowd, someone was singing. *Singing? What idiot is singing on his way into the Fold?* I glanced again at that smudge on the horizon and had to suppress a shudder. I'd seen the Shadow Fold on many maps, a black slash that had severed Ravka from its only coastline and left it landlocked. Sometimes it was shown as a stain, sometimes as a bleak and shapeless cloud. And then there were the maps that just showed the Shadow Fold as a long, narrow lake and labelled it by its other name, "the Unsea", a name intended to put soldiers and merchants at their ease and encourage crossings.

I snorted. That might fool some fat merchant, but it was little comfort to me.

I tore my attention from the sinister haze hovering in the distance and looked down onto the ruined farms of the Tula. The valley had once been home to some of Ravka's richest estates. One day it was a place where farmers tended crops and sheep grazed in green fields. The next, a dark slash had appeared on the landscape, a swathe of nearly impenetrable darkness that grew with every passing year and crawled with horrors. Where the farmers had gone, their herds, their crops, their homes and families, no one knew.

Stop it, I told myself firmly. You're only making things worse. People have been crossing the Fold for years . . . usually with massive casualties, but all the same. I took a deep breath to steady myself.

"No fainting in the middle of the road," said a voice close to my ear as a heavy arm landed across my shoulders and gave me a squeeze. I looked up to see Mal's familiar face, a smile in his bright blue eyes as he fell into step beside me. "C'mon," he said. "One foot in front of the other. You know how it's done."

"You're interfering with my plan."

"Oh really?"

"Yes. Faint, get trampled, grievous injuries all around."

"That sounds like a brilliant plan."

"Ah, but if I'm horribly maimed, I won't be able to cross the Fold."

Mal nodded slowly. "I see. I can shove you under a cart if that would help."

"I'll think about it," I grumbled, but I felt my mood lifting all the same. Despite my best efforts, Mal still had that effect on me. And I wasn't the only one. A pretty blonde girl strolled by and waved, throwing Mal a flirtatious glance over her shoulder.

"Hey, Ruby," he called. "See you later?"

Ruby giggled and scampered off into the crowd. Mal grinned broadly until he caught my eye roll.

"What? I thought you liked Ruby."

"As it happens, we don't have much to talk about," I said drily. I actually had liked Ruby – at first. When Mal and I left the orphanage at Keramzin to train for our military service in Poliznaya, I'd been nervous about meeting new people. But lots of girls had been excited to befriend me, and Ruby had been among the most eager. Those friendships lasted as long as it took me to figure out that their only interest in me lay in my proximity to Mal.

Now I watched him stretch his arms expansively and turn his face up to the autumn sky, looking perfectly content. There was even, I noted with some disgust, a little bounce in his step.

“What is wrong with you?” I whispered furiously.

“Nothing,” he said, surprised. “I feel great.”

“But how can you be so . . . so jaunty?”

“Jaunty? I’ve never been jaunty. I hope never to be jaunty.”

“Well, then what’s all this?” I asked, waving a hand at him. “You look like you’re on your way to a really good dinner instead of possible death and dismemberment.”

Mal laughed. “You worry too much. The King’s sent a whole group of Grisha pyros to cover the skiffs, and even a few of those creepy Heartrenders. We have our rifles,” he said, patting the one on his back. “We’ll be fine.”

“A rifle won’t make much difference if there’s a bad attack.”

Mal gave me a bemused glance. “What’s with you lately? You’re even grumpier than usual. And you look terrible.”

“Thanks,” I groused. “I haven’t been sleeping well.”

“What else is new?”

He was right, of course. I’d never slept well. But it had been even worse over the last few days. Saints knew I had plenty of good reasons to dread going into the Fold, reasons shared by every member of our regiment who had been unlucky enough to be chosen for the crossing. But there was something else, a deeper feeling of unease that I couldn’t quite name.

I glanced at Mal. There had been a time when I could have told him anything. “I just . . . have this feeling.”

“Stop worrying so much. Maybe they’ll put Mikhael on the skiff. The volera will take one look at that big juicy belly of his and leave us alone.”

Unbidden, a memory came to me: Mal and I, sitting side by side in a chair in the Duke’s library, flipping through the pages of a large leather-bound book. We’d happened on an illustration of a volera: long, filthy claws; leathery wings; and rows of razor-sharp teeth for feasting on human flesh. They were blind from generations spent living and hunting in the Fold, but legend had it they could smell human blood from miles away. I’d pointed to the page and asked, “What is it holding?”

I could still hear Mal’s whisper in my ear. “I think – I think it’s a foot.” We’d slammed the book shut and run squealing out into the safety of the sunlight . . .

Without realising it, I’d stopped walking, frozen in place, unable to shake the memory from my mind.

When Mal saw I wasn’t with him, he gave a great beleaguered sigh and marched back to me. He rested his hands on my shoulders and gave me a little shake.

“I was kidding. No one’s going to eat Mikhael.”

“I know,” I said, staring down at my boots. “You’re hilarious.”

“Alina, come on. We’ll be fine.”

“You can’t know that.”

“Look at me.” I willed myself to raise my eyes to his. “I know you’re scared. I am too. But we’re going to do this, and we’re going to be fine. We always are. Okay?” He smiled, and my heart gave a very loud thud in my chest.

I rubbed my thumb over the scar that ran across the palm of my right hand and took a shaky breath. “Okay,” I