

# Shadow and Bone



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LEIGH BARDUGO

Though Bardugo was born in Israel, her grandparents raised her in Los Angeles, California. She attended Yale University and studied English, graduating in 1997. For the next 13 years, Bardugo worked in copywriting, journalism, special effects, and finally became a makeup artist. But in 2010, as she grappled with depression following her father's death, and as she was getting out of an abusive marriage, Bardugo decided to begin writing a little bit every day. The result was her debut novel, *Shadow and Bone*, which went on to become an international bestseller. Bardugo followed it with two more novels tracing Alina's story, and then two more duologies that take place in the same fictional world. Today, Bardugo is one of the most popular authors of young adult fantasy novels, and she was heavily involved in Netflix's adaptation of *Shadow and Bone* into a TV series.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Unlike most high fantasy novels, *Shadow and Bone* draws mostly from 19th-century Tsarist Russia and Russian mythology to create its fictional world, rather than taking medieval-era western Europe as its inspiration. However, Bardugo also looked further back in history for some inspiration: the Darkling's personal guards, the *oprichniki*, are named after the 16th-century Russian Tsar Ivan the Terrible's own personal bodyguard corps. Ivan and Fyodor in the novel, meanwhile, are certainly nods to Ivan the Terrible himself and to Fyodor Basmanov, an *oprichnik* and, possibly, Ivan the Terrible's lover. The way that the Grisha in the novel copy peasant culinary and clothing habits (while still living wildly privileged lives, eating more and better than real peasants, and wearing lavish clothing that's only inspired by traditional peasant dress) more closely resembles Soviet-era propaganda campaigns that sought to idealize and elevate the working class, while actually doing no such thing. Particularly in terms of the peasant-inspired Grisha clothing style, though, this practice—of dressing like a person or group of people who are perceived to be lower-class—has been responsible for a variety of fashion trends throughout history. This includes everything from Georgian-era dresses modeled off of styles popular in the countryside, to blue jeans and the more recent popularity of ripped jeans, to an infamous and heavily criticized 2017 men's fashion show at New York Fashion Week inspired by homeless people.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like many contemporary young adult fantasy novels, *Shadow and Bone* owes some of its success to that of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, which legitimized children's literature more broadly and created a huge demand for fantasy aimed at younger readers. Like the Harry Potter books, *Shadow and Bone* is also considered a "chosen one" story. This refers to stories in which the protagonist is somehow special and often has the power to save the world in some form or another. Other "chosen one" series include Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games*, Veronica Roth's *Divergent*, and even Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*. Other novels that feature special groups with extra powers or responsibility, like the Grisha, include Neil Shusterman's *Scythe* (the first in the Arc of a Scythe series) and Tomi Adeyemi's *Legacy of Orisha* series. *Shadow and Bone* is the first of Bardugo's Grishaverse books; it's followed by *Siege and Storm* and *Ruin and Rising*, as well as two other duologies that take place in the same world.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Shadow and Bone
- **When Written:** 2010–2012
- **Where Written:** Los Angeles, California
- **When Published:** 2012
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Fantasy
- **Setting:** The fictional country Ravka
- **Climax:** Alina discovers how to take control of Morozova's collar from the Darkling, saving herself and Mal and abandoning the Darkling and his entourage in the Shadow Fold.
- **Antagonist:** The Darkling
- **Point of View:** First Person, Third Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**On the Small Screen.** When *Shadow and Bone* was adapted into a television series for Netflix in 2021, Bardugo was heavily involved—and even has a cameo as a Fabrikator Grisha in one episode. Additionally, in one scene where a character throws a book, the book is a Ravkan-language version of *Shadow and Bone*.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Having grown up an orphan, Alina has never felt like she fits in anywhere—and that includes with her childhood best friend Mal, on whom she nurses a secret crush. The two are both in

the army and are scheduled to cross the Shadow Fold, a desolate strip of sand and total darkness inhabited by monsters called volcra that divides their country, Ravka, in two. But their sandskiff is attacked part of the way through the journey. As Alina tries to protect Mal, a flash of light blazes bright and Alina passes out.

Back at the army camp, Alina is brought before the Darkling, the most powerful of the Grisha (people who can harness the elements). From others' testimony, Alina learns that the light came from her—she's a rare Sun Summoner Grisha. With her, the Darkling can destroy the Shadow Fold and reunite Ravka's two halves. The Darkling immediately sends Alina to the capital, Os Alta, and escorts her part of the way himself. Alina insists on wearing blue **kefta**, like the other Summoners, rather than black, which only the Darkling wears. She believes a blue kefta will help her fit in. Though it's nice to have food, a private room, and a friend—a gorgeous Grisha girl named Genya—Alina is miserable. She can't call her power without help from her ancient and crotchety tutor, Baghra; she's as weak and mousy as ever; and she still doesn't feel like she fits in with the Grisha. To make things worse, though Alina has written Mal weekly since arriving at the Little Palace, she hasn't heard from him. The King's advisor and a sort of priest, the Apparat, also appears regularly and seems frightening and predatory.

One day, the Darkling suggests getting Alina a powerful amplifier, which will help her access her power and make her even stronger. He explains that the fabled **Morozova's stag** isn't just a fairytale; the herd is real, and the creatures are ancient and powerful. The stag's antlers would make Alina unstoppable. Alina is thrilled, but Baghra, for no discernible reason, isn't.

Weeks later, Alina is feeling particularly abandoned by Mal. She attends her lesson with Baghra angry—and with Baghra's coaxing, Alina realizes that she's been using all her energy to subsume her power for years, all so she could stay with Mal. But now that Mal has abandoned her, Alina doesn't have to do this anymore. Alina apologizes to herself for what she's done and with Baghra's help, she learns to manipulate light. Suddenly, Alina has an appetite and is strong. She fills out, her skin clears up, and she begins taking an interest in the world and people around her. However, when the Darkling visits during one of her lessons with Baghra, he insists she's "not enough." They still need Morozova's stag, and the Darkling's trackers are close. On the way back to the palace, the Darkling kisses Alina—and it's exciting, but confusing.

As spring approaches, all the Grisha can talk about is the upcoming fete, where the Grisha will demonstrate their powers for the King, Queen, and various nobles—as well as drink and dance all night. Even Alina is excited. It's a bit of a shock when Alina receives her kefta for the fete and sees that it's black silk: the Darkling's color. Still, Alina mostly enjoys the party and, during the demonstration, wows the nobles and royal family

with her ability to banish the Darkling's conjured darkness with light. Afterwards, the Darkling drags Alina to a secluded room, where he tells her his trackers are even closer to Morozova's stag. They kiss and are on the verge of going further when people bang on the door. The Darkling asks to visit Alina's room later.

When Alina is on her way back to her room, she notices soldiers—and one of them is Mal. She's thrilled to see him, but he's angry. He saw her demonstration with the Darkling and is sure they're sexually involved, and he hates that the Darkling "owns" her. He also reveals that he hasn't gotten any of her letters. Alina snaps that she doesn't want to see Mal again and hurries to her room to sob. But after a while, she hears a knock on the door. It's Baghra. Baghra drags Alina to a servant's room, where she explains that she's the Darkling's mother—and the Darkling has no intention of getting rid of the Fold. Rather, he plans to enslave Alina by putting Morozova's stag's antlers on her, which will allow him to use her power to expand the Fold. He wants control of Ravka and its neighboring countries, and he'll depose the King and rule through terror. Baghra gives Alina clothes and supplies and helps her slip out of the palace grounds. Alina will head for West Ravka, where she'll take a ship across the True Sea.

Alina travels on foot for days, certain the Darkling will be after her. Things are fine until she reaches a bigger town and one of the Darkling's guards spots her. As she tries to evade soldiers tracking her through the woods, Mal appears, sends the soldiers the wrong way, and begins to lead Alina into the woods. He explains that they must head north, to where Morozova's herd is. They decide they must get the antlers for Alina; that's the only way to defeat the Darkling. The journey is difficult, physically and emotionally. But by the time Alina and Mal finally find the herd, they've admitted their love for each other.

As Alina approaches and even touches Morozova's stag, she realizes she can't kill the creature. But the Darkling and his minions appear to kill the stag and fasten the antlers around Alina's neck. The Darkling imprisons Mal and the party returns to a town on the edge of the Fold, where the Darkling is preparing to lead a group of diplomats from various countries into the Fold to demonstrate Alina's power. From Genya and Ivan, one of the Darkling's closest allies, Alina discovers that many Grisha see the Darkling's power grab as the only way to save Ravka from years of deadly war, even if they find his methods somewhat disturbing.

Finally, Alina, the Darkling, Mal, and the group of diplomats enter the Fold, and the Darkling demonstrates how Alina's power can repel the volcra. But when they reach the far side of the Fold, the Darkling uses his and Alina's combined powers to extend the Fold, decimating a Ravkan village. When the Darkling then throws Mal over the edge of the sandskiff to leave him for the volcra, Alina feels helpless—she should've killed the stag so she'd have control of its antlers. But then,

Alina realizes that choosing to show the stag mercy was a powerful choice in and of itself. With this, Alina regains control over her power. She rescues Mal and leaves the Darkling and the diplomats in the dark to deal with the volcra.

In *West Ravka*, Alina and Mal burn Alina's kefta and book passage on a ship going over the True Sea. Alina is haunted by nightmares, but she feels better with Mal beside her.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Alina Starkov** – The protagonist of the novel, Alina is a teenage mapmaker in the First Army who's hopelessly in love with her childhood best friend, Mal. Alina feels she's never going to fit in anywhere, as she's not pretty or good at anything. However, during an attempted crossing of the Shadow Fold, it's discovered that Alina is a powerful Sun Summoner Grisha. This doesn't help Alina's fears about fitting in, as she doesn't fit in with the Grisha for many of the same reasons she never fit in in the army. Eventually, Alina realizes that these negative qualities are actually a result of actively subsuming her power for years, all so she could stay with Mal. Once she realizes this, Alina blossoms. Things become confusing as the Darkling expresses romantic and sexual interest in her—Alina is afraid of him, but she also finds him intoxicating. However, on the night of the winter fete, Alina learns that the Darkling doesn't want her to help him destroy the Shadow Fold: he wants to enslave her so *he* can control the Fold, Ravka, and neighboring countries. Alina runs away, reconnects with Mal, and ultimately discovers the power of choosing to be merciful—it allows her to break free from the Darkling, save Mal, and escape across the True Sea with him.

**Malyen "Mal" Oretsov** – Mal is Alina's childhood best friend and current love interest. He's a tracker in the First Army, and Alina believes he's totally out of reach: he's handsome, popular, and good at what he does, while she is none of those things. Though Alina believes Mal doesn't love her, when they're alone—or in danger—Mal speaks fondly of their childhoods spent together and mentions going to "their meadow," a place they felt connected and safe as children. Mal and Alina are separated when Alina's Grisha powers are discovered, and they lose contact for several months. Alina believes Mal doesn't love her, as he never responds to any of her letters. However, when Alina reconnects with Mal, she learns that he never got them—and that he's jealous of the Darkling and the Darkling's relationship with Alina. Mal helps Alina when she escapes from the Little Palace by deserting his unit, which was initially hunting **Morozova's stag** and was then tasked with finding Alina. Traveling together, Mal and Alina repair their relationship and ultimately admit their love for each other. Though Mal promises to kill Alina to prevent the Darkling from enslaving

her, he ultimately refuses to do so. Nevertheless, Alina manages to rescue Mal, and the two escape together across the True Sea.

**The Darkling** – The antagonist of the novel, the Darkling is a Summoner who can manipulate darkness and shadows. He leads the Grisha and the Second Army. Though Alina is frightened of and intimidated by the Darkling from the beginning, he initially seems like a force for good. When he identifies Alina's power, he tells her that together they can destroy the Shadow Fold and reunite Ravka. Though Alina believes him and what he says, she also feels consistently afraid and uncomfortable around him—even as it seems as though the Darkling becomes sexually attracted to Alina and perhaps is falling in love with her. However, Alina learns that the Darkling is hundreds of years old and even created the Shadow Fold on purpose. He's skilled at manipulating young, naïve women like her, and he plans to use her power to expand the Shadow Fold and take control of Ravka and neighboring countries. The Darkling knows nothing of mercy and kindness, only greed. So, it's a shock to him when, in the Fold, Alina manages to take back control of her body and her power by realizing how powerful mercy is. Alina leaves the Darkling to die in the Fold, though it's left ambiguous whether he dies or not.

**Baghra** – Baghra is a mysterious, crotchety old woman who lives in a hut on the grounds of the Royal Palace—and eventually, Alina discovers that she's the Darkling's mother. She's hundreds of years old, if not older, and nobody but the Darkling (and eventually Alina) knows who she really is and what her power is (she can, like the Darkling, summon darkness). Initially, Alina hates Baghra. Baghra is tasked with teaching Alina to use her power, and when Alina can't summon her power without help, Baghra grows frustrated and even hits Alina. Things improve when Alina learns to accept and harness her power, but Baghra remains a difficult, cold, and unsupportive teacher. She's also derisive when the Darkling suggests getting Alina the antlers of **Morozova's stag** as an amplifier—though later, Alina learns that this is because Baghra knows exactly what her son plans to do with it. When Baghra helps Alina escape the Little Palace, she explains that the amplifier will subjugate Alina and make her the Darkling's prisoner. She also explains that she's helping Alina thwart the Darkling now because she should've stepped in years ago, when the Darkling created the Shadow Fold.

**Genya** – Genya comes to be one of Alina's closest friends at the Little Palace. Though Genya is technically a Corporalnik Grisha, when the Darkling discovered her "special talent"—she's a Tailor, a Grisha who can essentially do magical makeup—he gave her to the Queen as a "gift." Therefore, Genya is technically a servant, so the Grisha look down on her (in part because, like most female servants, Genya was forced to sleep with the King) while the other servants never fully accept her. Grisha also hate her because Genya is shockingly beautiful,

with red hair and perfect, porcelain skin. But she and Alina bond over their outsider status, and Genya is instrumental in making Alina feel at home and showing her around the Little Palace. While Genya cryptically warns Alina about the Darkling by warning her to beware “powerful men,” it’s implied that Genya nevertheless supports the Darkling and, on some level, supports what he plans to do. The implication is that Genya caused the King to fall ill on the Darkling’s orders to earn her place among the Corporalki. Despite Genya’s companionship and support during her months at the Little Palace, Alina ends the novel still unsure if Genya was ever genuinely her friend.

**Ivan** – Ivan is a Heartrender who serves as the Darkling’s right-hand man. He’s hulking and powerful, and he knows it—he likes to lord his power over others, especially over Fedyor. One of the reasons he feels he can do this is because he possesses an amplifier, something not many Grisha have. Alina resents Ivan for much of the novel because he’s so derisive toward her and clearly doesn’t like or respect her. However, Ivan begins to look a bit more human when Alina begs him not to support the Darkling’s power grab—and Ivan reveals that he supports the Darkling because he’s lost countless family members to the border wars. The Darkling, he believes, is the only person willing to do something about the wars and stop the carnage—therefore, any evil acts the Darkling might commit seem worth it to Ivan.

**Botkin Yul-Erdene** – Botkin is the combat instructor at the Little Palace. He’s not a Grisha, but is a former Shu Han mercenary who’s fought for a variety of countries and is very good at killing people. Initially, Alina detests him, as he works her hard and she can’t keep up. But once Alina learns to use her power and can finally accomplish the movements he drills her on, they develop mutual respect for each other. Botkin even gives Alina a knife of Grisha steel, something he insists Alina earned (rather than it being a gift).

**Zoya** – Zoya is an extremely beautiful—and mean—Squaller. Even Marie and Nadia, whom Alina finds catty and mean themselves, don’t have anything nice to say about Zoya. Zoya first appears in the novel’s opening pages, when she catches sight of Mal and seems to take an interest in him. Later, once Alina is settled at the Little Palace and Zoya returns from her military post, Zoya is particularly cruel to Alina: she taunts Alina for being poor and uses her powers to hurt Alina during combat practice.

**The King** – The King of Ravka is in his mid-40s. Rather than being an imposing figure, the King is unattractive, with watery eyes and a weak chin. However, the King is still quite powerful, and he uses his power to sexually abuse and manipulate his servants: Genya reveals that the King forces many of his female servants, including her, to sleep with him. Female Grisha are also warned to lock their doors at night, presumably against the King. The King, Alina realizes, is far more caught up in living a comfortable life than he is in ruling. Grisha often speak of him

as incompetent and uncaring, especially about his poorer subjects—many blame his unwillingness to take action and use his station to help people for the century-long wars ravaging Ravka. This leads many Grisha to support the Darkling when the Darkling seizes power for himself; the Darkling, unlike the King, is willing to do something. It’s implied that the Darkling does away with the King by having Genya cause the King to fall seriously ill.

**The Queen** – The Queen of Ravka is a blond woman in her mid-40s. She’s beautiful, but she’s been made beautiful to the point of it being uncanny, thanks to Genya’s gift. The Darkling “gifted” Genya to the Queen several years ago, and while the Queen openly resents Genya, she also makes regular use of Genya’s ability to brighten her eye and hair color and smooth her skin. Genya describes the Queen as vain, selfish, and attention-seeking.

**The Apparat** – The Apparat is a priest who serves the King and the Darkling. Alina initially hates and fears him: he smells like a musty graveyard and seems like an unhinged fanatic who’s far too interested in Alina. At several points, the Apparat seems to try to warn Alina against cooperating with the Darkling, though due to how strange the Apparat’s behavior is, Alina never confirms whether she’s reading these warnings correctly. In the end, the Darkling elevates the Apparat to rule in the King’s stead; he once told Alina that the Apparat “has his uses,” and this, Alina believes, is what he meant.

**Ana Kuya** – Ana Kuya was the strict, elderly housekeeper who ran Duke Keramsov’s estate and was in charge of managing the many orphans who lived on the estate. While it’s implied that she wasn’t the nicest to any of the children, she particularly disliked Alina. Mal and Alina reminisce about Ana Kuya often, and in their memories she’s a fierce adversary—but as adults, they also recognize that she was probably doing her best in a difficult situation. Alina also comes to realize that Ana Kuya was very snobby and went out of her way to make sure that the orphans in her care learned upper-class manners and conduct.

**Duke Keramsov** – Duke Keramsov is the elderly noble who cared for Alina, Mal, and countless other children who were orphaned by the border wars. He educated the orphans in his care and, in Alina’s memory, was a kind and generous benefactor. So, it’s a painful shock for Alina when she encounters Duke Keramsov at the winter fete—and he doesn’t recognize her.

**Mikhael** – Mikhael is one of Mal’s best friends and a fellow tracker in the First Army. Alina doesn’t like him, as he’s cocky, dismissive, and not very nice to her. But she’s still shocked and sad when Mal tells her that Mikhael and their other best friend Dubrov died senselessly in Fjerda while tracking **Morozova’s stag**.

**Dubrov** – Dubrov is one of Mal’s best friends and a fellow tracker in the First Army. Alina doesn’t like him, as he’s cocky

and not very nice to her. But she's still shocked and sad when Mal tells her that Dubrov and their other best friend Mikhael died senselessly in Fjerda while tracking **Morozova's stag**.

**Marie** – Marie is a Summoner who's Alina's age. Her best friend is Nadia. The two of them take Alina under their wings, though Alina can never tell if they genuinely like her or just want to get close to her for political reasons. Though Marie speaks ill of Corporalki, she eventually begins dating Sergei, a Heartrender.

**David** – David is a young Fabrikator at the Little Palace. He's Genya's crush, but he's uninterested in anything that isn't metal or glass—including girls. David crafts the mirrors that Alina uses to fight, as well as **Morozova's collar**. However, David regrets helping the Darkling make the collar: he believes he helped bring about the end of the world.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Ruby** – Ruby is another young woman in the First Army. When Alina first joined, Ruby tried to befriend her—but Alina quickly discovered that Ruby was just trying to get close to Mal. She continues to express romantic interest in Mal in the novel's present.

**Fedyor** – Fedyor is a Heartrender who serves the Darkling. Though he's one of the Grisha to forcibly escort Alina to the Little Palace, he's a bit more open and kind to Alina than Ivan, his companion and superior.

**Sergei Beznikov** – Sergei is a young Heartrender. He and Marie act like they hate each other, but they begin flirting and dating not long before Alina leaves the Little Palace.

**Nadia** – Nadia is a Summoner who's Alina's age. Her best friend is Marie. The two of them take Alina under their wings, though Alina can never tell if they genuinely like her or just want to get close to her for political reasons.

**Alexei** – Alexei is Alina's best friend in the First Army; he's a fellow mapmaker and is one of the best at the job. Though Alina tries to protect him, volcra snatch and kill Alexei in the Shadow Fold.

**Eva** – Eva is a fellow mapmaker in the First Army. She's seen as quaint and provincial, as she talks about how Grisha, and the Darkling specifically, aren't human and don't have souls.

**Colonel Raevsky** – Colonel Raevsky is a senior officer in the First Army.

**The Senior Cartographer** – The Senior Cartographer is Alina's boss in the army. He's an older, rumpled man.

## TERMS

**Amplifier** – Amplifiers are pieces of a powerful animal's body (usually bones or teeth) that amplify a Grisha's power. The pieces are usually made into jewelry of some sort. Grisha are

only allowed one amplifier, and they must kill the powerful, often mystical animal themselves to assume its power. Some people, like the **Darkling** and **Baghra**, are living human amplifiers.

**Corporalki** – The Corporalki are an order of Grisha who can manipulate bodies, either by healing (Healers), as soldiers (Heartrenders), or by changing the body's appearance (Tailors). They are the highest ranking Grisha, and their *kefta* are red.

**Etherealki/Summoners** – Etherealki, or Summoners, are an order of Grisha who can manipulate either fire (Inferni), air and wind (Squallers), or water (Tidemakers). **Alina** is a rare Summoner in that she can manipulate light (she's a Sun Summoner), while the **Darkling** can manipulate the darkness. Summoners wear midnight blue *kefta*, except for the Darkling, who wears black.

**Fjerda** – Fjerda is a neighboring country and enemy of Ravka.

**Grisha** – Grisha are people who can harness the "small science"; what they can do seems magical, but they actually just learn to use elements (like light or metal) that already exist and simply manipulate them. They make up Ravka's Second Army.

**Healer** – Healers are a subgroup of Corporalki Grisha. They're trained to heal injuries.

**Heartrender** – Heartrenders are a subgroup of Corporalki Grisha. They're soldiers and are trained to kill by manipulating people's bodies.

**Inferni** – Inferni are Summoner Grisha who can manipulate fire.

**Materialki/Fabrikators** – The Materialki or Fabrikator Grisha can manipulate physical elements, like stone, bone, or metal. Their *kefta* are purple.

**Oprichniki** – Oprichniki are a class of non-Grisha people who are nevertheless highly trained and act as guards for the **Darkling**.

**Sandskiff** – Sandskiffs are shallow sleds that people use to cross the Shadow Fold. They have huge sails that propel them over the sand.

**The Shadow Fold/The Unsea** – The Shadow Fold, or the Unsea, is a desolate, sandy area that divides Ravka in two. It's entirely dark and was created centuries ago by a Grisha known as the Black Heretic. In the novel's present, it's inhabited by bloodthirsty monsters called volcra, and the **Darkling** insists he wants to do away with it—but in reality, he's not only the Black Heretic, he also wants to expand and control the Fold so he can gain power and intimidate his enemies.

**The Shu Han** – The Shu Han is a neighboring country and enemy of Ravka.

**Squaller** – Squallers are Summoner Grisha who can manipulate wind and the air.

**Tailor** – Tailors are Corporalki Grisha who can manipulate the body's appearance; they're essentially makeup artists. **Genya** is

the only Tailor in the novel, and other Grisha scorn her work as silly and pointless.

**Tidemaker** – Tidemakers are Summoner Grisha who can manipulate water.

**Volcra** – Volcra are monsters that live in the Shadow Fold. They're blind, with sharp teeth and claws and leathery wings, and they attack and eat anyone they can detect in the Fold.

**Alina** learns that the volcra are the people who used to live in the fertile valleys that were decimated when the Black Heretic created the Shadow Fold in their place.



## DESPERATION, LEADERSHIP, AND CORRUPTION

While Alina's process of self-discovery takes center stage in *Shadow and Bone*, the novel also explores the consequences of ineffective, uncaring political leaders—and how such a government can breed apathy, desperation, and political radicalism. Ravka is a country that, hundreds of years before the novel's present, was divided in two by the Shadow Fold, a desolate area of complete darkness inhabited by nightmarish monsters. This division threatens to permanently divide the country and leave the landlocked half to die. At the same time, Ravka has been engaged in bloody wars with neighboring countries for about a century. These wars have decimated armies and civilian populations; Alina and Mal are two of many orphans of the so-called border wars. The result of these wars and the fear and division caused by the Fold, the novel shows, is a combination of fear, increased poverty, and a growing sense that Ravka's leaders aren't actually capable of fixing anything. So when the Darkling discovers Alina's power—she's a Sun Summoner, who can manipulate light—she represents hope for Ravka: with her, the Darkling believes he can do away with the Shadow Fold altogether, reuniting and bringing prosperity to every corner of Ravka.

However, Alina discovers that the Darkling has no interest in reuniting the country—rather, he wants to use her power, combined with his own, to threaten Ravka's adversaries with expanding the Fold into their territories and essentially rule the country himself using brute force. Alina is shocked when she discovers that the Darkling isn't good. But she's even more shocked to discover that while many Grisha harbor some reservations, they still see following the Darkling and enabling his bloody crusade as the only way to save a country plagued by corruption, war, and an ineffective and uncaring King. As the first in a trilogy, *Shadow and Bone* offers no neat fixes for the situation in Ravka, but it serves as a chilling warning about how ineffective, bloated governments can lose the people's trust—creating situations ripe for bad actors like the Darkling to step in and take control.



## CLASS AND PRIVILEGE

The fictional country of Ravka is one with major differences between its lower-class and upper-class residents. Teenaged Alina, the novel's protagonist, is an orphan who grew up in near poverty. In her experience, peasant life isn't easy or straightforward: it's plagued by hunger, cold, and insecurity. It's a shock for her, then, once she's identified as Grisha, to be swept away to the Little Palace in Ravka's capital city, Os Alta. There, in a towering building ornately decorated with mother of pearl and jewels, Alina and her fellow Grisha enjoy luxuries like sugar, year-round fresh fruit, and warm clothing made of the finest materials. Surrounded by all this luxury, Alina begins to suspect



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



## IDENTITY AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE

*Shadow and Bone* tells the story of Alina, a teenage military mapmaker in the fictional land of Ravka.

Alina has never felt like she fits in: she believes she's not a Grisha (a person who can perform a sort of magic), but she's also not very good at anything. So, it's a shock to everyone when it's revealed that Alina is actually a Grisha with a rare and powerful talent: she's a Sun Summoner, someone who can manipulate light. Through Alina's process of self-discovery, the novel proposes that accepting one's identity is essential to a person's happiness. Initially, Alina struggles to believe she's even a Grisha: Alina struggles to call her power without help, is weak and uncoordinated, and compared to the other Grisha (who are all naturally attractive), she's mousy and plain. But it's revealed that Alina has been trying for years to keep her power locked away so that she could stay with her childhood best friend and love interest, Mal. Working so hard to subsume this part of her identity has made Alina's life miserable and taken a major toll on her body—and once Alina accepts the part of herself that can summon light, she feels confident and competent for the first time in her life. Indeed, as Alina learns to have a relationship with this part of herself, she apologizes to it for keeping it locked away for so long and hurting herself in the process. This suggests that she sees her previous actions almost as a form of violence against herself. Ultimately, as Alina discovers the full extent of her powers, forms an even better relationship with herself, and uses her power to help people she loves, the novel implies that this kind of self-knowledge doesn't just help the person in question. Rather, being comfortable with oneself is also the first step to being able to help other people.

that Ravka's wars aren't what's hurting peasants and making them poorer. Rather, it's the way that royalty and Grisha live so well at the expense of Ravka's poor people. Put another way, the lower classes are so desperately poor because Ravka's upper classes have made the choice to take everything they might possibly want, rather than helping everyone in the country.

Alina is also confused and disturbed by what she sees as the wealthy Grisha essentially fetishizing the peasant lifestyle, a lifestyle she's lived firsthand and knows isn't something to aspire to. The Darkling insists that Grisha uniforms be modeled after the kinds of clothes peasants wear—but their clothes aren't peasant clothes at all, and are in fact made of the finest materials. And while Grisha ostensibly eat like peasants (daily breakfast consists of classic peasant fare like pickled fish and bread), Alina observes that there's way more food on offer than any real peasant would see in their lifetime—and that's before she takes the sugar (which is rationed for poor people) and fresh fruit into account. The clothing and culinary habits are intended to make the Grisha seem trustworthy and relatable to Ravka's non-Grisha population, but having grown up poor, Alina knows that trying to emulate the lower classes doesn't impress people who are actually poor. Rather, it simply makes the Grisha seem even more alien and out of touch with the people they're ostensibly supposed to serve—and this, in turn, makes class divisions even worse, and increases the animosity the lower classes feel for wealthy Ravkans on the whole and Grisha specifically.



### GENDER, SEX, AND POWER

As Alina becomes increasingly attracted to the Darkling during her time at the Little Palace, her friend Genya dispenses a chilling warning: to beware of powerful men. *Shadow and Bone* plays close attention to how men in positions of power, such as the King and the Darkling, abuse their stations to manipulate women by using either the threat or the promise of love, attention, prestige, or sex. The King, Alina learns within hours of arriving at the Little Palace, is someone to avoid: female Grisha are warned to lock their rooms at night, as he's known for entering rooms and assaulting women. Genya, however, isn't able to protect herself. She explains that most female servants such as herself have had to submit to the King's sexual advances. Agreeing to sleep with the King is, in this context, something Genya must put up with in order to keep her job, though she sarcastically acknowledges that she got some pretty jewelry out of the deal. Genya still maintains that she has no choice but to submit to the King—and, potentially, a lot to lose by refusing him.

Rather than raping or assaulting women, the Darkling tricks Alina into falling in love with him, his goal being to take Alina's power for himself and effectively enslave her. It's only after Alina escapes the Little Palace that she realizes that every kiss

or touch from the Darkling was carefully planned to keep her focused on the possibility of (at the time, wanted) romance and sex, thereby distracting her from asking practical questions that might have helped her see the Darkling's manipulation for what it was. Ultimately, *Shadow and Bone* acknowledges that there may be benefits for women who do give in to powerful men's advances. But those benefits aren't always as clear-cut as they might seem at first—and indeed, perhaps aren't benefits at all.



### GREED VS. MERCY

In many ways, *Shadow and Bone* is a classic good versus evil story: protagonist Alina must save her country from the Darkling, an evil villain who, she later discovers, plans to threaten everyone in Ravka with total darkness if they don't give in to him. As it becomes clear that the Darkling is an antagonist rather than a savior, *Shadow and Bone* proposes that it's his greed, ruthlessness, and inability to show respect and mercy that makes him evil. Indeed, Alina's first indicator that perhaps the Darkling isn't as good as she initially thinks he is comes when she discovers that the Darkling knowingly "gifted" Genya, a Grisha with powers to change people's appearances, to the Queen as a maid. This makes Genya unable to refuse the King's sexual advances—something the Darkling knew about when he sent Genya to work for the Queen. Later, it's the Darkling's willingness to murder an entire village and Alina's love interest, Mal, to prove a point that shows Alina the extent of his evil. People's lives mean nothing to him, and he sees no point in showing mercy to anyone unless it benefits him.

Alina, however, discovers that the only way to fight the Darkling's greed is with mercy. The Darkling's plan revolves around killing the mythical **Morozova's stag** and making its antlers into a collar for Alina, which will amplify and allow him to wield her power—if he kills the stag. Alina knows this, and yet when she has the opportunity to kill the stag and take its power for herself, she chooses not to. Ultimately, Alina realizes her act of mercy wasn't her death sentence. Rather, refusing to kill the stag allows her to take control of her power and her body back from the Darkling, as showing the stag mercy was, in and of itself, a powerful choice. Showing others mercy, the novel suggests, can be a dangerous proposition in the novel's magical world—but its power is, perhaps, far stronger than what one earns by being ruthless and greedy.



### CONFORMITY VS. INDIVIDUALITY

*Shadow and Bone* explores how people handle both the immense pressure to fit in and the desire to stand out and be special. Alina, the novel's protagonist, has never felt like she fits in anywhere. She's an orphan, is a weak and uncoordinated soldier, and a poor mapmaker, so she doesn't feel like she fits in in the army. And

when it's discovered that she's actually a powerful Grisha (a person who performs a sort of magic), Alina feels even more out of place: she's not beautiful like Grisha are, and she struggles to call her power to summon light without assistance. Eventually, it's revealed that Alina has been subsuming her power for years in order to be able to stay with her childhood friend and love interest, Mal. Alina has been trying so hard to conform that she's actively hurt herself. For Alina, accepting her power helps her feel secure, important, and as though she fits in for the first time in her life.

However, Alina quickly learns that being the sole Sun Summoner has its downsides. When she discovers that the Grisha's leader, the Darkling, plans to use her powers for evil, Alina realizes she's been tricked. She realizes her desire to not just fit in with the Grisha, but to be special to the Darkling, has blinded her to any possible costs of conforming. Though Alina chooses to run from the Darkling and assert her individuality, others, like Genya, show how overwhelming the pressure to fit in is. For years, Genya has lived like a servant and been scorned by other Grisha, using her talent to do the Queen's makeup and hair. It's implied that Genya ultimately uses her power to make the King sick, in exchange for becoming a real Grisha and not a servant. Both Genya and Alina's trajectories make it clear that there are steep costs to both fitting in and asserting one's individuality—and each person must decide for themselves what cost they're willing to accept.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### MOROZOVA'S STAG/MOROZOVA'S COLLAR

Morozova's stag, and the collar made from its antlers, symbolize power—specifically, the power of mercy. Like many Ravkan children, Alina grows up believing that the stag, the ancient leader of Morozova's herd, is just a fairy tale. However, the Darkling reveals that not only is the herd real, but that the stag's antlers could create one of the most powerful amplifiers in the world—and make Alina capable of wielding her power and helping the Darkling destroy the Shadow Fold. Though Alina isn't entirely aware of it at this point, the stag thus symbolizes easy, thoughtless power grabs. She never considers the cost of killing such an important, ancient creature just for her gain; all she sees is the power it will give her. This also mirrors how the Darkling sees Alina herself. Unbeknownst to her, he plans to enslave her using the amplifier made from the stag's antlers. Just as Alina sees the stag as a tool, the Darkling sees Alina in the same way—which deprives her of her agency and her humanity.

When Alina finally has the opportunity to kill the stag, she refuses to do so. But almost immediately after, this act of mercy begins to look like a death sentence as the Darkling swoops in, kills the stag himself, and creates Morozova's collar, which makes it so that he alone controls Alina's power. Alina characterizes her unwillingness to kill the stag as weakness. However, when the Darkling takes Alina to the Shadow Fold and uses her power to extend the Fold, Alina makes an important realization. Choosing to show the stag mercy was a difficult choice—but a powerful one. Recognizing the power in mercy and compassion allows Alina to retake control of her power and use Morozova's collar for herself; the Darkling is no longer able to abuse and manipulate her power. Besting the Darkling in this way symbolizes one of the novel's main points: that mercy is far more powerful than greed and cruelty.



### ALINA'S KEFTA

The colors of Alina's kefta represent her attempts to balance wanting to fit in with wanting to be special—and the dangers of trying to fit in. When Alina is first brought to the Little Palace and is fitted for a kefta, the Darkling insists her kefta be black—the Darkling's color, rather than the midnight blue color that Summoners like Alina normally wear. Alina advocates to wear blue rather than black, which shows that at this point, her main goal is to fit in with the other Grisha who are her peers. She doesn't want to wear a black kefta, something that's going to set her apart—people are already fascinated by her because of her rare power, and she doesn't want to attract more attention than she already has. But advocating for herself in this context is also significant because it shows that Alina isn't yet comfortable with the Darkling's advances, or with being so special to him. She wants to appease and fit in with the other Grisha, not the Darkling.

On the night of the winter fete, though, Alina is shocked when her silk kefta arrives—and it's black, with the Darkling's symbol included as a gold pendant at the neck. Agreeing to wear it symbolizes Alina's desire to be special and please the Darkling. At this point, Alina is sexually attracted to the Darkling and accepts his confusing advances, so it doesn't seem like such a bad thing to wear "his" color. However, when Alina finds Mal at the palace and fights with him, Mal unwittingly articulates exactly what's so sinister about Alina wearing black. That is, other Grisha all wear kefta in a color that symbolizes who they are and what they can do. A black kefta, though, doesn't necessarily symbolize what Alina can do: it symbolizes who she *belongs* to, as black is the Darkling's color exclusively. Alina gets proof that Mal was right when Baghra explains that the Darkling wants to essentially enslave Alina using **Morozova's stag's** antlers, highlighting that getting Alina to wear a black kefta to the fete was an expression of the Darkling's power and domination more than anything else. It's cathartic for Alina, then, when at the end of the novel, she and Mal burn her black



kefta. By burning it, Alina mentally frees herself from the Darkling's grasp and asserts her independence.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Square Fish edition of *Shadow and Bone* published in 2021.

### Chapter 1 Quotes

“He’s not natural,” said Eva, another assistant; [...] “None of them are.”

Alexei sniffed. “Please spare us your superstition, Eva.”

“It was the Darkling who made the Shadow Fold to begin with.”

“That was hundreds of years ago!” protested Alexei. “And that Darkling was completely mad.”

“This one is just as bad.”

“Peasant,” Alexei said, and dismissed her with a wave. [...]

I stayed silent. I was more a peasant than Eva, despite her superstitions.

**Related Characters:** Eva, Alexei, Alina Starkov (speaker), The Darkling

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 19

#### Explanation and Analysis

At dinner on the day Alina and her army unit gather in preparation to cross the Shadow Fold, her friends argue about the Darkling, the mysterious, powerful leader of the Grisha. This passage establishes how many lower-class people in Ravka feel about the Darkling specifically, and Grisha in general. Eva speaks for many when she insists that Grisha aren’t “natural”; Alina later shares stories from poor serfs that say much the same thing. This is important because, as Alina later discovers, the Grisha go to great lengths to seem relatable and trustworthy to Ravka’s peasants—and clearly, they’re not succeeding. This feeds the class struggles in Ravka, as the lower classes don’t trust the upper classes. And later, Alina discovers how little the upper classes think of the lower classes, creating even more issues.

Also notable here is how hard Alina is working to hide that she’s “more a peasant than Eva.” She does this because she wants to fit in; Alexei is one of her best friends in the army, and she doesn’t want to alienate him. It’s important to recognize, though, that Alina doesn’t seem to agree with Eva at all, so in that regard she doesn’t fit the classic mold of

a peasant. Still, she grew up extremely poor and goes out of her way to hide it, highlighting how ashamed she is of where she comes from.

### Chapter 3 Quotes

“The side of the Darkling’s mouth twitched, as if he were repressing a smile. His eyes slid over me from head to toe and back again. I felt like something strange and shiny, a curiosity that had washed up on a lake shore, that he might kick aside with his boot.”

**Related Characters:** Alina Starkov (speaker), The Darkling, Malyen “Mal” Oretsov

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 49

#### Explanation and Analysis


In the hours after Alina unwittingly exercises her power in the Shadow Fold (she’s a rare Sun Summoner), she’s taken to the Darkling. At this point, Alina is terrified of the Darkling and doesn’t trust him at all; to some degree, she believes the rumors about him, and these rumors feed her distrust. However, it’s significant that she feels so powerless and like an object (rather than a person) as he looks her over. While the Darkling will go on to manipulate Alina into thinking he cares about her romantically, in reality, he makes it clear as the novel progresses that he never really stops seeing her as “something strange and shiny, a curiosity.” This is because the Darkling sees Alina as a tool to accomplish his goals—of seizing complete power over Ravka and its neighbors—rather than as a person in her own right. So, though Alina picks up on this dynamic early on, her desire to fit in and be special causes her to cast aside this initial assessment and makes her vulnerable to the Darkling’s manipulation.

### Chapter 4 Quotes

“The *kefta* was far too large. It felt soft and unfamiliar, the fur lining warm against my skin. I chewed my lip. It didn’t seem fair that *oprichniki* and Grisha wore corecloth while ordinary soldiers went without. Did our officers wear it, too?”

**Related Characters:** Alina Starkov (speaker), Ivan

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 59

### Explanation and Analysis


Ivan has just made the Healer who tended to Alina's wounds give Alina her *kefta* (a special gown-like coat) for Alina's protection, as *kefta* are made of bulletproof corecloth. First, Alina's discomfort with the *kefta* itself highlights how totally out of place she feels now that she has been identified as a Grisha. *Kefta* are worn only by Grisha, and since Alina is insistent that she's not a Grisha, she feels she has no right to wear such a special garment—especially one that's obviously so warm and luxurious. It doesn't help that the *kefta* is too big either; this just adds to Alina's sense that what's happening is totally wrong.

However, Alina's thoughts are soon consumed with how unfair it is that Grisha—who can defend themselves on the battlefield with their special powers and so are perhaps better able to defend themselves than normal soldiers—have special bulletproof *kefta*. This subtly shows who the higher-ups in Ravka value: the Grisha, rather than the poor soldiers who die in huge numbers every year crossing the Shadow Fold or fighting in the border wars.

☝ I pulled the *kefta* tighter around me, feeling suddenly cold. I remembered the surety that had flooded through me with the Darkling's touch, and that strangely familiar sensation of a call echoing through me, a call that demanded an answer. It had been frightening, but exhilarating, too. In that moment, all my doubt and fear had been replaced by a kind of absolute certainty. I was no one, a refugee from an unnamed village, a scrawny clumsy girl hurtling alone through the gathering dark. But when the Darkling had closed his fingers around my wrist, I'd felt different, like something more.

**Related Characters:** Alina Starkov (speaker), The Darkling

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 63-64

### Explanation and Analysis

Alina remembers the experience of the Darkling touching her and forcing her to call her power. This was a very conflicting event for her. Alina, like most people (and Grisha), fears the Darkling. So, standing in front of him is a

terrifying prospect—and being touched by him (and having no choice in the matter) only increases the fear. However, feeling her power surge within her was nevertheless exciting.

It's worth denoting which emotions Alina ties to the Darkling himself and which ones she ties to the experience of calling her power. The Darkling frightens her, while feeling her power surge is something positive, as, for the first time in her life, she feels sure of herself and like she matters. Things get complicated, though, because at this point, the Darkling's touch is the only way that Alina can call her power and experience these positive feelings—so her feelings about the Darkling get muddier and more difficult to parse. He remains scary, but he's also the one person who can make Alina feel this way. This dynamic later makes Alina vulnerable to the Darkling's manipulation.

Additionally, Alina's desire to be important and more than just another nameless orphan shines through here. The Darkling doesn't just physically make her feel good by helping her summon her power: he also makes her feel important. This is something that Alina has wanted for some time, and now that she knows the Darkling can help her feel this way, this is yet one more thing that helps the Darkling manipulate her. He alone can make her feel important to all of Ravka—and that's intoxicating to someone who has always believed she will live and die a nobody.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

☝ “My great-great-great-grandfather was the Black Heretic, the Darkling who created the Shadow Fold. It was a mistake, an experiment born of his greed, maybe his evil. I don't know. But every Darkling since has tried to undo the damage he did to our country, and I'm no different.” He turned to me then, his expression serious, the firelight playing over the perfect planes of his features. “I've spent my life searching for a way to make things right. You're the first glimmer of hope I've had in a long time.”  
“Me?”

**Related Characters:** The Darkling, Alina Starkov (speaker), Baghra

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 81

### Explanation and Analysis

When the party stops to make camp one night, the Darkling approaches Alina to talk and essentially explains that no

matter what others think, he's a good guy. It's later revealed that the Darkling is no such thing; he is, in fact, the Black Heretic, and he created the Shadow Fold himself. Knowing this, it's easy to see that the Darkling is, in this moment, beginning to manipulate Alina. The Black Heretic, to hear the Darkling tell it, is one aberrant bad guy—but he, on the other hand, has dedicated his life to helping Ravkans and trying to fix things. This makes him look sympathetic, compassionate, and like something of a martyr—his tired tone suggests he's carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders and has been for some time.

Then, the Darkling turns to Alina and turns the manipulation up even higher by insisting that she's special. The Darkling is, of course, not wrong—assuming nobody's lying, Alina is the first Sun Summoner to emerge in centuries—but telling Alina this has a particular effect. Because Alina grew up a poor orphan and never thought she'd amount to anything, it's especially intoxicating to hear that she's special. It causes her to feel more sympathetic and positively toward the Darkling, since he's the one who's going to make her special.

## Chapter 7 Quotes

☞☞ Everywhere I looked, I saw marble and gold, soaring walls of white and palest blue, gleaming chandeliers, liveried footmen, polished parquet floors laid out in elaborate geometric designs. It wasn't without beauty, but there was something exhausting about the extravagance of it all. I'd always assumed that Ravka's hungry peasants and poorly supplied soldiers were the result of the Shadow Fold. But as we walked by a tree of jade embellished with diamond leaves, I wasn't so sure.

**Related Characters:** Alina Starkov (speaker), The King

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 104

### Explanation and Analysis

Alina is entering the Grand Palace to be presented to the King. She's shocked by how extravagantly furnished and decorated the palace is, and this causes her to think a very unpleasant and concerning thought: are Ravka's so poor because of the wars, or is it that the King simply prioritizes his own comfort over that of his people? Over the course of the novel, Alina discovers that this second answer is the correct one: the King takes little or no interest in his people and instead focuses all of his attentions on throwing grand

parties and doing everything he can think of to please and entertain himself.

As Alina describes how “exhausting” the opulent Grand Palace is, it highlights Alina's belief that she doesn't fit in here. She doesn't believe she's a Grisha, and she's never seen such lavish rooms in her life—and in her mind, this means she doesn't belong here.

☞☞ “...If it would be alright, I'd prefer to have blue robes, Summoners' blue.”

“Alina!” exclaimed Genya, clearly horrified.

But the Darkling held up a hand to silence her. “Why?” he asked, his expression unreadable.

“I already feel like I don't belong here. I think it might be easier if I weren't...singled out.”

“Are you so anxious to be like everyone else?”

My chin lifted. “I just don't want to be more conspicuous than I already am.”

The Darkling looked at me for a long moment. I wasn't sure if he was thinking over what I'd said or trying to intimidate me, but I gritted my teeth and returned his gaze.

Abruptly, he nodded. “As you wish,” he said. “Your *kefta* will be blue.”

**Related Characters:** Alina Starkov, Genya, The Darkling (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 110-11

### Explanation and Analysis

The Darkling has just insisted that Alina's *kefta* should be black, but Alina resists and asks to wear Summoners' blue so she doesn't stand out quite so much. First, it's worth considering why being asked to wear a black *kefta* is so meaningful in the first place. The Darkling is the only person who's allowed to wear black; it's referred to throughout the novel as “his” color. So, wearing black would very conspicuously mark Alina as important and in the Darkling's favor. Additionally, wearing the Darkling's color would also imply that Alina essentially belongs to the Darkling—while other *kefta* denote what the wearer can do, wearing black would simply tell people that Alina is the Darkling's.

Though Alina insists her reasoning for refusing the black



kefta is because she's uncomfortable with standing out, her lingering fear and distrust of the Darkling suggests she may also pick up on the implications of wearing "his" color. Indeed, it seems likely that the Darkling is trying to intimidate Alina as he stares at her—it later comes out that he wants to control her rather than let her be an autonomous person who can make her own decisions. But it's not politically prudent to simply force Alina to comply at this early stage, and so the Darkling gives in. Later, he gives Alina no choice but to wear black, highlighting the very unbalanced power dynamic between them.

## Chapter 8 Quotes

☞ “The Darkling is very keen on the idea that we all eat hearty peasant fare. Saints forbid we forget we're *real* Ravkans.”

I restrained a snort. The Little Palace was a storybook version of serf life, no more like the real Ravka than the glitter and gilt of the royal court. The Grisha seemed obsessed with emulating serf ways, right down to the clothes we wore beneath our *kefta*. But there was something a little silly about eating “hearty peasant fare” off porcelain plates, beneath a dome inlaid with real gold. And what peasant wouldn't pick pastry over pickled fish?

**Related Characters:** Genya, Alina Starkov (speaker), The Darkling

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 124

### Explanation and Analysis

After Alina's first breakfast with the other Grisha, Genya shares that she has a deal with the cook and gets pastries so that she doesn't have to eat the almost universally disliked “hearty peasant fare” that the other Grisha get every morning. The idea of Grisha eating “hearty peasant fare” is ridiculous to Alina, and it highlights how out of touch the Darkling is with the peasants he and the Grisha ostensibly serve and protect. The point, Alina believes, is that the Grisha feel connected to the peasants and can tell themselves that they're not so different. But in actuality, they're very different. Their clothes might resemble peasant clothes in style, but as Alina described earlier, her clothes are made of the finest materials on offer—materials peasants could never afford, if they could even get their hands on them. Meanwhile, Alina picks up on the implication that being a peasant is supposedly a wonderful thing, and the peasant lifestyle is something to revere. Again though, having grown up poor, Alina knows this isn't the case. Given

the choice, peasants would absolutely choose to eat fluffy, sweet pastries over pickled fish any day. They eat the pickled fish because that's what available and affordable, not necessarily because that's what they'd eat if they had more options.


## Chapter 12 Quotes

☞ “*The horse has speed. The bear has strength. The bird has wings. No creature has all of these gifts, and so the world is held in balance. Amplifiers are part of this balance, not a means of subverting it, and each Grisha would do well to remember this or risk the consequences.*”

Another philosopher wrote, “*Why can a Grisha possess but one amplifier? I will answer this question instead: What is infinite? The universe and the greed of men.*”

**Related Characters:** Alina Starkov, The Darkling

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 173

### Explanation and Analysis

The Darkling has recently promised Alina an amplifier made from the antlers of Morozova's stag, so Alina is trying to research the stag and amplifiers in the library. These are excerpts of what she finds. What Alina discovers, unbeknownst to her, foreshadows exactly why the Darkling goes on to fail to possess Alina using Morozova's collar. Controlling her in this way upsets the checks and balances on a Grisha's power, as the Darkling controls shadows and darkness and Alina controls light. Possessing both essentially gives the Darkling—to use the writer's metaphor—the horse's speed, the bear's strength, and the bird's wings, thereby setting the world off balance.

However, this also lays out why the Darkling tries to possess Alina. The novel later establishes that his greed is, as this philosopher writes, “infinite”—his greed is so strong that it's nothing for him to kill or dehumanize people if it helps him achieve his goals of dominating the entire region.

Finally, it's ironic that these philosophers' writings end up being so prophetic, as the Darkling himself told Alina to catch up on the theory so she's better prepared. This implies that the Darkling knows all of what Alina learns here—and still thinks he can take what these philosophers would suggest is too much power for himself.



●● I closed my eyes, feeling tears slide down my cheeks, and I reached out to the thing within me that I'd kept hidden for so long. *I'm sorry*, I whispered to it.

*I'm sorry I left you so long in the dark.*

*I'm sorry, but I'm ready now.*

I called and the light answered. [...] It surrounded me, blazing with heat, more powerful and more pure than ever before because it was all mine. I wanted to laugh, to sing, to shout. At last, there was something that belonged wholly and completely to me.

**Related Characters:** Alina Starkov (speaker), Baghra, The Darkling, Malyen "Mal" Oretsov

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 182

### Explanation and Analysis

When Alina realizes that Mal has abandoned her, she realizes that she's been subsuming her power for years, all so that she could stay with him. But with him gone, she decides she doesn't have to do this anymore and summons light for the first time.



The fact that Alina apologizes to this part of herself suggests that she realizes she's been committing a sort of violence against herself by refusing to acknowledge this part of her identity. It's an essential part of who she is, and yet she's been using all her energy for years to keep it hidden away and to deny that she's a Grisha. But in this moment, Alina begins to repair this internal rift by apologizing—and to her surprise, Alina discovers that calling the light feels right, reparative, and makes her feel secure for the first time in her life. Accepting her identity, in this sense, is what makes Alina finally feel happy and as though she has the right to exist in the world, and even exist in the Grishas' world.

## Chapter 13 Quotes

●● Suddenly, lots of things seemed easy. I wasn't tired all the time or winded when I climbed the stairs. I slept deeply and dreamlessly every night and woke refreshed. Food was a revelation: bowls of porridge heaped with sugar and cream, plates of skate fried in butter, fat plums and hothouse peaches, the clear and bitter taste of *kvas*. It was as if that moment in Baghra's cottage was my first full breath and I had awakened into a new life.

**Related Characters:** Alina Starkov (speaker), Baghra,

Malyen "Mal" Oretsov

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 184

### Explanation and Analysis

As soon as Alina discovers that she's been hiding her power and then apologizes to that part of herself, her life transforms. The huge change highlights just how much damage Alina was doing to herself by trying to hide this major part of her identity. While she hid it for reasons that seemed good at the time—she didn't want to be taken away from Mal, her first and only friend—she now realizes that even if it was worth it at the time, it's no longer worth it to deny this part of herself.

Finally feeling competent, well-rested, and hungry makes Alina feel like she fits in for the first time in her life. Prior to this, Alina didn't feel at home in the army or with the other Grisha; she was weak, sickly, and mousy. But now, she's changing to become more like the Grisha. She's hungry, able to use her body to move and do things, and she can even enjoy *kvas*, something she detested before. Accepting this part of herself, the novel suggests, was absolutely essential to Alina's success in the world—and even to just make Alina feel like she deserves to exist in the world at all.

## Chapter 14 Quotes

●● "Black," Genya whispered.

*His color.* What did it mean?

"Look!" she gasped.


The neckline of the gown was laced with a black velvet ribbon, and from it hung a small golden charm: the sun in eclipse, the Darkling's symbol.

I bit my lip. This time, the Darkling had chosen to set me apart, and there was nothing I could do about it. I felt a little jab of resentment, but it was drowned by excitement. Had he chosen these colors for me before or after the night by the lake? Would he regret seeing me in them tonight?

I couldn't think about that now. Unless I wanted to go to the ball naked, I didn't have a lot of options.

**Related Characters:** Genya, Alina Starkov (speaker), The Darkling

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 206

### Explanation and Analysis

When Alina receives her silk kefta for the winter fete, she and Genya are shocked: the kefta is black, the Darkling's color—which Alina previously asked not to wear. Alina's reaction makes it clear that this is a confusing thing for her, since, on the one hand, she's growing attracted to the Darkling and wants to please him. But on the other hand, Alina doesn't appreciate how much power he has over her. The fact that she isn't entirely happy suggests that she hasn't been totally drawn in by the Darkling's attempts to manipulate her. On some level, she's aware that she should tread carefully and not trust him or that she should at least be aware that there's a huge power difference between them. She even explicitly gets at this power difference in this passage when she notes that she literally doesn't have any other options—she either goes to the fete in this black kefta, or she doesn't go at all. The Darkling no doubt knows this and uses it to his advantage.

Still, Alina is excited and plays along by wearing the black kefta. It seems romantic and intriguing to wear the Darkling's color—and for now, it's easier for Alina to focus on her excitement than it is for her to give too much thought to her sneaking suspicions that she's being manipulated.

☝ “Alina, the Darkling doesn't notice most of us. We're moments he'll forget in his long life. And I'm not sure that's such a bad thing. Just...be careful.”


I stared at her, baffled. “Of what?”


“Of powerful men.”

“Genya,” I asked before I could lose my nerve, “what happened between you and the King?”

She examined the toes of her satin slippers. “The King has his way with lots of servants,” she said.

**Related Characters:** Genya, Alina Starkov (speaker), The Darkling, The King

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 209

### Explanation and Analysis

Alina has been admiring herself in the mirror (she's wearing a black kefta), but Genya nervously warns her to beware of “powerful men.” Up to this point, Alina has more or less let her guard down when it comes to the Darkling. She began her relationship with him afraid and insecure, and while she still feels afraid of him, her sexual attraction means she's willing to set aside her fears if it means getting close to him. Genya, though, warns Alina that she might be making a mistake by letting herself get involved with the Darkling—he's a powerful man, and in Genya's experience, powerful men often use sex (either the threat of unwanted sex or the promise of wanted sex) to manipulate women. As she goes on to explain, the King rapes and assaults many female servants, including her. It is, she suggests, to be expected when one is a servant in the Grand Palace—and she had little choice in the matter. Alina, though, does have a choice, and Genya subtly urges Alina to reject the Darkling's advances here.

☝ If the Darkling came to my room tonight, what would it mean? The idea of being his sent a little jolt through me. I didn't think he was in love with me and I had no idea what I felt for him, but he wanted me, and maybe that was enough.

I shook my head, trying to make sense of everything. The Darkling's men had found the stag. I should be thinking about that, [...] but all I could think about was his hands on my hips, his lips on my neck, the lean, hard feel of him in the dark.

**Related Characters:** Alina Starkov (speaker), The Darkling

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 225

### Explanation and Analysis


After passionately kissing Alina at the fete, the Darkling has asked to come to her room later. Alina isn't sure how she feels about it, but at this point, she's pretty sure she wants him to come. Her reasoning—that he wants her, and “maybe that was enough”—highlights just how badly Alina wants to be wanted. She senses, on some level, that this isn't quite enough. Her thought process implied that it'd be preferable if the Darkling did feel something more than just sexual interest in her. But for now, it's enough to be wanted and to fit in for once in her life.

Then, Alina realizes that the Darkling's sexual interest—and her interest in him—is keeping her from thinking about what she knows is the more important thing going on: that the Darkling's trackers are close to getting Morozova's stag and making Alina a powerful amplifier with the stag's antlers. What Alina doesn't realize, though, is that the Darkling is very purposefully showering her with attention and interest to keep her from thinking too much or too critically about the stag and the amplifier. So, while she recognizes on some level what's happening here, she doesn't see it as the manipulation it actually is.

☞ “Just admit it,” he sneered. “He owns you.”  
“He owns you, too, Mal,” I lashed back. “He owns us all.”

**Related Characters:** Malyen “Mal” Oretsov, Alina Starkov (speaker), The Darkling, The King

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 231

### Explanation and Analysis

Alina has run into Mal, who's helping to track Morozova's stag for the Darkling. He takes issue with Alina wearing the Darkling's color to the fete, and the two are fighting over whether it's okay for the Darkling to “own” Alina. Unwittingly, both Alina and Mal speak the truth here. The Darkling plans to essentially enslave Alina and use her to take control over all of Ravka, even usurping the King. So, even though Alina and Mal are fighting, emotions are running high, and they're perhaps saying things they wouldn't say under other circumstances, the fact that they nevertheless say these true things suggests that they are on some level aware of how powerful and dangerous the Darkling is. Mal is coming from a place of romantic and sexual jealousy, but he's also not wrong that it's not a good thing for Alina for the Darkling to “own” her—the Darkling plans to deprive her of her humanity. And as Alina discovers later, the Darkling isn't afraid to use and abuse anyone he feels like if it means he'll get his way; he kills people without a second thought to make a point, and he does so in front of people to show them how powerful he is. The Darkling does, as Alina says, own everyone—even if that's not yet consciously apparent to Alina and Mal yet.



## Chapter 15 Quotes


☞ “The Fold was no mistake.” Baghra dropped her hands and the swirling darkness around her melted away. “The only mistake was the volcra. He did not anticipate them, did not think to wonder what power of that magnitude might do to mere men.”

My stomach turned. “The volcra were men?”

“Oh yes. Generations ago. Farmers and their wives, their children. I warned him that there would be a price, but he didn't listen. He was blinded by his hunger for power. Just as he is blinded now.”

**Related Characters:** Baghra, Alina Starkov (speaker), The Darkling

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 237


### Explanation and Analysis


Baghra is trying to encourage Alina to run away from the Darkling; here, she explains that the Darkling created the Shadow Fold on purpose. The way that Baghra describes the Darkling's oversight when it came to the volcra highlights just how blinded the Darkling is by greed and his desire for power. Baghra implies that within the world of the novel, it's pretty much guaranteed that exercising so much power, especially for something so evil, is going to have consequences. The Darkling should've known this, she suggests, even if he didn't know exactly what those consequences would be. And that the victims of the Darkling's greed were humans who then became bloodthirsty monsters highlights how little the Darkling thinks of other people. The volcra are, to him, annoyances that Alina can help him get rid of; there's no indication he feels any remorse for depriving these people of their lives and livelihoods.

Interestingly, though, Baghra insists that the Darkling is still “blinded by his hunger for power,” which suggests that Alina has an advantage. The Darkling is so focused on gaining power that he essentially leaves himself open to someone else he sees as less powerful getting the upper hand. Ultimately, this is exactly what happens when Alina learns how to take the stag's power for herself and take it from the Darkling.

“But he can’t use an amplifier,” I protested weakly. “He can use *you*,” Baghra said softly. “Morozova’s stag is no ordinary amplifier. He will hunt it. He will kill it. He will take its antlers, and once he places them around your neck, you will belong to him completely. You will be the most powerful Grisha who has ever lived, and all that newfound power will be his to command. You will be bound to him forever, and you will be powerless to resist.”

**Related Characters:** Baghra, Alina Starkov (speaker), The Darkling

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 239


### Explanation and Analysis

After the fete, Baghra tells Alina to run away, as the Darkling plans to enslave her using an amplifier made from the antlers of Morozova’s stag. Though Alina has learned a lot in her few months at the Little Palace, her grasp of how amplifiers works remains pretty rudimentary. As she understands it, because the Darkling is a living amplifier, he can’t use another—Grisha are only able to have one amplifier, as this creates a check on their power. But Baghra explains that the Darkling can get around this by killing the stag (which gives him the stag’s power) and then putting the amplifier on Alina, thereby taking total control of her power. That the Darkling wants to do this highlights his ruthlessness, his greed, and his total lack of respect for Alina’s humanity. She’s nothing but a tool to him. Similarly, the Darkling also sees the stag only as a tool for him to acquire for his own gain. He has no interest in recognizing the stag for the ancient, special creature it is; killing it is no big deal for him. More broadly, this illustrates just how selfish and heartless the Darkling is. Killing people, if it helps him in some way, simply doesn’t matter—and this highlights the Darkling’s inhumanity.

“I’d wanted so badly to belong somewhere, anywhere. I’d been so eager to please him, so proud to keep his secrets. But I’d never bothered to question what he might really want, what his true motives might be. I’d been too busy imagining myself by his side, the savior of Ravka, most treasured, most desired, like some kind of queen. I’d made it so easy for him.”

**Related Characters:** Alina Starkov (speaker), Baghra, The Darkling

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 240

### Explanation and Analysis

Baghra has revealed to Alina that the Darkling plans to enslave her and expand the Shadow Fold, and Alina realizes how vulnerable she was to the Darkling’s manipulation. What made her most vulnerable, she knows now, is how desperately she wanted to fit in. The Darkling offered her a life where she wouldn’t just fit in as one of the Grisha: she’d be one of the most powerful Grisha, and the one who could help save the world and deliver Ravka from its enemies. And the desire to be that person and be wanted made Alina blind to the fact that the Darkling was manipulating her every step of the way. Indeed, by describing her imagined life as “some kind of queen,” she even alludes to the romantic relationship she dreamed of having with the Darkling—she’d be the queen to his king.




Now, though, Alina chooses to run away, essentially ensuring that she won’t fit in. She realizes that the only way she can actually save the world is to assert her individuality and hold onto it. By continuing to make her own decisions rather than letting the Darkling control her, Alina believes she has some hope to not decimate Ravka.

## Chapter 18 Quotes

“He wasn’t at all shocked to hear of the contempt with which most Grisha regarded the King. Apparently, the trackers had been grumbling more and more loudly amongst themselves about the King’s incompetence.”

“The Fjerdans have a breach-loading rifle that can fire twenty-eight rounds per minute. Our soldiers should have them, too. If the King could be bothered to take an interest in the First Army, we wouldn’t be so dependent on the Grisha. But it’ll never happen,” he told me. Then he muttered, “We all know who’s running the country.”

**Related Characters:** Alina Starkov, Malyen “Mal” Oretsov (speaker), The Darkling, The King

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 283

### Explanation and Analysis

While Mal and Alina head north to Tsibeya, they discuss that



few if any people—Grisha or laypeople—think the King is doing a good job managing the country, particularly the military. As Mal explains, other countries with which Ravka is fighting have weapons that are far more advanced. This, of course, means they're better equipped and can kill more Ravkans—something that Mal and presumably even the Grisha would expect the King to take issue with. Yet the Darkling has previously described the King as a “child” who's interested only in fine furnishings and surrounding himself with beautiful women. The people fighting his many wars, like Mal, don't matter at all to him. This is partially a class thing; the King and even the Darkling care about wealthy, powerful people, not the peasants who join the army to fight and die in droves. Further, Mal highlights how the King's disinterest in the First Army (which is comprised entirely of non-Grisha soldiers) means that the First Army is dependent on the Grisha and their various powers for protection and the upper hand. Better weapons would put the First Army in a better position to fight without help—but no one, the King nor the Darkling, is interested in actually helping the troops on the ground.

## Chapter 20 Quotes

☝☝ “He plans to bring us peace.”



“At what price?” I asked desperately. “You know this is madness.”

“Did you know I had two brothers?” Ivan asked abruptly. The familiar smirk was gone from his handsome face. “Of course not. They weren't born Grisha. They were soldiers, and they both died fighting the King's wars. So did my father. So did my uncle.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Yes, everyone is sorry. The King is sorry. The Queen is sorry. I'm sorry. But only the Darkling will do something about it.”

**Related Characters:** Ivan, Alina Starkov (speaker), The Darkling, The King, The Queen

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 310

### Explanation and Analysis

Alina tries desperately to talk Ivan, who's extremely close to the Darkling, out of going along with the Darkling's plan to expand the Shadow Fold and take control for himself. As she makes her case, Alina asks Ivan to consider that there's going to be a huge cost to expanding the Fold—lots of people will die if the Darkling does this. And she also realizes that the Darkling isn't going to ever let go of power

once he has it, which will mean that anyone who ever tries to challenge him is going to be done away with. There will be no check on the Darkling's power, and Alina desperately wants Ivan to understand that this is a huge problem—for everyone.

Ivan, though, speaks for many Grisha and even non-Grisha soldiers when he lists all the family members who have died fighting the King's border wars. The King was supposed to protect those soldiers, but he hasn't; all he has to offer are empty condolences. This creates major discontent among Ravka's people, and it makes it seem like following the Darkling is the only way to get anything to change. Essentially, Ivan seems at least somewhat aware that things won't be great under the Darkling. But this is the best of several options, so he feels like it's the only choice worth considering.

## Chapter 21 Quotes

☝☝ Dimly, I'd been aware that I still had a shard of the blue cup in my hand, that it was digging into my palm, but I didn't want to let go.

When he finally set me down and ambled off to the kitchen to find his lunch, I had stood there, my palm dripping blood, my head still spinning, knowing that everything had changed.

Ana Kuya had scolded me for getting blood on the clean kitchen floor. She'd bandaged my hand and told me it would heal. But I knew it would just go on hurting.

**Related Characters:** Alina Starkov (speaker), Malyen “Mal” Oretsov, Ana Kuya, The Darkling

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 332

### Explanation and Analysis

On Alina and Mal's last night together before the Darkling plans to murder Mal in the Shadow Fold, Alina finally shares the story of how she got the scar on her hand—and the significance of that scar. She got the scar because, when Mal came home from a hunting trip and picked her up to spin her around, she didn't want to let go. Essentially, this is the moment that Alina realizes that Mal isn't just her best friend. She also loves him. And moreover, she's willing to hurt herself if it means being with him. This mirrors how, as a young child, Alina instinctively subsumed her Grisha power in order to be able to stay with Mal at Keramzin rather than leave and train as a Grisha. It has caused her pain her entire life, but it was something that seemed


entirely necessary to keep her best friend in her life. The scar, too, has caused Alina a great deal of pain because, just as she hid her Grisha powers, she has also hidden her love for Mal. Now that she's letting him in on this secret, there's some hope that she'll find a greater feeling of peace—and that she and Mal can be more truthful and connect more fully with each other going forward.

## Chapter 22 Quotes

☞ *This is the truth of him*, I thought as I squinted in the dazzling light. *Like calls to like*. This was his soul made flesh, the truth of him laid bare in the blazing sun, shorn of mystery and shadow. This was the truth behind the handsome face and the miraculous powers, the truth that was the dead and empty space between the stars, a wasteland peopled by frightened monsters.

**Related Characters:** Alina Starkov (speaker), The Darkling

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 338

### Explanation and Analysis


As the Darkling uses Alina's power to light up the Shadow Fold, Alina realizes the truth of Grisha's theory that "like calls to like." The Shadow Fold is, she sees now, an almost perfect representation of the Darkling's soul. It's dark, with shipwrecks everywhere denoting where people have lost their lives trying to cross—but the Darkling never thinks twice about those people, as they're not useful to him. Nothing grows here either, as the Darkling doesn't want anyone but him to be able to do anything useful and important—at least not without his say-so.

It's interesting that Alina refers to the Fold as a "wasteland peopled by frightened monsters," particularly in that she calls the monsters frightened. Alina sees that the volcra are frightened of the light—but this highlights that the Darkling rules with fear. Even the monsters he creates, like the volcra and the various Grisha who believe in his mission, are afraid of him and what he can do.

☞ *They're hungry for this*, I realized. Even after they've seen what he can do, even after watching their own people die. The Darkling wasn't just offering them an end to war, but an end to weakness. After all these long years of terror and suffering, he would give them something that had seemed permanently beyond their grasp: victory. And despite their fear, they loved him for it.

**Related Characters:** Alina Starkov (speaker), The Darkling, The King

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 342

### Explanation and Analysis



The Darkling has just destroyed a village bordering the Shadow Fold to make a point. Though Alina notices that the various parties on the skiff are afraid and perhaps even displeased by what the Darkling did, they see the Darkling's promise: that with him in charge, Ravka can be powerful and Ravkans can stop dying senseless deaths in the border wars. It is, of course, ironic that the Darkling allows a village to be eaten by volcra in order to make this point—he's still killing people, just not the soldiers fighting the wars. However, he's banking on the fact that people will see that he's powerful and will bend to his will, even if they don't agree with him. They'll hope that he'll only turn his power on their enemies—or, perhaps, on poor people they don't care as much about, as he does here. The village he destroys is implied to be a poorer village, and the novel has shown again and again that people like the Darkling and the King don't care at all about Ravka's poorest and most vulnerable. Here, as elsewhere, the Darkling uses them as tools and feels no remorse for taking their lives.


☞ I'd thought the stag was haunting me, a reminder of my failure and the price my weakness would exact. But I was wrong.

The stag had been showing me my strength—not just the price of mercy but the power it bestowed. And mercy was something the Darkling would never understand.

I had spared the stag's life. The power of that life belonged to me as surely as it belonged to the man who had taken it.

**Related Characters:** Alina Starkov (speaker), The Darkling, Malyen "Mal" Oretsov

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 


**Page Number:** 338

### Explanation and Analysis

In the Shadow Fold, as the Darkling commands Alina to contract her circle of light and leave Mal vulnerable to the volcra, Alina suddenly realizes how she can take control of her power. Prior to this moment, Alina believed that she did a weak, foolish, and selfish thing by refusing to kill Morozova's stag and take its power for herself when she had the chance. However, she now understands that showing someone mercy is a powerful thing. Indeed, it gives a person power, which is why, with this realization, Alina is able to wrest the amplifier's power away from the Darkling and control it herself. Mercy, in the world of the novel, is far more powerful than the Darkling's greed and selfishness. And it's also something that a person as evil as the Darkling would never understand, since he sees other beings as tools rather than living beings in their own right. So, in this way, Alina is finally able to put a check on the Darkling's seemingly endless power by tapping into mercy, the one thing he understands nothing about.

**Related Characters:** Alina Starkov (speaker), Malyen "Mal" Oretsov, The Darkling

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 351

### Explanation and Analysis

In West Ravka, Alina changes into a dress that Mal bought for her and is thrilled to take off her black silk kefta for the last time. As she does so, Alina symbolically frees herself from the Darkling. The black kefta signified that Alina belonged to the Darkling—black is his color, and no other Grisha can wear it. That Alina was forced to wear black showed people that Alina was special because of her relationship to the Darkling, not necessarily because of anything she can do. This association is presumably part of the "burden" that Alina feels disappearing as she sheds the kefta. The many difficult buttons, meanwhile, highlight how hard Alina has had to work to get to this point—it hasn't been easy to free herself from the Darkling and assert her independence. But now, she can be fully herself and can make her own choices about her life, her body, and how to use her power.

●● I fumbled with the tiny black buttons of the *kefta*. There seemed to be a thousand of them. When the silk finally slid over my shoulders and pooled at my feet, I felt a great burden lift from me.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## BEFORE

A boy and a girl, orphans from the border wars, arrive at the Duke's estate within a month of each other. They're the youngest orphans there, and they quickly grow attached to each other. The servants and the housekeeper, Ana Kuya, dislike the girl in particular—she's skinny, pale, and doesn't eat much. The girl also knows she's different, but she keeps this a secret. The two children spend their summers in lessons or in the woods or their meadow, dreaming about owning a dairy farm one day. In the winter, when the Duke leaves for his house in Os Alta, they try to keep warm playing in the empty rooms.

The boy and the girl are looking for the mail coach on the day that the Grisha Examiners arrive. Immediately upon seeing the troika's three elegant passengers get out and enter the house, the children slip into a gallery above the room where Ana Kuya receives guests. She's speaking to the examiners, one dressed in crimson, one in bright purple, and the other in dark blue, about how little she knows about the children and how insolent they are. The man in purple, however, says the children are listening—so Ana Kuya calls for Alina and Mal to come downstairs. When asked, Mal blurts that he thinks the examiners are witches. Angry, the woman in red says they practice the Small Science and they keep the kingdom safe.

The man in purple kneels before Alina and Mal. He explains that they're here to test the children to see whether they can master the Small Science. Anxious, Mal asks what happens if they're Grisha. The woman in red says that in that case, they'll go to a special school, learn a lot, and have all the food and fine clothes they desire. Ana Kuya says this would be the best way to serve the King. The children exchange glances and grab hands. Nobody sees the look pass between them, but the Duke—who's spent years on the northern borders where peasant villagers fight battles with little help—would recognize the look in a man's eye as he defends his home with only a rock.

Shadow and Bone's opening passage sets the scene: this country is war-torn, and many kids are orphans. Referring to these children simply as the boy and the girl reinforces how insignificant they are—they're just two more orphaned kids. However, this doesn't mean that these two aren't able to find their own joy with each other. Indeed, the descriptions of dreaming in the meadow or playing in the house seem happy, highlighting the strength of the kids' friendship.



This passage highlights how poor, rural folk see the Grisha: they're witches, they're fancy, and they're frightening. The female Grisha clearly resents this assessment and insists that they're anything but fancy witches—they're righteous soldiers defending the country. This disconnect between how the Grisha are viewed and what the Grisha actually do underpins one of the central conflicts in the novel: the Grisha aren't well understood or trusted by the general population, and this causes major issues.



One might expect that Alina and Mal would want to be Grisha, if it means they essentially get to live in luxury. However, the look the children share suggests they'd rather be together than have just one of them venture into the unknown. The narrator's description of the children's shared look suggests that nobody (except, perhaps, the Duke) realizes just how attached the kids are to each other. The implication is that the kids are each other's home—the Duke's estate is just where they happen to live.



## CHAPTER 1

Alina stands on the edge of the crowded main road, staring down into the valley below. She hurries along the Vy, the main road that once connected Ravka's capital city, Os Alta, to the sea, before the Shadow Fold was created. The Fold looks like a smudge in the distance, but it cuts Ravka in two, separating East Ravka from the ocean. On some maps it's labeled "the Unsea," but this is just to make people think that it's not so bad. However, it *is* that bad: this valley used to be full of rich estates, but one day, darkness filled the valley. The farmers and other residents vanished.

As Alina tries to tell herself crossing the Fold will be fine, Mal whispers in her ear that she can't faint in the road. Alina says she has a plan: if she got hurt, she wouldn't have to risk dying in the Fold. Just then, a pretty girl named Ruby passes, and Mal tells her he'll see her later. Alina rolls her eyes; she and Ruby were friends, right after Alina and Mal joined the army. But it didn't take long for Alina to realize Ruby just wanted to be her friend to get close to Mal. Noticing that Mal looks happy, Alina snaps that they could easily die. Mal insists the Grisha will protect them, and they have guns.

In truth, there's more wrong with Alina than just fear of crossing the Fold. She used to be able to tell Mal anything, but she can't anymore, so she says nothing about how uneasy she is. He suggests that the volcra will go for Mikhael first, and Alina flashes on a childhood memory of flipping through a book with Mal. They'd come to an illustration of a volcra, with its leathery flesh and blind eyes. They live in the Fold and eat human flesh. It'd been holding a human foot. Coming back to the present, Alina realizes she's stopped walking. Mal assures her that things are going to be fine, and Alina rubs the scar on her right palm.

Suddenly, Mal snatches Alina and jerks her out of the road—a big black coach rushes past. The coach belongs to the Darkling. As Mal hastily lets Alina go, a red coach and then a blue coach roll past. A gorgeous girl looks out of the blue coach and smiles at Mal. Mal's friends Mikhael and Dubrov rush up to him, teasing him about the Grisha girl. They point out that she'll be staying at camp and that the lavish Grisha tent has lots of dark corners. Teasing Alina, they lead Mal away.

*Now, readers get more insight into exactly what's plaguing Ravka: the Shadow Fold and the fact that it's almost impossible to cross the Fold. Alina alludes to what sounds like a public relations campaign to make the Fold sound better when she describes people calling it the Unsea. The whole situation suggests Ravka is damaged and traumatized; it's in a difficult spot and, for now, there's no clear fix.*



*Alina and Mal's relationship seems different now than it was in the prologue, when they were small children. They're older and are trying to balance their friendship with romantic interest in other people. Mal also seems far more easygoing than Alina, who reads as very tightly wound and something of a worrywart. These differences may contribute to the tension in their friendship.*



*Here, the implication is that Alina is in love with Mal and is trying her best to hide it. And she seems to be even more anxious, given that she's going to cross the Fold with her friend and crush—someone she really doesn't want to die. Introducing the volcra helps illuminate for readers exactly why the Fold is so frightening: it's not just dark, there are actually flesh-eating monsters out there.*



*It's unclear if Mal reciprocates Alina's feelings. And yet, his instinct is clearly to protect her from harm, highlighting that whether it's romantic or not, he does care for her. Mal's friends, meanwhile, seem to not see Alina as girlfriend material—they're far more interested in the gorgeous Grisha girl.*



Alina continues into the village and to the Documents Tent, where she slips in without the Senior Cartographer noticing. She sits next to her friend Alexei and tells him she's late because the Darkling almost ran her over. Pulling out her notebook (as a junior cartographer, she's supposed to submit two sketches each day), Alina begins copying a sketch of a mountain range. To bribe Alina into telling him more about the Darkling's coach, Alexei pushes over one of his drawings for her to pass off as her own. When Alina is finally done, she and Alexei head for the mess tent. Over the meal, Alexei and a girl named Eva argue: Eva insists the Darkling isn't natural, and Alexei calls her a peasant for believing this. Alina says nothing; she's more of a peasant than Eva, but neither she nor Mal talk about their youth in an orphanage.

Across the hall, Mal is entertaining his fellow trackers. When Alexei shakes his head at the idea that Mal and Alina were ever friends, Alina tells Alexei that they grew up together and he wasn't always so full of himself. When they're finished eating, Alina and Alexei walk past the Grisha camp, which is lavish and massive. Then, they return to the barracks, where people are clearly afraid for tomorrow. Alina gets into bed, but she's wide awake when, hours later, she hears tapping on the tent. She slips on her boots and heads outside to meet Mal on the steps. Mikhael and Dubrov are drinking on the footpath. Alina hesitates: it's hard to be around Mal because she doesn't want him to know how much she cares or how his flirting with others hurts her. But she swallows her jealousy and sits down.

As they watch Dubrov and Mikhael drink, Alina asks Mal what he's doing here—he used to visit her all the time, but he hasn't in a long time. He says she looked miserable at dinner, and he's worried about her. Alina offers that hopefully a volcra will eat her tomorrow so he can stop worrying, but Mal insists he'd be lost without Alina—a clear lie, since he's a skilled tracker and has never been lost in his life. Mal admits that he's nervous too. They discuss Keramzin and Ana Kuya, and then Mal grabs Alina's hand. Tomorrow, he says, they'll drink and watch the ocean, just the two of them.

Mikhael ends the moment by shouting for Mal. As Mal jogs away, he asks for luck. Alina wishes him luck, but she wishes she hadn't—he's just going to go seduce a Grisha and have lovely babies with her. Mal has never looked at Alina like he looked at the Grisha girl earlier, or even Ruby. Alina tells herself that they're still friends, and that's the most important part—but will they keep getting further and further apart?

*It's not entirely clear yet who the Darkling is, but he's definitely a person of interest—and a powerful one, if his coach can roll through town so quickly that he puts people in danger of being run over. The dinner conversation highlights again that there are big differences in how people of different classes view the Grisha and the Darkling. It's a peasant—that is, low-class—belief that the Darkling is unnatural and inhuman, implying by extension that people with more education and power see the Darkling as human like them. At this point, it's hard to parse if lower-class people are responding to the Darkling's abilities or his power and prestige.*



*Alina doesn't fit in anywhere. She has to explain her childhood friendship with Mal to Alexei, who seems like her current best friend; and she can't fully be herself around Mal anymore because she's working so hard to hide her feelings for him. Still, the fact that Mal shows up to visit with Alina at night at all suggests that he does care for her, and perhaps he too is trying hard to fit in with his newer friends in the army. The description of the huge, well-appointed Grisha tent exposes the class differences again: they're also in an army camp, but they live in luxury, unlike the non-Grisha soldiers.*



*Alina is wildly uncomfortable letting Mal express any affection or care for her. Mal is almost certainly speaking figuratively when he says he'd be lost without Alina. He means that he'd be emotionally lost without his friend. And yet, Alina insists on taking him literally. This allows her to continue telling herself that she's unimportant and not good enough for Mal, even when there's a lot of evidence suggesting he cares about her as a friend, if not as more than that.*



*Again, Alina continues to think of herself as not good enough for Mal—obviously, she reasons, he's going to choose someone prettier and better than her, like a Grisha girl. Her main goal is keeping their friendship alive, but at this point, she's not willing to see Mal's overtures as true expressions of friendship due to her own poor self-esteem.*



## CHAPTER 2

The next morning is extremely busy. Finally, Alina joins Alexei and the other cartographers and boards a sandskiff, silent sleds that blow over the sands in the Fold. There are two Grisha Etherealki at the front; they control winds and will fill the sandskiff's sails. Mal and the trackers are on the other side of the skiff, armed with rifles. At a shout from the dock's foreman, men push the skiffs into the Fold. It's like drifting into smoke. Everything becomes still and dark; Alina can't even see her own hand. Hopefully, their party passes through the Fold without the volcra noticing them—but Alexei grabs Alina's wrist and hisses for her to listen.

Alina can hear wings in the distance, as well as people on the ship cocking triggers. At the signal, Grisha send flames into the air—and the flames illuminate hundreds of terrifying, shrieking volcra. Alexei and Alina cling to each other, but a volcra sinks its claws into Alexei's back and carries him away. Alina screams for him, which just attracts another volcra to her. Mal shoots at it, but the volcra rushes at Mal and Alina. Alina stabs a knife into its shoulders, but Mal collapses due to his injuries. Alina kneels by him and puts her forehead to his. As two more volcra approach, Mal says he'll meet Alina in their meadow. Just as a volcra sinks its claws into Alina's shoulders, everything goes white. Volcra shriek and Alina passes out.

*The preparations to enter the Fold highlight how dangerous and how big of a deal it is to try to get through the Fold unnoticed—and without major loss of life, if a sandskiff does get noticed. This illustrates just how much the Fold dictates life in Ravka: it creates huge problems as people try to cross it for military or commerce reasons. For now, the Etherealki seem like a tolerated part of this expedition; nobody says anything judgmental about them.*



*This scene is terrifying and chaotic, suggesting that, despite all their preparations, Ravkans still aren't well prepared to handle the volcra in the Fold. And though Alina is focused on Alexei and Mal, the three of them are almost certainly not the only ones killed. This highlights again how dangerous crossing the Fold is. However, in this tense moment, Alina and Mal seem to reaffirm their friendship (or their love) for each other. Mentioning their meadow suggests that they both idealize their childhood and wish they could go back to that relatively happy, innocent time.*



## CHAPTER 3

Alina wakes up on her back, staring up at the sky—the skiff is clearly leaving the Fold. Remembering the attack and afraid for Mal, she sits up and comes face to face with a rifle barrel. The soldier tells Alina to stay where she is. She takes in the bloody deck, a Healer tending to casualties, and then realizes that soldiers and Grisha are guarding her like she's a prisoner. Nobody will tell her what happened to Mal. When they reach the drydocks, Alina obediently gets up and walks at gunpoint back into the village she left an hour ago. What happened? Did she break military protocol somehow? She remembers nothing after the pain from the volcra's claws, and then the light.

*Alina's confusion creates tension for readers. It's not clear what happened, but clearly, something frightening and important happened in the Fold. It's another sign of how self-conscious Alina is that she wonders if she somehow broke military protocol and is in trouble, especially since it seems she only did what everyone else on the sandskiff did. That her focus is on Mal shows again how much she cares for him; worrying about him seems to take up almost equal space in her mind.*



The party approaches the Officers' tent, where the captain fetches Colonel Raevsky—what did Alina do to need a senior officer? When asked what she is, Alina tells him that she's a mapmaker. With an odd look, the soldiers march Alina to the Grisha tent, where Corporalki Heartrenders and oprichniki, elite soldiers who serve the Darkling, are guarding the entrance. Alina waits outside as the colonel and a Corporalnik confer and go inside, and soon after, the captain leads Alina inside. Alina's fear disappears: the tent is beautiful, draped in bronze silks with chandeliers and rich furs and rugs. Grisha in their bright kefta lounge around the room. The room is "alive with power and wealth."

The soldiers march Alina to a raised black dais. In front of it are several Corporalki and King's ministers—as well as a man in a black kefta. The Darkling is the only Grisha allowed to wear black. To Alina's surprise, the Darkling looks only a bit older than she does. She remembers that powerful Grisha live a long time and flashes on Eva saying the Darkling isn't natural. In the gathering crowd, Alina catches sight of the pretty Grisha girl who stared at Mal. The girl is clearly whispering about Alina, so Alina gives her a dirty look.

At Colonel Raevsky's word, the survivors from the sandskiff enter the tent—including the Senior Cartographer, Mikhael, and Mal. Alina wants to run to him, suddenly elated. But then, the Darkling looks at Alina and asks the captain what happened. The captain says, without expression, that the volcra attacked about 30 minutes into the trip. Things were going poorly, and then he saw a blaze of bright light. Alina nods along with the other soldiers; she also saw the light. The captain says they then returned to the drydock, but he didn't see "the girl." Raising an eyebrow, the Darkling asks if anyone actually saw what happened.

The Senior Cartographer steps up. Wringing his hands, he describes all the blood and seeing volcra carry Alexei off. When he says he saw the volcra go for Alina and Mal, Alina angrily interjects and asks why the Senior Cartographer didn't step in to help—Alexei might still be alive if he had. Colonel Raevsky silences Alina so the Cartographer can continue. The Cartographer says that then, he saw Alina "light up." Alina figures he hit his head, but others verify the story. Several Grisha argue about whether this could be true, or if Alina is a "Sun Summoner"—and several laugh at the idea. The Darkling silences everyone and asks Mal what he saw. Mal describes the diving volcra and how the world just started to "shin[e]." But he insists that he'd know if Alina had special powers.

*It's noteworthy that Colonel Raevsky asks what Alina is, not who she is. The implication is that she's more than a mapmaker, regardless of what she says. Getting to go inside the Grisha tent shows readers and Alina how the Grisha live. They live in luxury, with fancy furnishings and, it seems, more to keep them warm than non-Grisha soldiers. The narration then links this luxury to power and affluence when Alina describes the room as being "alive with power and wealth." This is where people make decisions that influence all of Ravka.*



*Alina's first look at the Darkling gives her a bit of a shock: he's maybe in his early or mid-twenties, something that she implies is at odds with how much power he has. One way he flaunts this power is by being the only Grisha who can wear black; this sets him apart and will be an important thing to remember going forward. Alina also seems to imply that, on some level, she now agrees with Eva: the Darkling is confusing and, perhaps, not a normal person or even a normal Grisha.*



*Alina's emotional investment in Mal shines through again; she could be in huge trouble, and yet, she's totally focused on the good news that he survived. During the captain's testimony, Alina starts to feel a bit better: like everyone else on the skiff, she saw the light. Clearly, then, it's not a sign that she's unwell. Given that Alina is the one on trial in this situation, though, the implication is that the light may have come from her—and Alina just doesn't know it yet.*



*As Alina sees it, the real tragedy of the trip into the Fold is that people in charge, like the Senior Cartographer, didn't go out of their way to protect subordinates like Alexei. And this led to numerous casualties that she believes were senseless. Indeed, this all seems far more important to her than the possibility that she herself is a Grisha—especially given the implication that being a "Sun Summoner" is highly unusual. Mal demonstrates his loyalty to Alina by insisting that he knows her well and that she can't keep secrets from him. By extension, this suggests he may be aware of her crush.*





Noting that everyone keeps secrets, the Darkling approaches Alina and asks what she thinks happened. As he looks her over like she's "something strange and shiny," Alina maintains she did nothing. He commands her to hold out her arm and push up her sleeve. Alina is terrified. Saying that they'll see what Alina can do, the Darkling claps his hands, filling the tent with darkness. He grabs her wrist and suddenly, her fear disappears. Alina feels a "call" go through her and she tries not to answer it—somehow, she knows that it'll destroy her if she lets herself answer. But when the Darkling cuts her arm, the thing in Alina explodes out of her—and white light bursts around her, destroying the Darkling's manufactured darkness.

The Darkling catches Alina as she stumbles and then hands her to an oprichnik. He calls for Ivan, a tall Heartrender, and tells him to escort Alina to the Little Palace in his coach, along with a Healer. Alina protests—she's not Grisha. But the Darkling says Alina has no clue what she is and turns away. Ivan roughly drags Alina down the aisle, ignoring her protests that she's just a mapmaker. Alina looks back and meets Mal's eyes. She wants to run to him, but she can't.

## CHAPTER 4

Ivan drags Alina to the Darkling's black coach, which is surrounded by Etherealki guards. He tells her to get in, but Alina refuses: there's been a mistake and she doesn't want to go. Ivan hisses that soon, Fjerdans and Shu Han assassins will know who she is—and they'll try to kill her. She must get to Os Alta, where she'll be safe. Ivan shoves Alina into the coach. A Healer, a Corporalnik, and two oprichniki guards enter as well, and then the coach starts to move. The Healer cleans and mends Alina's wounds, which itches but isn't painful. When the woman is finished, Ivan tells her to give Alina her **kefta** and ushers her out of the coach.

Once the Healer is gone, Ivan explains that the **kefta** is made with Materialki corecloth and is bulletproof. An oprichniki explains that they all wear these kefta when they're in the field. Alina thinks it doesn't seem quite fair that Grisha soldiers have so much protection, while regular soldiers are on their own. Blinking back tears and studying the Darkling's mark etched in the window—two overlapping circles to represent the sun in eclipse—Alina thinks this must be a hallucination. But Ivan and the Corporalnik are still staring at her, and they don't stop. Alina snaps that she doesn't do tricks and asks that they take a nap and leave her alone. The Corporalnik laughs and introduces himself as Fedyor.

*That the Darkling looks at Alina like she's "something strange and shiny" suggests that he doesn't see her as a person. She's an object and a tool to him, and when he touches her and makes light burst out of her, it shows that she's a tool he can use. Alina's feelings about the Darkling touching her are important. She's terrified, but he touches her anyway. And it turns out that his touch raises more confusing feelings: Alina doesn't want to be touched and she doesn't want to let the thing inside her out. But she's also no longer afraid.*



*Instantly, the Darkling situates himself as the one true authority on what Alina is. She's no longer in control of her life, who she is, or where she goes—the Darkling is. The hurry and force with which the Darkling and Ivan bustle Alina away suggest that she's more important or valuable than she realizes. But again, keeping her in the dark about it shows that they view her as a tool, rather than as an autonomous person.*



*Though Alina tries to stand up for herself, Ivan makes it abundantly clear that Alina is too valuable to him, the Darkling, and Ravka's enemies to let her just do what she wants. Thus begins Alina's new life, where she has very little control over where she goes and what she does. Getting to wear the Healer's kefta at this point just makes Alina feel very out of place. Kefta are framed as very important garments, so wearing one feels inappropriate and highlights how out of her element Alina is.*



*As Ivan explains, getting to wear the kefta also highlights how valuable Alina is now: hours ago she had only a knife to defend herself, but now she has a bulletproof garment. And immediately, Alina realizes how unfair this system is. Soldiers like her, Alexei, and Mal die all the time because they're not protected. The Grisha, because they're considered important, are protected. This begins to illuminate the class differences at play in the novel—as well as who and what Ravka's ruling class thinks is important.*



Fedyor explains that it's not safe to be traveling at night, but they must. The Shadow Fold, he explains, has been helping their enemies for years by weakening Ravka. But if Alina is a Sun Summoner, she can open the Fold or maybe destroy it—so Fjerda and the Shu Han will be itching to kill her. Alina just gapes at Fedyor. Ivan asks how Alina hid her power and if she was tested. Alina says she had no idea she had powers and she was tested—but she doesn't add that nobody really cared about Duke Keramsov's orphans and her dead parents couldn't help her. Instead, she says she's not Grisha. She doesn't know what happened in the Fold or when the Darkling touched her. *He did something when he touched her.*

Ivan explains that the Darkling is a living amplifier. He shows Alina his amplifier, a necklace of Sherborn bear claws. Amplifiers increase a Grisha's power, and only the Darkling's most favored Grisha have them—Fedyor, for instance, doesn't have one. Alina closes her eyes and remembers how she felt before the Darkling touched her: small and clumsy. But when he touched her, it was like a call echoed through her and when she answered, she felt absolutely certain and powerful. Alina tries to recreate the feeling, but she can't.

The coach travels for days, day and night. Once, Alina wakes up to Fedyor watching her—and he asks who Mal is. Realizing she must've been talking in her sleep, Alina says Mal is the tracker who saved her on the Shadow Fold. Fedyor points out that Alina saved his life too, as well as many others' lives. Alina is shocked, especially when Fedyor—a Heartrender, a killer—says that saving lives is an honor. He explains that he decided to become a Heartrender rather than a Healer because he thought he could save more lives that way.

Just then, Fedyor elbows Ivan—and a soldier opens the door to share that there's a fallen tree ahead. Before the soldier can finish, someone shoots him in the back. Fedyor mutters that it's the Fjerdans. He gives Alina a knife and leads everyone out of the coach to defend it. Terrified, Alina curls up on the floor of the coach—until two men with yellow beards enter the coach, and one pulls Alina out. Alina races into the hills away from the man and the battle, but the man tackles her halfway up. Just as the man pins Alina, the Darkling and some of his soldiers ride up on horseback. The Darkling claps his hand, sending tendrils of darkness to blind the attackers; Grisha take the opportunity to kill the men.

*Fedyor continues to try to impress upon Alina just how important she is. As he tells it, she literally has the power to change the world and transform Ravka's prospects overnight. In part because Alina comes from such humble beginnings, this sounds like total nonsense to her. In her estimation, nobody noticed her power earlier because, as an orphan of the border wars, she's just one of many poor, faceless children. Nobody would expect one of those kids to be special, so they missed identifying her earlier.*



*Interestingly, as Alina thinks about how she felt when the Darkling touched her, she doesn't acknowledge how terrified she was of him. Instead, she focuses on how powerful he made her feel. The feeling of certainty she experienced suggests that Alina finally felt comfortable and sure of herself—something she's never felt before, given her weakness and her perceived unattractiveness. So, the Darkling might be frightening, but perhaps Alina's fear is worth facing if he can also make her feel so good.*



*That Alina is talking about Mal in her sleep reaffirms how much she loves and relies on him; in a stressful situation like this, she can't ignore that he makes her feel safe. Fedyor's willingness to speak openly with Alina may reflect his lower status among the Grisha. Recall that he doesn't have an amplifier, which is a sign of a Grisha's high standing with the Darkling.*



*Alina sees firsthand how much danger she's in, now that her power has been discovered. When the Darkling rides up at just the right moment, it's convenient—but it also suggests that the Darkling has been watching, waiting, and expecting something like this to happen. This establishes him as someone who more or less skillfully makes plans and then is able to execute them. He also works well with the other Grisha, helping them do their jobs—something that makes him look like a team player.*



Alina shouts and the Darkling turns toward her. Her Fjerdan attacker, though blinded, says he can still kill Alina. The Darkling attempts to bargain with the man, but just as the man brings his knife down toward Alina, Alina hears a huge cracking sound. She opens her eyes and can't even scream: the man has been cut in half. Crawling backwards, Alina screams until the Darkling helps her up and walks her to his horse. He tells Ivan that he's taking 20 riders, and Alina will ride with him.

As the coach rolls away—a decoy—Alina observes that the Darkling does make mistakes. Smiling, he admits he *infrequently* makes mistakes. As he helps Alina onto the horse in front of him, he observes that she's shaking. Alina offers that she's not used to assassination attempts, and she can't tell if the Darkling is joking when he says he hardly notices anymore. She's also extremely disturbed by what he did to the Fjerdan. But he takes off a glove and puts a hand on the back of her neck, filling her with that feeling of power and certainty. Alina falls asleep.

## CHAPTER 5

Over the next few days, the Darkling sets a fast pace over side roads and hunting paths. Alina gets her own horse after the first day, but she's always aware of where the Darkling is. Since he doesn't speak to her, she wonders if she offended him—though how she might've, she doesn't know. When they stop on the fifth night, Alina wanders down to a stream to wash her face and worry about what will happen when they get to Os Alta. She's certain she'll disappoint the King and the Darkling, since she's not special. They'll probably kill her, and she didn't even get a chance to say goodbye to Mal. As she imagines saying goodbye to Mal and apologizing for falling in love with him, the Darkling appears behind her and asks why she's smiling.

Alina says she's laughing at herself and jokes that she's very funny. As the Darkling studies her, she becomes hyper-aware of how dirty and bruised she is—he still looks perfect after days of riding. Alina blurts that she's not Grisha; her appearance should be enough evidence. The Darkling says she doesn't understand and heads back to camp. Alina is desperate to hit him, though he'd probably cut her in half if she did. But she follows, eats her small portion of grouse, and feels bad when she wipes her fingers on her **kefta**. When she's finished, she notices how the Darkling, despite being the second most powerful man in Ravka, is sitting on the ground beside his soldiers.

*This is an extremely traumatic experience for Alina. Not only did she almost lose her life; she also witnessed the Darkling brutally murder her would-be assassin. The Darkling looks simultaneously terrifying and like a savior. He expresses no emotion or thought at all about the fact that he just killed someone—so despite having saved Alina's life, he also looks scary and intimidating himself.*



*Alina is afraid and intimidated. The Darkling just killed someone right in front of her, and at this point, that weighs more heavily on her than the fact that he also saved her. So it reads as somewhat uncomfortable when, rather than give her space, he invades her space and touches her with his bare hand to calm her down. Falling asleep and getting to escape is a welcome change for Alina, though, so she doesn't necessarily read this as a violation.*



*Alina remains insistent that she can't do anything right and isn't special—or even competent. It's curious just how insistent she is that she's right, especially given that it's now pretty well established that at least in some circumstances, she can produce light. However, her focus remains on the people, specifically the men, in her life: Mal and the Darkling. She seems extremely concerned with pleasing the Darkling, implying that she cares about what he thinks (if only so she can stay alive and return to Mal).*



*That Alina becomes suddenly so self-conscious about her appearance in the Darkling's presence suggests that she is, on some level, attracted to him—even if she's also afraid of him. Indeed, wanting to hit him but fearing grave consequences for doing so suggests that Alina has significantly less power next to the Darkling; in his presence, she constantly fears he might hurt her in some way. However, the Darkling continues to look not so bad when he sits with his soldiers, rather than insisting people treat him like he's better than others.*



Seeming to notice Alina's stare, the Darkling comes to sit next to her and offers her a flask of *kvas*, a burning spirit. Then, he invites her to ask questions. Alina first asks how old the Darkling is. After some evasion attempts, he reveals he's about 120—Grisha, he explains, get stronger and live longer the more they use their powers. Amplifiers help even more, and he's a living amplifier; however, he's not afraid that anyone will kill him for his teeth. Then, he asks Alina to tell him the stories she's heard about him. Alina offers a few rumors and then shares what a serf once said: that Darklings are evil and soulless, and that's why one created the Shadow Fold. She feels bad even saying this, but she knows people like Eva, the serf, and soldiers don't like or trust Grisha, especially the Darkling.

Sighing, the Darkling says his great-great-great grandfather was the Black Heretic and accidentally created the Shadow Fold because he was greedy. All the Darklings since have been trying to fix it. Alina, he says, is the first hope he's had in years. When Alina expresses shock, the Darkling says he's seen their enemies' powerful new weapons; soon, Grisha won't be the most powerful fighters. And Ravka's First Army gets their guns by crossing the Fold, which just kills soldiers. Alina can help by destroying the Shadow Fold.

Then, Alina asks the Darkling to explain what he did to her attacker. He explains that it's called the Cut and asks if Alina would be less disturbed if he'd used a sword. Alina doesn't know. She notices a look of anger or pain cross his face and feels bad: it feels like she failed a test.

The party reaches Os Alta two days later. Alina and Mal trained for the military nearby, but they never visited. As they ride through the first of Os Alta's two walls, Alina is disappointed: Os Alta is a dirty market town much like Keramzin. But that changes when they cross the bridge. The streets are wide, clean, and dotted with trees, parks, and fountains. Huge houses line the streets until, finally, they reach a golden gate. This gives way to a wide gravel path that leads, finally, to the Grand Palace—the King's winter home. The Darkling rides up next to Alina and asks what she thinks of the elaborate, shining building. She says it's grand, and he quips that it's the ugliest building he's seen.

*In some ways, this conversation makes the Darkling seem more human and relatable: he seems to not want to frighten Alina, and he wants to tell her the truth. However, the truth he tells her still paints a picture of an extremely powerful man—if he's not afraid of assassination attempts, this implies that he is, perhaps, too strong to take on in the first place. So, it makes some sense why people like Eva and the serf might believe rumors about the Darkling and about Grisha. They're so powerful that they seem untouchable—and that's threatening, particularly to those who are poor and have almost no power.*



*Though the Grisha have power in Ravka now, the Darkling makes it clear that this won't always be the case. The way to ensure the Grisha stay in power, he suggests, is to get rid of the Fold with Alina's help. That Alina is capable of doing such a thing means that she's extremely special—nobody in the last several hundred years has been able to undo the Black Heretic's mistake.*



*Alina is disturbed by the violence of murdering someone, regardless of the circumstances. That she feels bad about her sense of compassion shows just how much she wants to be liked, even by the Darkling: after all, it's not strange that she's so upset, and yet, the Darkling (perhaps unwittingly) makes her feel like she's doing something wrong.*



*For the first time, Alina gets a good look at the inequality that plagues Ravka. While she grew up poor (and while it seems like many in Os Alta are only a bit better off), there are also people who live comfortable upper-class lives—and a select few royals and Grisha who live in absolute luxury. This was already hinted at in earlier descriptions of the Grisha army tent, but seeing an entire upper-class neighborhood and the palace makes it more real. The Darkling, however, implies that he doesn't like what he sees—he doesn't find the opulence beautiful.*



The Darkling leads the riders down the path and through a wood. It feels like crossing into another world—and then, they emerge into the light and look down on the Little Palace. It's bigger than the Grand Palace and looks like it belongs in an enchanted forest. It's covered in carvings of animals and plants. Servants in charcoal rush to take the riders' horses, and Alina follows the others into the building. In a huge hexagonal room, the Darkling pulls an elderly female servant aside, motions to Alina, and then walks away. He leaves and the servant approaches Alina. Alina follows the woman up a tall staircase and into a grand room with a big bed in it. When Alina says she doesn't need food, the woman tells her to rest—but to lock her door as a precaution.

*The Little Palace looks like an absolutely magical place. It's highly decorated, well-appointed, and it seems like there's food aplenty if Alina wants any. For now, Alina is focused only on getting some sleep after a hard ride. She's not able to consider why she might need to lock her door, but this warning suggests that the Little Palace isn't as idyllic as it might look. Alina is protecting herself from something, though what that might be is left unclear. Then, the Darkling seems to give little thought to leaving Alina alone. He may have tried to get to know her on the ride, but his behavior suggests that things are different in his domain.*



## CHAPTER 6

Alina dreams that she's in Keramzin, looking for Mal. When she opens a bedroom, there's blood everywhere—and a volcra with the Darkling's gray eyes. Alina wakes up and has almost fallen back to sleep again when someone pounds on the door. Dragging herself out of bed, Alina asks who it is. The female voice on the other side snaps that she doesn't have time for this. Shrugging, Alina opens the door, and the most beautiful redhead Alina has ever seen walks in. She's wearing a cream kefta. The girl asks if Alina has even bathed, and then she tells servants to get Alina's clothes off now. Alina refuses to undress and demands to know what's going on. In a tone one might use with a child, the girl, Genya, explains that Alina is being presented to the King in an hour.

*Alina's dream is ominous—and it suggests that she might not be able to trust the Darkling. But the tension and confusion of meeting Genya and learning she's going to go meet the King soon distracts Alina from this prospect. That Genya waltzes in and immediately acts like she's in control highlights that, at the Little Palace (and under the Darkling's purview), Alina doesn't have much power to dictate what she does anymore. Now, she serves the Darkling and the King—and she must answer to Genya too.*



Alina meekly allows the servants to yank her clothes off and usher her into the massive copper tub in the ensuite bathroom. When they're finished scrubbing her, they help her out, towel her off, give her a robe, and leave. Then, Genya tells Alina to sit at the dressing table. Genya peruses her box of jars full of leaves, powders, and berries, and then she heals Alina's bruise. Alina thanks her and begins to get up, but Genya says she's not done. Seeing Alina's confusion, Genya explains that she's a Tailor, not a Healer—she doesn't make clothes, she works on faces. Alina realizes that this is why Genya's face is perfect, but she refuses to let Genya change her face. Genya assures Alina that she'll only freshen her up; she can't make big changes, anyway.

*Because Alina and Genya are in such a hurry to get ready for the King, Alina has no opportunity to enjoy the big tub and a hot bath. This highlights that at the Little Palace, such a bath isn't a luxury like it was in the army. Genya's power seems somewhat unique, given that she has to explain what it even is to Alina (and given that Alina and Mal seemed to have a good grasp of what other Grisha can do). Refusing to let Genya do anything is how Alina can assert her agency, now that it seems like she has little control anywhere else.*



When Alina continues to argue, Genya says the Darkling sent her because the King loves beauty. Looks are everything here, and Alina should look the part of Ravka's savior. Sighing, Alina agrees and accepts a mirror from Genya. She watches as Genya makes her blemishes and dark undereye circles disappear, and colors her cheeks and lips with a rose petal. Then, Genya brushes gold leaf through Alina's hair and curls her locks with a twist of her finger. When she's done, Alina agrees that it's nice: she looks like she's slept. Genya agrees, but she says cryptically that Alina doesn't want to attract the King's attention too much.

Servants rush back in and dress Alina in, to her surprise, a clean army cartographer's uniform. Genya notices Alina's expression. She says Alina needs to look like a soldier plucked from the army, not like a kefta-wearing Grisha the Darkling has been hiding. As Genya ushers Alina down the stairs, she tells Alina to only say that Genya helped her dress: the "ridiculous" Queen doesn't think it's fair for Genya to work on Grisha. Alina is shocked to hear Genya speak of the Queen in such a treasonous way, but Genya seems unconcerned. The girls enter a huge room filled with Grisha, all of whom are unnervingly beautiful. A Corporalki named Sergej Beznikov and a Summoner named Marie argue about who Alina will walk with. Alina suggests she walk with Genya, which elicits snickers. The Darkling enters and says Alina will walk with him.

## CHAPTER 7

The Darkling says, "We are expected." With this, the Grisha arrange themselves into a line two abreast, with the Materialki first, then the Etherealki, and the Corporalki—the highest ranked Grisha—last. He then approaches Alina and says she looks well rested. Alina asks if there are other Tailors, but the Darkling explains that Genya is special, and she's not walking with them because she attends to the Queen. When he saw her abilities, instead of letting her become a Fabrikator or a Corporalnik, he "cultivated her particular affinity" and gifted her to the Queen. Alina asks if Genya is any better than a serf, but the Darkling responds that they all serve someone.

Then, the Darkling says the King will want a demonstration, but Alina doesn't have to know how to do anything. When Alina snaps that this isn't fair, the Darling says he's never fair—but he won't make a fool of her. If she cooperates, he won't even have to cut her again. By now, the line of Grisha has reached the front steps of the Grand Palace. The inside is entirely marble and gold, with trees made of jewels. Alina always thought the Shadow Fold was to blame for the poverty in Ravka—but now, she's not sure.

*An unsettling picture starts to emerge of Ravka's king: he likes women in his court to be beautiful, but Genya also implies that he might be the reason Alina was warned to lock her bedroom door last night. If this is really what Genya is implying, this suggests that the King abuses his power and the women at court suffer for it. However, that Genya warns Alina begins to situate her as a potential friend or ally, since she's willing to look out for Alina.*



*There's clearly a lot of political posturing going on, but Alina has no idea what any of it means. Genya suggests that the royal family is, on the whole, not a family to take seriously and that they perhaps abuse their station. Then, among the Grisha themselves, there's clearly a distinct hierarchy—and Genya is at the bottom, though the reason for this isn't yet clear. Alina, meanwhile, needs to not look like a Grisha so that the Darkling can stay in the King's good graces, suggesting that there may be some tension or mistrust between the King and the Darkling. But when the Darkling seems to get the last word about Alina walking with him, it shows that he is the most powerful of the Grisha.*



*Already, it's becoming clear that the Grisha observe a strict hierarchy—and that Genya is at the very bottom of it. The Darkling also shows that, just as he found and plucked Alina out of the masses, he did the same to Genya, honing her gifts and then giving her a particular task. The difference at this point seems to be that, while Alina will presumably be one of the Grisha and have control of her life, Genya is beholden to the royal family—saying he "gifted" her to the Queen suggests Genya is fairly powerless.*



*Again and again, the Darkling tells Alina he's a dangerous person—the fact that he's never fair suggests that Alina should expect manipulation. As Alina looks around the Grand Palace, it starts to seem more like Ravka's poor are poor because those in power, like the King, choose to enrich themselves rather than help their subjects.*



Finally, the Darkling leads Alina into the throne room, through the ladies and gentlemen assembled and to the golden throne. The King is excited—but he’s a plain, unattractive man. Next to him is a dark man with a priest’s robe emblazoned with the King’s double eagle symbol. The King studies Alina and observes that she’s plain, but he asks for a demonstration. The Darkling claps, filling the room with darkness. Alina feels the Darkling grab her hand, and then she feels the Darkling’s call in her body. She lets something rise inside of her—and light bursts out of her, causing the darkness to disappear. The King insists this is a miracle and gets up to grab and kiss Alina’s hand. Alina’s skin crawls. Then, the King praises the Darkling and leads him away to “make plans.”

The priest stares at Alina in a disturbing way. He reminds Alina of a tomb, but thankfully, he follows the King. Then, the mass of beautiful people converges on Alina. Everyone wants to touch her, but Genya appears and pulls Alina away: the Queen wants to meet her. The Queen is in a sitting room, surrounded by ladies and snuffling dogs. Genya has clearly done work on her: her eyes are too blue, and her hair is too blond. Neither the Queen nor her ladies are as beautiful as Genya. Alina bows to the Queen and then answers the Queen’s questions: she comes from a peasant family, but her parents are dead and she was raised by Duke Keramsov. The Queen says it’s “marvelous” that Alina is an orphan and warns her to not let court corrupt her, implying that it’s corrupted Genya. Genya doesn’t acknowledge the insult.

Clearly annoyed, the Queen dismisses Alina and Genya. In the hall, the Darkling intercepts them. Alina admits that she’s not sure if the Queen liked her, since the Queen kept looking at her like she was vomit. The Darkling says that’s court: nobody likes it, but they all pretend to. He explains that the man in priests’ robes is the Apparat; the man is either a fraud or a fanatic, but he “has his uses.” With this, the Darkling tells Genya to take Alina back to her room and fit her for her **kefta**—which will be black. Horrified, Alina asks if she can wear Summoners’ blue instead. She already feels like she doesn’t belong. The Darkling gives in and walks away. Shocked, Genya says that wearing black would’ve marked Alina as special and important, but Alina snaps that she doesn’t want to be more important than everyone else.

*The King reads as something of a selfish, spoiled child, especially given what Genya said earlier about how much the King loves beautiful women at his court. He’s initially unimpressed with Alina because she’s not all that pretty, but he’s willing to set aside this perceived infraction when he sees what she’s capable of. When Alina observes her skin crawling—but allows the King to kiss her hand anyway—she recognizes how little power she has in this situation. The Darkling and the King are in charge here, and she must play along whether she’s comfortable or not.*



*As Alina describes the Queen, the Queen emerges as a bit of a try-hard: she wants to be the most beautiful woman at court, and she uses Genya to help in this regard, but it’s clear to anyone that she isn’t succeeding. Moreover, the Queen shows how out of touch she is when she insists it’s “marvelous” that Alina is an orphan. This is an insensitive thing to say at any time, but in this context, it suggests that the Queen idealizes difficult peasant life and sees Alina more as a compelling rags-to-riches story than as a person who’s suffered extreme hardship.*



*The Darkling essentially suggests that doing one’s best to fit in is the name of the game at court. It doesn’t matter if people enjoy the intrigue and catty drama or not—they have to conform, or they’re going to be even more miserable. It’s interesting when the Darkling initially insists on Alina’s kefta being black. This will set Alina apart from the others and mark her as powerful, but Alina just wants to fit in. Wearing blue will make her look like just another Summoner, which will be more comfortable for her. Her biggest concern, for now, is fitting in.*



Alina realizes that Genya's kefta is the same color as the servants' uniforms—that explains why she thinks Alina is silly for refusing to wear black. When they reach Alina's room, Genya summons a seamstress and asks if Alina wants to eat dinner with the other Grisha. Alina asks if Genya would stay and eat with her here, and Genya hesitates but asks the servant for dinner for two. Then, Genya explains that Corporalki, Summoners, and Fabrikators don't mix. She says she's happy to stay and eat, but other Grisha might not like Alina spending time with Genya. The other Grisha don't think what Genya does is valuable, and she's mocked because she's "the Queen's pet." Alina wonders if the King is also involved and wonders how it must feel to be separated from the Grisha and not a real member of court.

The seamstress arrives to fit Alina for her kefta, and Alina insists it be made in blue. The food arrives after, and fortunately, it's not too exotic. Genya gossips about people Alina doesn't know over dinner and promises to come get Alina for breakfast in the morning. She warns Alina to rest, as tomorrow she'll meet Baghra—an "absolute treat." With this, Genya leaves. Suddenly, Alina's excitement disappears and she's exhausted, anxious, and lonely. She dresses for bed, admires Genya's work on her face again, and climbs into bed smiling. Alina listens to everyone else going to sleep in neighboring rooms. She's never had her own room before, and it's lonely. Crying, she wonders if this is a dream. Maybe she'll wake up tomorrow and be able to tell Mal about it.

## CHAPTER 8

Alina wakes up early the next morning and lies in bed, studying her decorated ceiling, until a servant knocks. The servant has Alina's kefta and the rest of her new clothes. Alina has never had such nice clothes and never thought she'd wear a kefta, so she puts off getting dressed. But finally, she pulls on breeches, a long blouse, and the soft leather boots. The clothes mimic traditional peasant dress, but they're finer than anything a peasant would wear. Finally, Alina puts on the kefta. The midnight blue garment looks more like a gown than a coat, and the sleeves are embroidered with gold to denote that Alina can channel light.

*Understanding that Genya's kefta marks her as a servant (though the fact that she's wearing a kefta at all also marks her as a Grisha) highlights for Alina that Genya doesn't fit in anywhere. Alina might really like Genya, but she doesn't yet have the power to force others to be nice and accept Genya—especially now that she's chosen to become just another Summoner. The fact that Genya tries to explain so much to Alina about how the social structure works indicates that she realizes it's in Alina's best interests to fit in—and even if it might hurt, she will understand if Alina chooses to prioritize her reputation and social standing over their burgeoning friendship.*



*That Alina continues to insist on getting a blue kefta isn't just a sign that she wants to fit in with the Summoners; it also suggests that at this point she's not particularly concerned with pleasing the Darkling. But though she stands up for herself in this regard, once she's on her own, Alina can't ignore the fact that she's lost and lonely in a totally unfamiliar world. Genya is making things feel a bit better, but she's not a lifelong friend like Mal—and even she speaks in puzzles, as when she refuses to say more about Baghra.*



*Putting on the kefta symbolizes that Alina is stepping into a new identity: that of a Summoner and a Grisha. The clothes themselves add more nuance to the Queen saying earlier that it's "marvelous" that Alina is a poor orphan. The wealthy upper classes in Ravka clearly idealize the poor and want to emulate them—however, they're not entirely successful because the fabrics are so fine.*





Genya arrives to take Alina to breakfast. As soon as they enter the lavish hall, two Summoner girls swoop in. Marie introduces herself and Nadia and, turning her back to Genya, invites Alina to sit with them. Genya tells Alina to go before Alina can protest, but she insists on giving Alina a tour of the grounds herself after—the Darkling’s orders. Alina follows Marie to the appropriate table, which Marie says is on the Darkling’s right side. She disdainfully points to where the Corporalki sit across the table, and Alina doesn’t say that they sit just as close to him as the Summoners do. Alina is shocked, though, when Marie says the Darkling never even eats with the Grisha. Breakfast is, disgustingly, pickled herring and rye bread, but there are plums and sugar to go in tea.

Alina endures Summoners questioning her about her life until Genya appears to rescue her. Genya notes that pickled herring is “vile,” and confides in Alina that because she cured the cook’s daughter’s acne, the cook sends her pastries. But she warns Alina to say nothing; the Darkling wants them to eat “hearty peasant fare.” Grisha try so hard to emulate serf ways—but Alina finds it ironic that they eat “hearty peasant fare” off of porcelain plates.

Leading Alina through the Little Palace, Genya points out the doors leading to the Darkling’s chambers and the massive library. Its grandness makes Keramzin feel shabby, which makes Alina feel bad. She wonders if she can have guests and if Mal could maybe visit, but Genya drags her along. Genya hurries Alina past the Corporalki practice rooms to the Fabrikators’ workshops. They approach a reedy man in need of a haircut. Genya greets the man, David, but he barely acknowledges her. When Genya says Alina is the Sun Summoner, David says the glass disks he’s working on are for her. As Genya leads Alina away, she says David is skilled, but uninterested in anything not made of metal or glass. She clearly has a crush on David.

Genya leads Alina out to a lake, where the Summoners’ pavilions are. When Alina notices small children playing, Genya points out the school, where Grisha children are trained once their talents are discovered. Alina wonders why the Grisha Examiners didn’t discover her talent years ago—the Shadow Fold might already be destroyed, and she and Mal probably would’ve forgotten each other. When the kids finish their education, Genya explains, they join the Second Army or, if they’re very talented, they stay here and serve the Darkling. Their families are “compensated handsomely,” but Genya reveals she hasn’t seen her parents since she was five. This is her home. Alina wonders if this is true—she’s never felt at home anywhere. Perhaps she and Genya aren’t so different.

*Marie and Nadia’s entrance highlights how catty and hierarchical things are among the Grisha. Genya, because she’s thought of as little better than a servant, is ignored and insulted. Alina, on the other hand, is held up as the best because she’s perceived as the Darkling’s new favorite. Marie is able to give Alina insight into just how absurd this power struggle is—as Alina notes, the Summoners and the Corporalki sit equally close to the Darkling, and yet Marie clearly looks down on the Corporalki. It seems as though Alina has never had to deal with this kind of social structure before, so once again, she’s lost.*



*Other Grisha might scorn Genya, but being a Tailor clearly has its perks: she can barter for better food. The implication is that nobody really likes the “hearty peasant fare,” but again, the point is to emulate the peasants and seem relatable to them. Given how Alina described people like Eva being afraid of Grisha, though, it doesn’t seem like the Darkling’s attempts to make Grisha relatable are working.*



*Alina makes it seem like as a child she thought Keramzin’s library was pretty great—but now that she’s seen the library at the Little Palace, she can’t ignore how provincial her upbringing was. This happened to Alina in the army as well, but it seems far more common of an occurrence at the Little Palace. Discovering that Genya has a crush on David humanizes her a bit; she might be physically perfect, but she perhaps longs for someone who doesn’t just care about her beauty.*



*Seeing the school is a bit sad for Alina. These young Grisha are going to help do great things for Ravka—but at the expense of getting to stay with their families. Alina is an orphan, unlike Genya, and it still seems likely to her that growing up without one’s parents leaves a mark, even if Genya isn’t totally willing to admit it. That Alina seems to look back in shock and sadness about how she wasn’t identified earlier in life illustrates how completely she now trusts the Darkling. She believes his insistence that she can change the world—for once, she matters and is vitally important to something.*



Reaching a path leading into the woods, Genya points further along to a stone hut nestled in the trees. It's Baghra's hut, and Alina doesn't want to be late. Alina knocks, waits, knocks again, and then opens the door. It's extremely hot inside—and a small, clearly old woman in a kefta of “indeterminate color” tells Alina she's late. Baghra asks Alina why she wasn't tested as a kid and then, inexplicably, gives Alina a bleak expression. She says she hopes Alina is stronger than she looks and grips Alina's wrist.

*Baghra immediately emerges as something of a mystery: it's not clear who she is, why she lives in this hut alone, or what her power even is. However, Baghra's “bleak” expression suggests that she knows something Alina doesn't, though what this might be is left a mystery for now. Whatever it is, though, Baghra hopes that Alina is strong—implying that Alina will have to fight something later on.*



## CHAPTER 9

Baghra is an amplifier like the Darkling, so when she grips Alina's wrist, sunlight floods the hut. But as soon as Baghra tells Alina to call light on her own, Alina can't do it. The rest of the day is just as disastrous. Tutors assign Alina a stack of books to read and Summoners talk at lunch about the advanced subjects they're studying. Alina tunes out until Marie invites her to walk with her and Nadia to combat training. Marie's constant anti-Corporalki chatter is obnoxious, and Alina feels even worse when she notices the Apparat watching her from the trees.

*Alina's inability to call light makes her feel as though she's never going to be successful here. After all, how can she ever be a useful Grisha if she can't wield her own power? This contributes to her growing sense that she doesn't belong here. She's also at a disadvantage because she doesn't have the years of study that Marie and Nadia do, so she can't participate in the chatter about advanced subjects.*



The combat instructor, Botkin, isn't Grisha; he's a former Shu Han mercenary who's fought everywhere. Alina can't hide how weak and clumsy she is, so Botkin taunts her mercilessly—and tells her to come early tomorrow for individual training. Though she's exhausted and overwhelmed, Alina forces herself to go to dinner with the other Grisha. She joins Marie and Nadia and asks where Genya is. Snickering, Marie says Genya eats and sleeps at the Grand Palace so she's always available to the Queen—and the King. Suddenly, Alina isn't hungry.

*Again, Alina feels more and more like she doesn't belong: even Botkin, who isn't Grisha, thinks she's weak and ineffective. All Alina wants is to fit in and, it seems, blend in. This may be one reason she asks about Genya—Genya doesn't make her feel quite so conspicuous as everyone else does. What Marie says, though, suggests that Genya might be sleeping with the King, and that this is something the other Grisha hold against her. It's unclear at this point, though, if the relationship is consensual or not.*



Alina nurses tea through the rest of dinner until Ivan bursts out the Darkling's doors and the room falls silent. He calls Alina to him and leads her into the Darkling's war room. Alina is terrified; did Baghra share how awful she is? But instead of chastising her, the Darkling asks how her day was and assures her things will get better. He notes, though, that she'll have a difficult path, as Etherealki usually pair up to work—but she's the only one of her kind. With this, he leads her down some hallways and points to a door that leads to the dormitories; this way, she can avoid the other Grisha. Alina is floored—he just wanted to ask about her day? But the Darkling assures her he's not a monster.

*Given how terribly Alina's day has gone and how frightened she is of the Darkling, it makes sense that she'd expect the worst from him: it's not silly for her to think that she has disappointed him. So, it's very shocking to discover that he just wants to check on her. Initially, Alina is unwilling to just accept that the Darkling might actually be a nice person who cares about her; she's seen too much to think his interest is innocent. But the Darkling wants Alina to think that his terrible reputation is overblown, which is why he insists he's not a monster.*



Unable to stop herself, Alina says that she always expects the worst—and the Darkling could ship her off or cut her in half, so it seems fair to feel intimidated. He acknowledges that this makes sense and then, grabbing her hand, asks why she rubs the scar on her palm. Alina says it's an old habit and that she got the scar in Keramzin. Out of nowhere, the Darkling asks if the tracker—Mal—is also an orphan, and if he's any good. Alina says, truthfully, that the joke at Keramzin was that he could make rabbits out of rocks. With this, the Darkling ushers Alina through the door.

*Here, Alina explains exactly why she doesn't feel like it's a good idea to just take the Darkling's kindness at face value: he's one of the most powerful men in the country and can probably do whatever he wants. When the Darkling asks about the scar and then about Mal, it's a subtle clue that the scar and Mal are perhaps somehow connected. But for now, it's unclear what the connection is—or, for that matter, why the Darkling is curious about Mal at all.*



## CHAPTER 10

Alina's days are awful and frustrating. It starts to seem absurd that the Darkling thinks she has powers at all, let alone the ability to destroy the Fold. Both Baghra and Botkin work Alina hard and reprimand her, but Alina struggles to improve. She sleeps poorly and isn't hungry, which leads Baghra to think Alina is purposefully fighting her power. The Etherealki often practice by the lakeside together, but Alina never joins them. Because the Darkling fears assassination attempts, Alina can't join the Grisha on weekend outings. She seldom sees the Darkling either; he apparently spends most of his time traveling. Because he never acknowledges her, Alina figures he's mad that she's such a failure. And she struggles to understand Grisha theory at all—though she does note that the word for people without Grisha gifts is *otkazat'sya*, a word for orphan.

*In every way, Alina feels lost and alone. She's dealing with seemingly absurd accusations that she doesn't want to be successful, which make little sense, since Alina realizes that developing her power is how she's going to make a place for herself at the Little Palace. Because she feels so out of place and ashamed of her perceived failures, Alina also pulls away from potential friends. In terms of her education, she's also years behind, and this feels overwhelming. It's difficult for her to realize that the word for non-Grisha people is also a word for orphan, since Alina is an actual orphan—and at this point, she also feels like an *otkazat'sya*.*



One afternoon, as Alina is reading in the library, the Apparat appears and looms over her. He's the only other person in the library, and he sits down. Alina tries not to inhale his damp, dead smell as he explains that he's a spiritual advisor and wants to be friends. He offers her a gift: a small book of saints. The Apparat says that peasants love saints but hate Grisha—and he believes this is because Grisha don't suffer like saints. But Alina, he says, has suffered and will suffer more. Suddenly afraid, Alina looks up. But the Apparat's eyes are full of pity, not malice. Alina makes excuses and runs away. She tosses the book in a bottom drawer and thinks about the Documents Tent—and how much she misses Mal. She's been writing him weekly, but he hasn't responded.

*The Apparat's attempt to befriend Alina is frightening for her, mostly because he essentially insists that Alina is going to suffer enough to eventually be called a saint. Saints usually die in brutal ways, so this is not a comforting thought. Interestingly though, the Apparat puts his finger on the public relations issue the Grisha have with the general populace: they're not relatable or sympathetic. So, despite his frightening demeanor and awful smell, the Apparat might have useful insights.*



## CHAPTER 11

Alina doesn't think things can get worse, but they do, on the day that the black-haired Grisha who seemed interested in Mal arrives. Marie groans and mutters that her name is Zoya; she's a year older and "horrible," as she's extremely snobby. Alina rolls her eyes and wonders if Zoya might know where Mal is, but it makes her sick to consider asking. Just then, Zoya comes over and hugs Marie and Nadia. They all smile fake smiles. Marie introduces Alina and Zoya pulls Alina into a hug—and whispers in Alina's ear that she "stink[s] of Keramzin." Alina is shocked, and she dwells on Zoya's insult all day.

Zoya joins the Grisha at their combat lesson, and Botkin kisses her on the cheek. Alina isn't surprised when Botkin has her spar with Zoya. She is surprised, though, when she evades Zoya's first jab—and after a minute, manages to trip Zoya. Furious, Zoya slashes the air with her arm, sending Alina flying backward and into the wall. Botkin yells at Zoya and Alina faints as servants lift her onto a stretcher. Later, in the infirmary, Marie and Nadia tell Alina she broke a rib and that Zoya is in huge trouble with the Darkling. But when Alina asks why Zoya is so mean, they explain that she's wildly jealous. After all, she's just a Squaller, while Alina is the Sun Summoner: Alina is the Darkling's favorite. Alina can tell Nadia is jealous too, and she wonders how Marie and Nadia talk about her when she's not around.

Alina falls asleep after a Healer ushers Marie and Nadia out. She wakes up again when it's dark, pours herself water, and opens the window. The Apparat startles her when he appears out of the shadows. He asks if she's well and says it's essential she stay healthy. Alina's panic rises. The Apparat continues that in border villages, people are making altars to Alina—they think she's a saint. She's becoming a threat to something powerful enough to topple kings and the Darkling: faith. As the Apparat reaches for Alina, Alina knocks her water glass to the floor, where it shatters. A Healer enters and the Apparat silently slips away before he's noticed. The Healer ushers Alina back into bed. Once she's alone again, Alina turns on her lamp. If people are praying for her to save them, she's letting down all of Ravka by continuing to fail.

*Though Marie and Nadia are clear to Alina that they detest Zoya, part of being at court is pretending that they like her. This is why they all hug and share fake smiles. But Zoya ultimately shows how one can weaponize this kind of a social structure when she quietly and privately insults Alina while hugging her. The goal is to make Alina feel out of place and unwelcome while not looking like a jerk—and it seems to work.*



*Though Alina is far more focused on evading Zoya than on her broken ribs, the fact that she trips Zoya at all suggests she's getting better—she's not as incompetent as she thinks she is. However, chatting with Marie and Nadia later makes Alina feel like perhaps these two aren't actually friends. They're also jealous of the attention Alina gets from the Darkling. Generally speaking, this suggests that a lot of the Grisha hierarchy is based on how close a person is to the Darkling. Getting close to him is an honor—and it doesn't seem to matter how powerful and frightening it is to actually be close to the Darkling.*



*What's particularly disturbing about the Apparat is that he tends to approach Alina when she's alone and has her guard down—that is, when she's vulnerable. In this sense, he seems predatory and dangerous. What he has to say, though, suggests that Alina might have more power than she thinks. Unlike the other Grisha, Alina has the people's love—she can make them hope for a better future, and she seems relatable. But this just puts an even heavier weight on Alina, as she realizes there are thousands of people who would probably be really upset if they knew how poorly all her lessons were going.*



Genya visits in the morning and is unconcerned about the Apparat—though she agrees that Alina should move back to her room. She asks to fix Alina’s dark circles, but Alina refuses and asks if Genya could try to track down Mal with her Grand Palace connections (he’s not dead, since he’s not on the casualty lists). Genya refuses to look for Mal unless Alina lets her fix the dark circles, so Alina complies. Later, she moves back to her room and tries to read. She’s certain people will be gossiping about her after the altercation with Zoya. As Alina gets up, she notices her reflection in the mirror. She looks ill and scrawny, not like a Grisha. Why can’t she access her power? Zoya is awful, but she’s right: Alina doesn’t belong here.

*Mal is the only person who’s ever made Alina feel fully welcome and at home, so it’s extremely difficult not knowing if he’s okay—or if he’s mad at her somehow. That Genya doesn’t tease Alina about him, though, suggests that Genya might be stepping up and becoming a closer friend. Despite that, though, Alina still feels wholly out of place. This adds to Alina’s growing depression and to her sense of failure.*



## CHAPTER 12

Surprisingly, the next morning is fine: Zoya ignores Alina at breakfast and it’s a beautiful day. But when Alina reaches Baghra’s hut, she hears angry voices inside. Alina knocks and lets herself in but tries to leave again as the Darkling is there and is clearly furious. Baghra snaps for Alina to come in and Alina tells the Darkling she’s fine, but the Darkling warns Baghra to leave Alina alone. Perplexingly, she says that the Darkling would like that. They argue for a minute and then, Baghra says that “the boy” (the Darkling) wants to get Alina an amplifier. Alina is relieved and hopeful, but when she expresses interest, Baghra snorts.

*Alina is too emotional to pay close attention to Baghra and the Darkling’s argument, but what they say is extremely important. The Darkling, for instance, warns Baghra to leave Alina alone—and Baghra suggests that this would be ideal for the Darkling. It’s unclear what’s going on here, but this adds to the perception that Baghra and the Darkling know something Alina doesn’t. They’re also clearly talking about Alina and are doing so in a way that doesn’t really give Alina a say in anything. Alina accepts this because she feels so low, but it also implies that they don’t fully respect that she’s a person in her own right.*



The Darkling asks Alina if she’s heard of Morozova’s herd. When Baghra mocks that the deer are fairy tales, he leads Alina outside to speak privately. Alina shares what Ana Kuya always said about the deer: they’re magical, white, appear at twilight, and can grant wishes if a hunter catches one and spares its life. The Darkling laughs, a lovely sound. The deer are real and powerful, but they’re not magical and they don’t grant wishes. His men have never seen the creatures, but they’ve seen signs of them. Tapping Alina’s collarbone, the Darkling says that if they can kill **Morozova’s stag**, Alina can have a necklace: the most powerful amplifier ever. She needs the most powerful one if she’s to destroy the Fold.

*Though the Darkling insists Ana Kuya’s story about the deer is a fairy tale, it’s interesting what the story actually suggests: that the deer are willing to help those who show them mercy. The Darkling presents an opposite view: that if one forcibly kills Morozova’s stag, then they can take the stag’s power and use it as an amplifier. Noting how lovely the Darkling’s laugh is suggests that this is an emotionally—and perhaps sexually—charged moment for Alina. The Darkling is beginning to seem more human and relatable to her, and he’s also trying very hard to help her.*



When Alina asks if she could practice with a different amplifier in the meantime, the Darkling says she should know enough theory by now to know it doesn’t work that way. Choking back tears, Alina says there’s a lot of theory to get through, and she can’t even summon a sunbeam. The Darkling insists he’s not worried. **Morozova’s stag** is meant for Alina, and he needs Alina to trust him on this. They’re going to change the world. Her heart pounding, Alina says she’s not that type, but he gives her a searching look. Then, asking her to keep Morozova’s stag a secret, the Darkling strides away. When Alina turns and Baghra notices her blushing, Baghra harumphs.

*The Darkling essentially tells Alina that if he trusts her, she can be even more special than she already was—something that Alina seems to secretly want, despite insisting that she’s not capable of changing the world. Baghra seems well aware that Alina is developing confusing feelings for the Darkling—and she doesn’t like it. But given the apparent disagreements between Baghra and the Darkling, it makes sense that she wouldn’t want Alina getting involved with him.*



The first chance she gets, Alina goes to the library to research **Morozova's herd** and amplifiers. She finds little about the deer, but a lot about amplifiers. Grisha, she reads, can only have one, but the reason is hard to grasp—it seems like it's a check on Grisha power. Alina thinks of the Black Heretic and how his greed created the Shadow Fold. All of Ravka is suffering because of that man's greed.

Fall gives way to winter, but there's still fresh fruit from greenhouses at breakfast. Alina still can't summon anything and has a poor appetite, but she's slightly less miserable because she trusts the Darkling. She even begins joining Marie and Nadia in leisure activities. Baghra is furious and accuses Alina of not trying, but Alina is just tired of failing. Zoya continues to ignore Alina. Still, though, Alina feels like she's a failure who doesn't belong—she feels like a fraud when she receives her winter wool **kefta**.

As Alina walks to Baghra's hut in the new **kefta**, a servant appears and gives her a note. It's Genya's update on Mal: he's in Tsbeyra and is fine, so Alina can write to his regiment. Alina is hurt: she's *been* writing to his regiment, and he hasn't replied. Has he even opened the letters? Is she embarrassing him by continuing to write? She remembers how she and Mal used to skate on the frozen creek at Duke Keramsov's estate and crumples Genya's note. She wants to forget Mal and Keramzin, but instead she has to go suffer with Baghra.

Alina slams the door open and sits down across from Baghra. Laughing, Baghra asks what Alina is angry about; is she tired of waiting for her magic deer? Alina says she's sick of the food and her **kefta**, and she's sick of Botkin and Baghra. Baghra says this isn't it. Is Alina homesick? She shouldn't be, because she has the opportunity to be the Darkling's "pet." Alina flushes, but she won't bring up Mal. Instead, she stands up and spits that this is a waste of time. Baghra insists that Alina is trying too hard to be something she isn't, and she asks what's waiting for Alina outside. Alina shouts that nobody and nothing is waiting for her.

*Though Alina might not grasp all the theory, she seems to agree with the idea that Grisha should have some checks on their power. She infers that the Black Heretic might not have been able to create the Shadow Fold in the first place had there been more guardrails or checks to stop him.*



*The fresh fruit at breakfast highlights how well the Grisha live compared to Ravka's peasants: they have the means to keep greenhouses with fruit trees warm all winter. But this opulence isn't making Alina feel any better. Indeed, Alina seems to become even more disaffected as the winter arrives. Morozova's stag, at this point, represents an end to her seemingly endless failures—so in a way, Baghra is right. Continuing to try seems silly when soon, hopefully, Alina won't have to try so hard anymore.*



*Alina has a lot of fond childhood memories of playing with Mal—but they're becoming less comforting now that it seems like Mal is ignoring her. Her new kefta also makes her feel like she doesn't fit in, since it's more luxurious than anything she's had before. So, while Alina doesn't feel like she fits with Mal anymore, she also doesn't feel at home at the Little Palace.*



*Baghra insists that Alina ostensibly has everything she wants: the promise of an amplifier, a luxurious life, and the Darkling's favor. (Though calling Alina his "pet" is ominous and suggests that Alina won't have any control if the two begin a relationship—she'll be more like a plaything.) But it seems to strike a chord for Alina when Baghra essentially points out that Alina is totally alone. Nobody here is particularly friendly, and Mal isn't writing her back.*



Alina realizes she just spoke the truth—and she remembers what happened with the Grisha Examiners. She remembers Mal calling for her as the woman in red, an amplifier herself, gripped Alina’s wrist. Alina felt the thing rising in her to respond, but she also knew that if she gave in, she’d never see Mal again. So, she pushed it away. Mal had made her life at Keramzin worth living, but she’s been using all her energy to keep this secret since that day. But now, Mal has left Alina behind. Baghra is right: Alina wants to go home and grow old with Mal in their meadow, but Mal has moved on. Alina’s grief seems to dissolve a knot inside of her. She reaches for the thing inside her and apologizes to it—and light pours out of her. This power is hers, and Alina feels great.

*This is a watershed moment for Alina. Essentially, Alina has been rejecting and hiding a huge part of herself, all so she’d fit with Mal—and she even characterizes this as a sort of violence against herself. This is why she apologizes to the thing in her. As Alina makes this realization, she also realizes that she has to accept who and what she is. Doing so is immediately cathartic: not only can Alina summon light, but she also feels whole and fulfilled for seemingly the first time in her life. She now has something to hold onto that belongs only to her, and this makes her feel more secure than she ever has.*



## CHAPTER 13

That afternoon, Alina joins the other Etherealki and summons light for them. Suddenly, life is easy. Alina sleeps well and has an appetite. Genya shares the hilarious rumors circulating about why Alina changed—such as that the Darkling cured her with his blood and an “extract of diamonds.” Alina’s lessons with Baghra aren’t pleasant, but they make progress. Baghra encourages Alina to realize that her power is part of her, like her heart, and it’s not going to just refuse to work. Alina wonders if Baghra wants her to grasp some hidden meaning in her words, though she can’t figure out what that might be. She finds she now enjoys Botkin’s lessons and is improving—especially since she’s learning to use mirrors embedded in her gloves that let her bounce light into opponents’ eyes. Botkin even presents her with a Grisha steel knife.

*As soon as Alina accepts who she is and makes peace with her power, she suddenly begins taking an interest in the world and the people around her. Further, Alina no longer thinks of her body as her enemy—it’s fun to see what it can do. This suggests that Alina can only begin to fit in after she accepts herself and who she is. Most importantly, this also helps Alina brush off rumors that she might have found devastating prior to this change. However, mysteries remain, such as what (or even if) Baghra is trying to teach Alina more than she’s letting on.*



The holiday season passes pleasantly, and Alina feels more comfortable with her fellow Summoners. However, she prefers spending time with Genya in her room, listening to Genya’s tales of the opulent parties taking place at the Grand Palace. Genya also tells Alina about the winter fete that all Grisha attend, along with the royal family and many nobles and military heroes. They discuss the two princes—one of whom might be illegitimate—and Alina assures Genya that David will come around soon. Alina never mentions Mal to Genya.

*Alina continues to feel more at home in the Little Palace now that she has accepted who she is. Still, she can’t escape her roots as an orphan who’s always felt out of place, which helps explain why she still feels such a close connection to Genya. Alina also seems more confident that Genya actually likes her, which helps her feel as though Genya’s friendship is, perhaps, beginning to fill the hole left by Mal.*



One afternoon, while the other Grisha are away, Genya convinces Alina to sneak over to the Grand Palace to try on the Queen's clothes. They spend hours playing dress-up, and Alina is shocked by her reflection in the mirror. She's not mousy anymore; she's pretty and has shape. Making Alina realize this seems to be Genya's point. The girls are so preoccupied that Alina is late for her evening lesson with Baghra. Alina missed dinner and Baghra seems angrier than usual, but with coaching, Alina spreads a beam of light all the way across the lake. Baghra shouts for more in a tone that scares Alina, and Alina loses her focus.

From behind Alina, the Darkling says it isn't enough. Baghra argues Alina could do just fine with any amplifier, but the Darkling insists she'll get the **stag**. Alina pipes up that she can work harder, but the Darkling interjects that all of Ravka is at stake. They can't risk it. Chastised, Alina says she's useless without Morozova's stag. Baghra cackles, but the Darkling tells her to go. She says everyone will suffer because of his pride and returns to her hut. The Darkling and Alina head for the Little Palace. He says the herd is in Fjerda and then says Alina isn't useless. Alina insists she is; she's only good for "midnight picnics" without Morozova's stag. She's grateful for everything, but she feels like she's earned nothing.

Wearily, the Darkling says Baghra might be right. Alina asks why he lets Baghra bother him and suggests it's good for him—Baghra is the only person who isn't frightened or trying to impress the Darkling all the time. Alina asks what Baghra's power is, but the Darkling says nobody is old enough to remember. Then, he asks if Alina would think he's crazy if he said he believes they can find the **stag**. Alina asks why he cares what she thinks—and then he kisses her. Just as he pulls back, Ivan comes around the corner with a knowing grin. The Darkling leaves with Ivan to meet with the Apparat, leaving Alina standing alone.

Alina can't believe what happened. She calls for dinner in her room and wishes she could talk to Genya, but she's too afraid to try and go find her at the Grand Palace. Instead, Alina goes downstairs and joins Marie, Nadia, and Sergei at the *banya*, the public baths. Ana Kuya always called them barbaric, but Alina realizes now she was very snobby. After hours of fun and alcohol, Alina returns to her room. Her mind isn't quiet, though. She summons a glow on the ceiling—but thinking of the Darkling's kiss causes her to lose her concentration.

*Recall that Grisha are, on the whole, very attractive people. Now that Alina realizes she's also an attractive person, she feels more like a competent Grisha and can survive this difficult lesson with Baghra. And even though Alina loses focus here, she's still in a cycle of positive reinforcement: she feels better about herself and therefore gets better in her lessons, which then makes her feel better about herself.*



*Once again, Baghra seems to have some ulterior motive as she bickers with the Darkling—she seems to not want Alina to get the stag. Her warning that people will suffer because of the Darkling's pride also seems ominous, particularly since it was the Black Heretic's pride and greed that created the Shadow Fold initially. The Darkling starts to look more like a savior to Alina, though, as he assures her that she's useful and belongs here. Unlike Baghra and even Zoya, Marie, and Nadia, he's not going to make Alina feel unwelcome.*



*Despite the Darkling expressing interest in Alina and insisting that she's special, Alina still believes she doesn't matter much. This is why it's such a shock when the Darkling kisses her—Alina wanted him to be attracted to her on some level, but it never seemed entirely possible. Still, the kiss seems somewhat less positive when Ivan appears and the Darkling leaves immediately. Alina is left off-balance.*



*Now, Alina can't ignore or explain away the Darkling's interest: she is special to him, and she's not sure what to do with the attention. It's not entirely clear, though, whether the Darkling's attention is actually a good thing. When the thought of the kiss destroys Alina's concentration, it suggests that the Darkling is a distraction from the work she's doing to harness her power. This might not matter when Morozova's stag shows up, but it's a problem at this point.*





## CHAPTER 14

As spring approaches, all anyone can talk about is the fete at the Grand Palace. The Grisha Summoners are supposed to put on a demonstration, though Genya warns Alina to not call it “performing,” as the Darkling thinks the whole thing is a waste of time. Alina agrees; Ravka has been at war for a century, so the party seems frivolous. Nevertheless, she’s excited. Baghra begins accusing Alina of dreaming of her “dark prince” when Alina loses focus, and annoyingly, Baghra is usually right. But Alina keeps it a secret that the Darkling kissed her and tells herself he probably kissed lots of girls. She also feels worse and worse about herself, as she knows she’s not strong enough to destroy the Fold. To make things worse, the Apparatus is everywhere. Alina struggles to avoid him.

There are no classes on the day of the fete, but Alina goes to train with Botkin anyway. She then has a hurried dinner and a bath. To Alina’s surprise, she’s excited—she wouldn’t have been a month ago. But she’s also worried, as her new silk **kefta** hasn’t arrived yet. Fortunately, Genya waltzes in, gorgeous as ever, and offers to do Alina’s hair. Genya explains that the Queen will ultimately go to the fete, but for now, she’s pretending to be too sick to go because she wants people to fawn over her. This is why Genya is able to do Alina’s hair now.

Alina casually asks if the Darkling has arrived, and Genya says he arrived yesterday and is probably very busy. After a minute, Genya says they all feel the Darkling’s pull, but he’s not like other Grisha. Genya mischievously admits she’d totally sleep with the Darkling, but she’d never let herself fall in love with him. Just as Genya finishes Alina’s hair, a servant arrives at the door with several boxes. Alina lays the biggest box on the bed and opens it. The **kefta** inside is black, with the Darkling’s gold symbol at the neck. Alina is nervous; she resents the Darkling for making her stand out, but she’s also excited. She pulls on the kefta and emerges from behind the dressing screen.

With a grin, Genya drags Alina down the hallway and into Zoya’s room. She announces that on the Darkling’s orders, Alina needs to use this room. Zoya pales when she sees Alina’s black **kefta**, and she leaves the room. Genya admits she only brought Alina in here to see the look on Zoya’s face, but she does steal some of Zoya’s makeup to darken Alina’s lashes. Alina doesn’t look sickly anymore: she looks like a temptress. The girls race back to Alina’s room, where Alina puts on silk slippers and black jewelry. Alina catches a troubled expression on Genya’s face. Hesitantly, Genya warns Alina to be careful of powerful men like the Darkling.

*Despite Alina’s genuine excitement, she also can’t ignore the fact that parties like this seem to be part of why Ravka’s poor are so poor—money goes to putting on parties rather than feeding hungry people. The way Alina describes her difficulty focusing and worsening self-esteem suggests that the Darkling’s kiss is a dangerous, unwanted distraction. She’s too busy worrying about him— and about what he might think—to focus on what she wants or on her education.*



*Having Genya around to do her hair makes Alina feel more secure, and perhaps even like she’ll stand out: Genya’s whole gift revolves around making people beautiful, so Alina may come out of this better dressed than her peers. Genya reveals that court drama is still alive and well; everyone, she insists, wants attention. But note, too, that Genya doesn’t have much power when it comes to the Queen. Rather than coming and going like the Grisha, she’s expected to be there whenever the Queen wants her.*



*Essentially, Genya proposes that the Darkling is fine for a good time, but he’s someone to be wary of. The black kefta helps explain why: the Darkling is controlling, and he always wants to get his way. As Alina notes, she wasn’t asked what color kefta she wanted; now, she has no choice but to wear what the Darkling wants her to. However, she doesn’t see this as overbearing or inappropriate because she’s developing feelings for the Darkling. She’s willing to look past the possible red flags and live in the moment.*



*This moment is humorous—it’s satisfying to see Zoya react like this—but it also gives Alina a taste of how the night will go, since she’s wearing black. Recall that black is the Darkling’s color exclusively, so Alina will stand out all night because she’s the only other person in black. Genya’s warning, though, suggests that Alina should think critically about what’s happening here. The Darkling is powerful, and she implies that the Darkling could be manipulating Alina.*



Alina asks Genya what happened with the King. Genya explains that the King “has his way” with many servants, and she got jewelry out of the deal. The worst part is that everyone knows. Alina hugs Genya and says the Darkling should’ve protected her, but Genya says he did. And anyway, he’s beholden to the King like the rest of them—at least for now. But, smiling, Genya says they should go drink champagne. Alina follows, leaving “her worries and Genya’s warnings behind.”

Downstairs, Alina clings to Genya—she’s going to take advantage of the Darkling’s color to keep her friend beside her. The girls walk with the other Grisha to the Grand Palace, and Alina notices that Heartrenders loosely surround the group. They’re protecting her. In the courtyard, troupes of actors perform for guests. A servant arrives with a note for Genya: the Queen will be attending the ball after all, so Genya must go attend to her. Inside, Alina walks with Marie and Nadia. The palace is filled with flowers and jewels, and guests dance and drink. Over the next hour, Alina meets noblemen and military officers. She recognizes Duke Keramsov—but when she greets him, he clearly doesn’t recognize her. It hurts to be reminded that she was such a forgettable orphan.

Alina grabs a champagne flute and leans against a pillar. She’s hot, upset, and misses Mal. People stare as Genya floats across the room to Alina to say that it’s time to get ready for the demonstration. She leads Alina backstage, where they watch Inferni summon flame and Squallers and Tidemakers create glitter and waves. The Darkling comes up behind Alina, startling her, and the orchestra starts to play ominous music. Ivan appears to whisper something clearly good in the Darkling’s ear, and then the Darkling and Alina take the stage. The Darkling claps his hands, spreading darkness through the room. Then, Alina summons a beam of light and directs it toward a mirror David put on the balcony. The light zigzags through the room, bouncing off of mirrors, and then Alina creates a circle of light around herself and the Darkling.

Finally, Alina claps her hands, flooding the room with light so bright that it blinds the nobles. The crowd cheers wildly as the Darkling pulls Alina off the stage. The Darkling says the people know now that things will change, but Alina asks if it’s not true that she’s not strong enough. Grinning a bit, the Darkling says he’s not done with Alina. Suddenly, he grabs her arm and pulls Alina through the crowd. Alina is anxious: these people think she can save them, and they don’t realize she just does tricks. But her mind is overrun with thoughts of the Darkling as he drags her into the Queen’s sitting room and begins to kiss her.

*Genya reveals that sleeping with the King wasn’t consensual. But even more disturbing is that she insists the Darkling protected her. He put her where he knew she’d be sexually abused, which Alina doesn’t think is actually protective at all. Ominously, though, Alina doesn’t delve further into what this might say about the Darkling.*



*At the fete, Alina’s newfound power and her sense that she fits in collide with her past. She enters the fete on top of the world—she’s powerful, she can keep Genya next to her, and she doesn’t mind being conspicuous in her black kefta. However, the fete becomes overwhelming when Alina runs into Duke Keramsov. Alina has many fond memories of Duke Keramsov and of growing up in his care—so it makes her feel terrible to realize that to him, she’s just another orphan. It also suggests that her newfound power and prestige isn’t going to change her past.*



*Readers have already seen Grisha do meaningful military things with their powers, such as propel the sandskiffs and throw flames at the volcra. This demonstration for the nobles, though, perhaps cuts into the idea that the Grisha are an absolutely essential element to Ravka’s military strategy, helping explain why peasants aren’t so enamored with the Grisha. Indeed, this is the King’s party, and in general he seems more interested in beauty and spectacle than in practical things. This party, on the whole, may reflect why the wars in Ravka persist: the King is either not committed or doesn’t care enough.*



*Note the differences between the Darkling’s attitude and Alina’s: the Darkling is exalted and certain of himself, while Alina remains self-conscious and afraid she’s not good enough. And though Alina trusts the Darkling and reciprocates his feelings on some level, she’s also not given any choice in the matter as he leads her away and kisses her. It might be exciting and wanted, but this also highlights how comparatively little power Alina has in this situation.*



Alina has never been kissed like this before. She can tell the Darkling wants her, but she also senses anger. Pulling away, Alina asks if he wants this. The Darkling says he does, but Alina can tell he hates that he wants it. Kissing her neck, the Darkling growls that Ivan brought news that his men found **Morozova's herd**. He should be meeting with them in the war room, but he's not. The problem with wanting, he says, is that wanting makes people weak. With this, he kisses her. It's angry, but Alina doesn't care. His touch still gives her that feeling of surety and power. She forgets Genya's warnings and the Darkling's confusing behavior; the Darkling was right about her and the stag.

As the Darkling grabs Alina's thigh, drunk people slam into the door and continue down the hall. The Darkling pulls away. He says he must go, and Alina flushes with embarrassment: Ana Kuya would say she's no better than a peasant girl with her skirts pulled up. The Darkling asks if he can come to Alina's room later, but Alina is too slow to answer. He leaves her alone and a few minutes later, Alina leaves the room to return to the party. She avoids the Apparat, who tries to grab her and tell her, cryptically, that things are moving too quickly. Alina meets more nobles and then speaks briefly with Fedyor, the Corporalki who saved her on her way to Os Alta.

After an hour, Alina leaves the party. She wonders what it will mean if the Darkling comes tonight. He's probably not in love with her, but it's nice to be wanted. Shaking her head, Alina tells herself to focus on the **stag**—but all she can think about is the Darkling's kiss. Finally, she enters the Little Palace. When she sees the Darkling's doors open, she hides, not wanting to see the Darkling. But soldiers come out the doors—and one of them is Mal. Alina races to him and throws her arms around him, and he tells the soldiers to go ahead.

Mal pulls Alina's arms away and says he came to report to Alina's "master"; he's the one tracking **Morozova's stag**. Alina's happiness disappears as Mal's anger becomes apparent. They argue about Alina's letters—Mal says he never got them. He seems weary and different somehow; there's a new scar on his jaw. Alina begs him to stay longer, but Mal refuses. He says he saw Alina's demonstration. Nobody knew what happened to her or whether she was being tortured, and then he discovers she's living like a princess. Alina asks what happened to Mal and puts a hand on his face. She traces the scar and says that Genya could fix it, but he hisses that he's fine.

*Even though Alina feels mostly sure of herself, this remains a confusing kiss. The Darkling is angry and more powerful than Alina, but he suggests that he's more relatable when he says his desire for Alina makes him weak. And notice how, as the Darkling kisses her, Alina is able to let go of all her doubts and concerns—and Genya's warnings. She fully believes in the Darkling, at least when she's physically close to him. But Genya's warning still implied that Alina shouldn't let her guard down, as she's doing now.*



*Almost immediately after the Darkling leaves her alone, Alina begins to regret her actions—she's been raised to believe that kissing the Darkling like she did is uncouth and low-class, and she's been trained to avoid behaviors that others would associate with poverty. That Alina doesn't immediately invite the Darkling to visit her later highlights how conflicted she is. On some level she is, perhaps, thinking of Genya's warning—but this doesn't necessarily take away from how exciting the kiss was for her.*



*Alina's thought process as she considers the Darkling's potential visit shows how badly she wants to fit in and be important. She's trying to tell herself that it's not a big deal if love doesn't enter into this relationship; the whole point is to feel like she's supposed to be here and like people want her to be here. But once again, Alina can't escape her past: Mal's arrival suggests she'll have to try to reconcile her growing feelings for the Darkling with her previous love for Mal.*



*Neither Alina nor Mal have had all the information they wanted about the other, and now this leads to misunderstandings and an argument. From the outside, it looks like Alina has been living in luxury; Mal has no idea how out of place she has felt. And Alina can tell that Mal has been through a lot and has suffered, but it highlights their differences when Mal reacts so emotionally to the offer to "fix" the scar. His reaction could suggest that he shares many others' distrust of Grisha.*



Mal asks if Alina is happy here, with the Darkling—it's clear to him that the Darkling "owns" Alina. He stares at the Darkling's symbol at the neckline of Alina's **kefta**. Alina insists it's not like that, but it feels like Mal can see right into her mind and see all her dreams about the Darkling. But what right does he have to judge? Mal says again that the Darkling owns Alina, but Alina says the Darkling owns *all* of them—even Mal. Mal turns and strides away. Alina doesn't run after him, for the first time in her life.

*Mal seems to be speaking without thinking, but he unwittingly highlights the disturbing symbolism of Alina's black kefta. Other kefta signify what a Grisha can do, but Alina's black kefta indicates that she belongs to the Darkling, since black is his color exclusively. The insistence that they all belong to the Darkling is also something to keep in mind for later, when this statement becomes particularly prescient.*



## CHAPTER 15

Alina sobs once she's safe in her room. She rubs the scar on her palm and whispers "come back," but she knows Mal won't. After a while, Alina realizes someone is at the door. She opens it to find not the Darkling, but Baghra. Baghra looks frightened, and she snaps for Alina to come with her. Silently, Baghra drags Alina into a servant's staircase and then into an empty room. Locking the door and shoving clothes at Alina, Baghra tells Alina to get dressed. Alina must leave tonight, or she'll be enslaved. Alina listens, perplexed, as Baghra says the Darkling plans to use **Morozova's stag** so he can use the Fold as a weapon and expand it. He'll push it into Fjerda and Shu Han if people don't submit to him. It's clear to Alina that Baghra is unwell.

*That Alina rubs the scar while asking Mal to return reinforces that the scar is somehow connected to him, but the novel will return to this later. Things get suddenly mysterious when Baghra arrives in such a frenzy. Alina is less willing to listen to Baghra right now because she's still spinning after her passionate kiss with the Darkling earlier—and keep in mind that she also believes that the Darkling has been telling her the truth. Now, though, it seems questionable whether the Darkling has been telling the truth—and likely that Baghra might be right, given how the Darkling has already wielded his power over Alina.*



Almost howling now, Baghra says the Darkling has no intention of destroying the Fold. In fact, he created it—the Darkling is the Black Heretic. Alina turns to go fetch Baghra a Healer, but Baghra conjures darkness in her palms. She is the Darkling's mother. Alina is shocked; did the Darkling lie when he said he didn't know what Baghra's power was? But Baghra says the Darkling has faked his death many times, waiting for someone like Alina. He'll be unstoppable with her. Baghra says the Fold itself wasn't a mistake, but the volcra were: they used to be the people who lived in the fertile land the Fold destroyed. The volcra, Baghra says, are all that stop the Darkling from weaponizing the Fold. Once Alina subdues them with sunlight, the Darkling can enter the Fold and expand it.

*It sure seems like the Darkling has been lying to Alina, particularly once Baghra reveals that she's his mother and has been watching him abuse his power for centuries. This revelation also highlights that what makes the Darkling a bad guy is his greed. In addition to greedily destroying fertile land and creating the Fold, if Baghra is to be believed, the Darkling wants to also possess Alina and use her power for his own gain—something that suggests he doesn't see her as a person in her own right. Rather, she's just a tool.*



Alina continues to argue, repeating what the Darkling told her about wanting to reunite Ravka. But Baghra snarls that the Darkling has had centuries to practice lying to lonely and naïve girls. She points out that if Ravka is reunited, the Second Army and Grisha won't be important anymore. The Darkling will just serve the King. But if he controls the Fold, *he's* the one in charge. Then, Baghra explains that the Darkling will force Alina to help him by slaying **Morozova's stag** himself. Putting the antlers around Alina's neck will bind her to him forever. She'll be powerful, but he will control her power.

*Baghra implies that Alina has been an easy target for the Darkling. It's not Alina's fault, but wanting so badly to fit in has made Alina vulnerable to his attentions. She also adds more nuance to how amplifiers work. By using an amplifier to imprison Alina, the Darkling can get around the rule forbidding Grisha from having multiple amplifiers. Finally, Baghra makes it clear that reuniting Ravka is a nice idea in theory, but it's not politically useful for the Darkling to pursue it. In other words, the Darkling cares about getting power for himself, not actually helping Ravkans.*



It's Baghra's pity that convinces Alina. The Darkling clearly lied to her and deliberately kept her waiting for kisses and attention to distract her from his true motives. He surely knows that Alina wanted nothing more than to be wanted, and it seems obvious now that he wouldn't let Grisha fall out of power. Thinking of Alexei and the volcra, Alina asks Baghra what to do.

*Finally, Alina realizes that the Darkling has been using the promise of romance and attention to distract her from asking questions that might have let her on to what he's actually planning. And Alina does want to do what's right and save the world—so her only option, it seems, is to trust Baghra.*



## CHAPTER 16

Baghra tells Alina to leave with performers and travel west, where she'll take a ship across the True Sea—Alina is powerful enough to cross the Fold, thanks to Baghra's training. Alina remembers the Darkling telling Baghra to leave Alina alone, but Alina never questioned why—maybe he wanted to keep her weak. Baghra points Alina across the grounds. Abruptly, Alina asks why Baghra is betraying her own son. The look on Baghra's face is empty, like she's lived too long. She softly says that the Darkling used to be a brilliant boy. She gave him his ambition, and she should've stopped him. Now, she'll stop him before he goes too far. Baghra says she'll post a guard outside Alina's room tomorrow to say she's sick, but Alina says they'll need the guard tonight. Baghra sighs that Alina is foolish.

*As Baghra shares more and more, Alina comes to realize just how manipulative the Darkling perhaps was. She makes it seem like he's been specifically trying to keep Alina in the dark and without information she'd need to protect herself, though thanks to Baghra, Alina is prepared to tackle the Fold. Baghra also makes it clear that trying to stop the Darkling is the only way she believes she can make a real difference in the world. Unlike him, she cares about the people who will die if the Darkling expands the Fold, showing just how much she differs from her son.*



Alina thanks Baghra and, thanks to Botkin's training, hurries purposefully across the lawn. Baghra sends darkness around Alina to hide her. Near the Grand Palace, Alina slips into a troupe's wagon. It carries her out of the grounds and into Os Alta's cobblestone streets. Alina is terrified. She's running from the most powerful man in Ravka, and everyone from the First Army to trackers like Mal will be after her. And what will she do in a strange land where she doesn't speak the language?

*Fortunately for Alina, the Darkling wasn't able to entirely stop her education while she was at the Little Palace. In that sense, the social structure there helped her, even as it also frustrated her. Now, though, she doesn't have the social structure of the palace to protect her—she's essentially declared herself the Darkling's enemy. Refusing to play his game and appease him seems like a dangerous proposition.*



Sometime the next day, the wagon stops and Alina sneaks out. She discovers she's in a town west of Os Alta. Ideally she'd travel on horseback, but Alina is too afraid to buy or steal a horse. She buys some food and continues heading west on foot, stopping for the night to sleep in a hayloft. As she lies there, she wonders what if Baghra is wrong; would the Darkling forgive her if she just went back? But the Darkling is the one who wants to subjugate Alina. Alina knows Baghra is right, and she knows she spoke the truth when she told Mal that the Darkling owns all of them. But part of her wants to belong to the Darkling, and she hates that.

*Even though Alina remains convinced that she's doing the right thing by running away and rejecting the Darkling, this is still really confusing—she can't ignore the part of her that thrived with the Darkling's attention. There was a lot for Alina to gain by playing along, and now those benefits—power, attention, perhaps romance—are out of reach.*



Alina travels for days, first on the Vy and then on hunting paths running parallel to the Vy. Though she's not really lonely, she slips into a church to hear Mass one day. The priest offers a prayer for Alina, the Sun Summoner who's going to save Ravka. Alina hurries away, feeling terrible. The people will have every right to hate her now that she's running away from Ravka.

*Interestingly, Baghra told Alina to get away from the Darkling but not to beat him and destroy the Fold. So, Baghra's thinking was still very narrow and focused on Alina's safety, rather than that of all Ravkans. This doesn't sit well with Alina, who doesn't want to abandon Ravka's poor.*



Finally, Alina gets close to Ryevost. This means making a choice: she can either continue along the heavily populated river or go into the remote Petrazoi mountains. Alina decides to stop in the city to purchase a bedroll and food. The crowds are overwhelming, and Alina is terrified someone will find her. But when she comes upon a group of soldiers, they ignore her. The Darkling certainly knows Alina has gone and has sent soldiers after her, but it sure doesn't seem like it. Alina hurries to the edge of town as night falls. As she passes an inn, a drunk man flies out the door and grabs Alina. Alina flashes her mirrors in his eyes and then trips him—just as an oprichnik comes out of the inn and recognizes Alina.

*Things get confusing for Alina when it starts to look like nobody is actually looking for her. It raises questions about whether Alina was correct to trust Baghra—after all, wouldn't the Darkling be looking for her if she was so important to his plan? Still, Alina demonstrates how far she's come, and how confident she is in her abilities, when she seems to easily take down the drunk man with her mirrors and with Botkin's coaching.*



Alina runs and dives into the underbrush once she reaches city limits. She can hear men chasing her as she reaches what sounds like a stream. Alina slides and then gets up to run down the hill leading to the stream, but she falls and plunges right into the water. The water carries Alina downstream until finally, she's able to pull herself out. The river took everything: Alina only has her knife. But Alina falls asleep and wakes up the next morning to the sound of voices nearby. As Alina spots a soldier, she prepares to kill him—but just before he gets close enough, another soldier shouts “Nothing” and the man walks away. Alina is stunned; this must be a trick. But when Alina turns, she realizes there's someone behind her: Mal.

*As Alina tries to evade the soldiers, her fight essentially is for her individuality and her right to make her own choices. Now, she knows the Darkling is out looking for her—just with a much smaller force than she initially expected. And the soldiers' intensity does suggest that the Darkling desperately wants her back, which adds more credence to Baghra's warnings before Alina left the Little Palace. Mal's sudden appearance suggests not all is lost: with Mal, a skilled tracker, Alina might have a better chance of evading the soldiers.*



Silently, Mal leads Alina back through the stream and then deeper into the woods. Alina wants to punch him and hug him as they walk for hours in total silence. The hike is agony for Alina due to her blisters, her lack of food, and her trip in the stream. Finally, they stop high in the mountains in a secluded spot. Alina sits while Mal covers their tracks. When Mal returns, he says they can't risk a fire. Working up her courage, Alina asks if the trackers have captured **Morozova's stag**. He says they're close, but he doesn't think they can do it without him. They're “not ordinary animals.” Alina wonders if there's more to Mal's gift for tracking than he realizes.

*Thanks to their deep childhood bond, Alina trusts Mal entirely as he leads her to safety. She's not at all afraid that he's going to betray her, which is one of the reasons she'd like to punch him: he probably won't leave even if she does. When Mal deems the deer “not ordinary animals,” he almost echoes Ana Kuya's stories about magical deer—and since he (and not the Darkling) has actually gotten close to the creatures, his assessment might carry more truth.*



In a hard tone, Mal asks why Alina ran from the Little Palace and the Darkling. Alina doesn't know where to start, but she says she's trying to save the world. She laughs when Mal asks if this is just a lovers' quarrel. As though he's made some decision, Mal stands up and tosses Alina a blanket so she can go to sleep. Alina thanks Mal for finding her, and he whispers, "Always."

*It sounds corny, but Alina also isn't lying when she says she's trying to save the world—her goal is to keep the Darkling from expanding the Fold and killing people. Mal seems to sense on some level that Alina is just trying to do the right thing, which may help him believe that Alina isn't the corrupted, selfish "princess" he thought he saw on the night of the fete.*



## CHAPTER 17

Mal lets Alina sleep all night. In the morning, he gives her dried meat and tells her to talk while they walk. Alina explains how the Darkling plans to weaponize the Fold, how amplifiers work, and the significance of **Morozova's stag**. When Alina is done, Mal says she shouldn't have trusted Baghra: the Darkling's power extends beyond the True Sea, and he'll catch Alina eventually. Alina doesn't think she had any choice, even if the plan isn't great. Mal leads Alina up and down mountainsides in silence for hours. Alina is certain that she's doomed herself and Mal—after all, Mal gave up everything to help her. He could be executed for treason or desertion.

*As Mal sees it, Baghra's plan ignored just how selfish and ruthless the Darkling is: the True Sea won't stop him from getting something (or someone) he really wants. Still, it's a good sign that he listens attentively to everything Alina says, as now the two can begin to repair their relationship and the information gap that caused so many problems for them.*



That evening, Mal says they're going north to Tsibeya: they're going to catch the **stag** before the Darkling does. If Alina has the amplifier, she might be strong enough to fight him. Aghast, Alina reminds Mal that he could die and asks why he came after her. He says he's been helping Alina since his unit was tasked with tracking her, and he's not afraid to die. Over the next few days, Mal leads them quickly through the mountains. He refuses to answer most of Alina's questions, so Alina spends her time worrying. It's a relief to leave the mountains for the woods, where they finally can start a fire. Mal isn't impressed when Alina uses her power to start a fire, and he isn't impressed by her newfound appetite, either.

*Mal demonstrates that, like Alina, he cares about doing the right thing by suggesting they get the amplifier for Alina to use independent of the Darkling. However, this outlook also represents its own kind of greed and selfishness: it doesn't acknowledge that the stag is a living thing with a life of its own. Though the end goal is different, this is exactly how the Darkling sees the stag. Alina is so stressed in part because Mal, her childhood best friend, doesn't yet entirely accept who Alina has become. Her old identity has been overtaken by the new, and this is difficult for both of them to accept.*



Alina and Mal need new supplies before they head further north, so they approach a small village. Mal disappears for a while and returns wearing a coat and hat he found in an unlocked house. But he says that disturbingly, nobody is home or on the roads. As they get closer to town, they learn why this is: it's butter week. This is a week in spring when noblemen take carts out among their people, passing out sweet breads and other treats. Alina has fond memories of butter week at Keramsov, so she asks if they can go look. Mal agrees, so they slip into the crowd. He purchases furs and supplies while Alina slips forward and catches a sweet roll the noble in the cart tosses to her.

*Mal and Alina venture into the village with extreme caution at first—especially now that Mal has deserted, it's even more likely that someone is looking for them. But Alina's happy memories of butter week cause her to let her guard down, suggesting that this might lead to trouble down the line. However, the fact that Alina still finds these memories and traditions so comforting does highlight that she's still the same person in many ways. She's just grown up and has developed some new skills.*



Mal drags Alina into an alley and says they can't take risks, but Alina is too happy. She threatens to not give him a bite, and they playfully fight over the roll. But they stop suddenly when they realize two men have snuck up on them—and one man puts a knife to Mal's throat. The man asks for money and Alina laughs—this is absurd. Mal hands over his money pouch and then shows the men the supplies he just purchased. When they see the gun inside, the men note that they've heard a soldier deserted—and the rifle and Mal's pack look like military issue. Mal lies that the pack is his brother's, but the men remain unconvinced. One expresses interest in Alina, so Mal growls to leave her alone.

The man hits Mal in the head with his knife handle, causing Mal to bleed. Alina shoots light into the man's eyes and then kicks the other man in the groin and breaks his nose. She's shocked she did it, but Mal leads her away at a run. They leave the rifle behind. After they've traveled several miles, they stop and discuss that the men might try to get people to pay for information. Then, smiling, Mal asks where Alina learned to fight. She tells him about Botkin and how the Darkling doesn't think Grisha should only rely on their powers.

Suddenly grim, Mal says the Darkling is smart—and now he'll know Alina didn't head straight for the Fold. Alina pulls the squashed and linty roll out of her pocket—and Mal begins laughing uncontrollably. Alina joins in and they laugh about how terrible Alina is, now that she's broken a man's nose. They eat the roll and it's as delicious as they remember. Mal leads Alina until dusk and then, as they eat their cheese, asks Alina about Botkin and the other teachers. Mal doesn't laugh as easily as he once did, but it feels like he's turning into his old self a bit. He lies down next to Alina to go to sleep, and Alina sleeps better than she has in months with her friend beside her. In the night, Mal rolls over and puts an arm over Alina.

## CHAPTER 18

The further north Mal and Alina travel, the less it looks like spring. But Mal and Alina's relationship is easier, and they talk as they travel. Mal isn't surprised to hear that most Grisha don't like the King; the trackers and soldiers are also annoyed. Fjerdans have far superior weapons, and Ravkan soldiers should have better guns—but the King takes no interest. However, Mal refuses to talk about tracking the **stag**. As Mal points out birds' nests, Alina wishes they could walk in the woods forever. Will she change if she gets the antlers for herself? Will it be enough to defeat the Darkling? Finally, after several days, Alina asks Mal to promise to kill her if the Darkling catches them before they catch the stag. He argues, but ultimately agrees.

*For just a moment, Mal and Alina can be kids arguing over a sweet roll again—but the realities of the dangerous adult world come crashing in when the men accost them. The men confirm that people are out looking for Mal, but interestingly, they don't give any indication that they know who Alina is or that there's also a search out for a young woman. This perhaps highlights how much more important Alina is to the Darkling than Mal: he has specific people looking for Alina, and everyone looking for Mal.*



*Now that Alina has proven herself useful, Mal is starting to get used to—and even like—the person she's become. With this, Mal becomes more accepting of who Alina has become without him. And Alina, too, is continuing to realize just how competent she is, which shows that, like Mal, she's not entirely at peace yet with her transformation. Still, they can't ignore that they're in danger and no longer have all the supplies they really need.*



*The absurdity of the situation—that they got into so much trouble and blew their cover for a sweet roll—finally breaks the ice between Alina and Mal. It shows Mal that they're still friends and that they still think about their childhood fondly, which suggests that a bond is still there. It thus no longer feels so fraught for Mal to express interest in Alina's life at the Little Palace, and he's more willing to engage with Alina as though they're actually friends. His arm over her at night, however, suggests they might actually be more than friends.*



*Part of Alina's transformation over the course of the novel entails essentially becoming disillusioned with her government and understanding how ineffective it is. As Mal shows, most adults with any experience in the world don't think the King is doing a good job at managing the war effort—which many take as a sign that the King is disinterested in making sure as few soldiers as possible die. Alina asks Mal to promise something extremely difficult, but this promise also highlights how committed Alina is to doing the right thing and saving Ravka—unlike the Darkling and the King.*





As they get closer to an outpost, Mal gets more anxious, as he sees signs of other people. Then, one morning, he wakes Alina early: he has a feeling the herd is close. She grumbles, but Mal says they have to go so he doesn't have to decapitate Alina. It seems a good sign he can joke about it, so Alina follows. When they reach a hill that Mal likes the look of, they sit on a fur and wait for hours. It seems like the perfect place for the herd, but the moon rises after dusk, and nothing changes. Mal sighs, but Alina assures him it's okay—she's certain the Darkling hasn't caught the **stag** yet.

Alina summons some warm light in her hands, arguing with Mal that nobody will see them and they're both freezing. Mal puts his fingers in the light and then says that Mikhael and Dubrov were both killed in Fjerda. To Alina's surprise, Mal continues that they'd hunted the **stag** all the way to the border, and the captain wanted a few people to dress as Fjerdans to keep going. It was silly—were the trackers really going to capture the stag and get it back over the border? But Mal says he volunteered because Alina saved his life on the Fold. He didn't do anything when the Grisha took Alina away, and that haunted him. He thought if he could get the stag for the Darkling, he could help Alina. Mikhael and Dubrov didn't know this, but they insisted on going. Nine went into Fjerda. Two came back.

Alina is stunned and disturbed, but she surprises herself by wondering how many people the **stag's** power might save. *Could* the Darkling use the Fold to end the border wars that orphaned Alina and Mal in the first place? Would that make Ravka safe? But Alina reminds herself that the Darkling would destroy everything before he gives up any power. Mal sighs that the entire trip to Fjerda was useless, as the herd returned to Ravka after a few days. Alina studies Mal. He's changed so much, and she knows she's partially responsible. She apologizes for Mikhael and Dubrov's deaths, but Mal says it's not her fault. Alina points out that it's not his fault, either. They hold hands as it starts to snow.

## CHAPTER 19

Alina and Mal stay awake all night, bundled in furs and warmed by Alina's light. Everything is white when they wake up in the morning, and Mal looks disgusted—they're easier to track now, while the herd's tracks will be covered by snow. Alina knows they're in trouble as they cross a plateau and as Mal tries to cover their tracks. Eventually, they enter a grove of trees. Without thinking, Alina slips her hand into Mal's, and he allows it as they continue. They reach a little glade at sunset and, rather than make camp, they just stand, holding hands.

*Recall that Mal has an almost supernatural ability to track animals, so it seems like a good idea to trust him when he believes the herd is close. But even though the herd doesn't appear, this walk isn't without purpose: Alina and Mal's relationship continues to thaw, and for now, their goal keeps them moving forward. But they both continue to see the stag as a tool, rather than as a living being in its own right.*



*Mal's account of losing seven trackers in Fjerda shows that the dysfunction and disregard for people's lives extends all the way down to mid-level officers in the Ravkan military. Mal implies that this was fool's errand from the beginning; it was guaranteed to get people killed. And yet, it seems as though the goal was to make it seem like the trackers were doing something—anything—rather than doing the sensible thing. Interestingly, Mal willingly admits that his reasons for going into Fjerda were questionable, but he also suggests that he thought of himself as noble and good for going.*



*Alina essentially realizes that the Darkling might have a point: perhaps it is better to turn the Fold into a weapon that could work for Ravka, rather than getting rid of it. However, she also knows now that the Darkling is greedy beyond belief, so even if he did the right thing initially, he'd soon wield too much power and more innocent people would die. Further, if Alina did go along with the Darkling's plan, she'd be powerless (assuming Baghra told her the truth). So, nobody would be able to challenge the Darkling's power again.*



*The snow creates tension due to how easy it makes Alina and Mal to track, but it also gives this chapter a beautiful and otherworldly feel. Alina seems to pick up on this when she slips her hand into Mal's in the glade—the snow is a bit magical, even if it causes issues. However, the fact that they'll now struggle to track the herd also symbolically brings Alina and Mal together: they are truly alone in the wilderness.*



Mal apologizes for what he said at the Little Palace and for “everything else.” He explains that he came after Alina initially because he thought he owed her for saving his life. Now, everything has changed. They discuss how happy Alina looked the night of the fete, but Alina says she was just happy to fit in—she’s never fit in anywhere, even with Mal. Mal spits that he missed Alina all the time after she left, and it surprised him. He’s come so far for her, and he’d do it all again just to be with her—they belong together. Mal kisses Alina. Alina thought she was silly for loving Mal, but now, she knows for sure that she was right to wait for him.

Alina sees movement in the corner of her eye—Morozova’s herd. The **stag** is staring at Alina. Mal pulls out his bow but tells Alina she’ll have to kill it, but Alina asks him to wait as the stag approaches her. She walks to the stag and puts a hand on his muzzle. Alina thinks of how miserable she’s been while traveling, but how happy she is to be with Mal. She knows she can’t kill the stag, and she tells Mal they’ll find another way.

Out of nowhere, an arrow pierces the **stag**’s chest. The other deer flee as oprichniki and Grisha appear out of the trees—along with the Darkling. Mal tries to shoot the stag, but a Squaller sends wind to knock the arrow off course. When Mal tries again, the Darkling tries to perform the Cut on the stag. Alina throws herself in front of the stag, and the Darkling directs the Cut at a tree instead. He sends out darkness and Alina summons light, which stays around her, Mal, and the stag. The Darkling chuckles that Alina is doing well, but she’s not strong enough. He begins taunting Mal and asks if Alina has told Mal “what [he] showed [her] in the dark.” Alina blushes, and her light falters.

Alina knows what has to happen: she tells Mal that it’s time. But though Mal picks up his knife, he says he can’t do it. Alina loses control of her light, and people grab her and Mal in the darkness. The Darkling promptly slits the **stag**’s throat and tells an oprichnik to cut off the stag’s antlers. David appears, unwilling to meet Alina’s eyes—of course, the Darkling would want his best Fabrikator to make the collar. Alina tells David not to do this, but the Darkling snarls that David “understands the future.” Alina refuses to open her coat, so Ivan tortures Mal until Alina obeys.

*It’s a big step for Alina to be able to voice that for her entire life, her main goal has simply been to fit in. The Darkling, for all his faults, offered her the opportunity to fit in—and she took it. The intimate conversation adds to the sense that Alina and Mal are alone in an otherworldly place: for now, they can put aside the rest of their worries and focus on the fact that they do indeed love each other. Further, with Mal, there isn’t the power imbalance like there was in a relationship with the Darkling. Alina is on more equal footing, if not the more powerful one in the relationship.*



*Notice the shift in pronouns: the stag changes from being an “it” to being a “he,” something that highlights that Alina recognizes the stag’s life and sentience. This leads Alina to realize she can’t kill the stag—she’d rather work harder and come up with another way to best the Darkling than take this creature’s life.*



*All at once, the magic of the glade disappears when the Darkling arrives. Both the Darkling and Mal fight to kill the stag—if Mal kills it, nobody gets the stag’s power; if the Darkling kills it, it belongs to him. Alina’s goal, meanwhile, is to keep anyone from killing the stag. As the Darkling taunts Alina, he shows how well he knows her (or girls like her): he essentially taunts her for her sexual interest in him, something he knows will embarrass her in front of Mal. In this way, he continues to use sex as a weapon to control her.*



*Mal’s refusal to kill Alina makes some sense—he loves her, and he doesn’t want to kill the person he’s admitted he wants to spend his life with. However, it becomes clear now that this condemns Alina to obeying the Darkling’s every order. The fact that David doesn’t seem proud of cooperating with the Darkling offers some hope that other Grisha don’t agree with what the Darkling is doing.*



Alina watches the pieces of bone in the Darkling's hands. He places them around her neck and seems angry when Alina flinches away. David fuses the ends of the antlers together—and doesn't create a clasp. Everything is quiet for a moment. Then, the Darkling grips Alina's shoulder and Alina hears a command inside her. Light bursts out of Alina, but it doesn't feel right. She can't resist as the Darkling calls for more and more light, and what once felt joyful now makes Alina feel powerless and like she's drowning. Finally, the Darkling releases Alina and tells the oprichniki to put Mal in chains. They'll leave for the Fold in the morning, where they'll meet the Apparat. After warning Alina not to hurt herself on purpose, the Darkling commands someone to burn the **stag**.

*The fact that there's no clasp on Morozova's collar highlights that it is a collar, not a necklace: Alina can't take it off. The power dynamic is thrown into sharp relief when the Darkling tests Alina's new power for the first time. The language implies that this is a huge violation. Alina's power was something that gave her joy, but now, she can't control it at all—she's entirely at the Darkling's mercy. This highlights how little the Darkling cares about other people, and the novel reinforces this when he simply has someone burn the stag's body. He shows it no respect in death, since he already got what he wanted.*



## CHAPTER 20

The Darkling and his Grisha force Alina and Mal to march an hour, until they reach a campsite. Mal's guards shove him into a tent, while Ivan shoves Alina into a different tent. As he ties her to a pole, Alina begs Ivan to not do this. Abruptly, Ivan says he had two brothers, a father, and an uncle—they weren't Grisha, and they all died fighting the King's wars. Everyone, including the King and Queen, are sorry for his loss. But the Darkling is the only person willing to take action. Alina tries to convince him that her power could destroy the Fold, and she points out that the Darkling will eventually subjugate them all. For this, he threatens to gag her.

*Ivan offers some insight into why people are willing to go along with the Darkling: the King is inept and uncaring, while the Darkling is the only person who's promised to do anything to save people's loved ones from certain death in the wars. Supporting the Darkling might not be a great choice, Ivan seems to acknowledge, but it also feels like the only choice. Alina, however, realizes that they'll all get hurt in the end, simply because the Darkling cares about no one but himself.*



A while after Ivan leaves, a Summoner and a Heartrender duck into the tent and go to sleep. Alina sits awake, thinking that this is her fault. If she'd killed the **stag**, she'd have his power. Showing him mercy was a weak choice, and many will die because of that choice. Alina dreams all night of the Darkling slitting the stag's throat—but the blood is hers. When Alina wakes, a Heartrender marches her to the Darkling and the horses. Oprichniki bring Mal a minute later. Ivan suggests they drag Mal, but the Darkling says ominously that he wants Mal to stay alive. They ride for hours. Alina wonders who the Darkling is going to kill first when they reach the Fold.

*At this point, Alina doesn't think she did anything noble or worthy by trying to spare the stag's life. Instead, she conceptualizes her choice to spare him as weak and selfish—suggesting that, for now, it seems like a better idea to see other beings as tools, which is how the Darkling views them. Note, too, that now that Alina is the Darkling's prisoner, she's lost a lot of her desire for action. Her power made her interested in the world and in doing things, so now that she doesn't have control of her power, her desire to do things slips away, too.*



When they reach the Vy, Alina is dumped unceremoniously in the Darkling's coach to ride with Ivan. Though Ivan threatens to make her pass out if she keeps asking about Mal, Alina doesn't stop asking. Every night, Alina dreams of staring into the **stag's** eyes. His death was senseless and Alina's fault, but she also feels like she's missing some message in the dream. Near Kribirsk, the Darkling slides into the coach across from Alina. He tells her that the other Grisha think Alina has been in seclusion, preparing to cross the Fold—nobody knows she ran away. He also asks what kind of a life Alina thinks she can have with Mal. Mal, he insists, would eventually grow afraid of Alina. With a final threat to torture Mal if Alina doesn't behave, the Darkling leaves the coach.

Alina trembles—is Mal actually still alive, or is the Darkling just manipulating her? She looks out the window as she enters Kribirsk, remembering how this coach almost ran her over the last time she was here. To Alina's surprise, she's happy to see Marie and Sergei when they run to greet her, but it's hard to look anything but miserable. The Darkling hovers, shooting Alina warning looks, as Alina pushes through the crowd. She passes Zoya, who is, ironically, clearly jealous of **Morozova's collar**. Finally, Ivan ushers Alina into a tent near the Darkling's. It's comfortable but surrounded by guards. Alina would give everything to be shivering with Mal.

Alina paces in her tent for days. On the fourth night, Genya brings Alina her dinner. As the girls talk, Genya implies that she knows Alina ran—and she implies that Baghra has disappeared. Deciding to take a chance, Alina asks if she could somehow get word to the King about what the Darkling is planning. Genya reveals that the King is ill, so the Apparat is ruling. Alina remembers the Darkling saying the Apparat “has his uses”; now, she wishes she'd listened to the Apparat's warnings. Alina asks about the Queen, but she's been quarantined for safety. Suddenly, Alina notices that Genya is wearing a red kefta with blue embroidery, a combination Alina has never seen—what did Genya do to get to wear full Grisha colors?

Sadly, Genya says she tried to warn Alina. She says there are rumors about what the Darkling is planning, and Alina says they're true. Genya says that in that case, “it has to be done.” Alina just stares. Genya says David feels like he's destroyed Ravka, but Alina says hollowly that they've all helped “bring about the end of the world.” Looking suddenly worried, Genya asks if Alina really means that. Alina says she doesn't, and she knows Genya doesn't believe her, but Genya acts like she does. Thinking of the **stag**, Alina asks Genya to tell David she forgives him. Alina thinks that she forgives Genya, too. She knows how it feels to want to belong.

*The way Alina describes missing a message in her dreams about the stag mirrors the way she spoke earlier about feeling like she was missing warnings from Baghra. Now that she knows she actually was missing something, she's more focused and intent on solving this mystery. As the Darkling speaks to Alina, he essentially suggests that she's unlovable to anyone but a Grisha, presumably him. The way he describes Alina and Mal's hypothetical relationship is, interestingly, exactly what happened between the Darkling and Alina—Alina fears him because of his power.*



*The Darkling has clearly done a great job of covering up that Alina ran away. To her surprise, Alina finds that Marie and Sergei are, perhaps, real friends whom she cares about, suggesting that Alina's belief that she fit in at the Little Palace wasn't just an illusion. In some ways, she did fit. However, the Little Palace wasn't without its issues, as Zoya's clear jealousy makes clear. But of course, what Zoya doesn't know is that what now sets Alina apart and makes her seem special is actually the very thing that deprives her of her individuality and her humanity.*



*Recall that Genya has always had a better grasp of what's going on politically than other Grisha, potentially due to working in the Grand Palace and being in closer proximity to the King and other government officials. So, it's unsurprising that Genya seems to know what the Darkling is up to. Further, it's implied that Genya herself might have made the King sick, especially if she did so to elevate her own position. If this is what happened, then Genya, like David and Ivan, is complicit in what the Darkling is planning.*



*As Alina sees it, Genya did exactly what she felt she had to in order to become something more than a laughingstock for the other Grisha. Fitting in was extremely important to her, and she presumably sees cooperating with the Darkling as worthwhile if it helps her achieve that goal. Alina, on the other hand, attempted to assert her individuality and stand out by running away. Alina has a really nuanced, sensitive take on her and Genya's differences: they both made choices, and now they both have to live with the consequences.*



## CHAPTER 21

Alina thinks of Genya. Genya has spent years living uncomfortably in between the Grisha and the court. The Darkling put her there and then raised her out of it. Genya doesn't seem to have regrets, but David does—and maybe there are more people like David. Ivan appears, interrupting Alina's thoughts, and says the Darkling wants to see her. In the Darkling's tent, Alina sits across from him and asks him why he even wants her to talk, since he won't listen anyway. The Darkling brings up Mal, and Alina knows the Darkling will use Mal to gain power over her. But knowing that the Darkling is greedy, Alina notes that Mal is the best tracker he'll ever have—so he shouldn't kill Mal.

Amused, the Darkling observes that he's given Alina so much power, but she thinks she can run off and “keep house for [her] tracker.” Alina points out that she's enslaved, not powerful, but the Darkling maintains that he's fighting for Ravka's future. The Darkling sounds almost reasonable as he says this, but Alina insists that he lied to her and isn't being fair. Laughing, the Darkling says someone has to help the people, and the King won't do it. But Alina shakes her head, so the Darkling calls her to him. He touches **Morozova's collar** and then Alina's neck, which is uncomfortable but also thrills her. He accuses Alina of betraying him, says he knows she's not sorry, and tells her to beg for Mal's life.

Desperately, Alina says that she'll try to kill herself if the Darkling doesn't show Mal mercy. The Darkling kisses Alina and she lets him—she hates the kiss and the Darkling, but his power still tugs at her. Pulling away and calling for Ivan, the Darkling says that Alina can go say goodbye to Mal. Tomorrow, he'll feed Mal to the volcra in the Shadow Fold. Alina fights wildly, but the Darkling says she'll be fighting for a long time.

Ivan pulls Alina out of the tent, hisses for her to stop crying, and gives her a cloak to wear over her **kefta**. As they walk through the camp, Alina senses tension in the air—people are openly hostile to Ivan. They reach the jail and the guard allows Ivan and Alina to enter. At the bottom of rickety stairs, Mal is in a cell. Ivan says Alina has the night and leaves them. Alina tells Mal what's going to happen, but he just says, “all right.” She teases him for this and then tries to explain what the Darkling inferred in the glade. But Mal cuts her off, insisting he loves all of her—even the parts of her that loved the Darkling. They kiss through the bars and spend hours reminiscing about their childhood.

*Alina's only hope at this point is that other Grisha might, like David, take issue with the Darkling having total power over everything. However, she also realizes how power imbalances and the King's ineffectiveness have created a situation where many, like Genya and Ivan, see the Darkling as their only option. Alina shows just how much she's learned when she realizes she knows the Darkling will try to use Mal to manipulate her. Hopefully, knowing this, Alina might be able to gain some power herself.*



*Notice that when Alina points out that she's enslaved, the Darkling doesn't contradict her—he seems to hope that she'll just believe him, like she did before Baghra helped her flee. And speaking to the Darkling about his plan, Alina has to admit that the Darkling makes a compelling case for weaponizing the Fold—as he notes, the King isn't going to help the people. The Darkling's methods might be questionable, but he's doing something. Alina continues to experience conflicted feelings about physical contact with the Darkling, but she now realizes that the certainty she feels when he touches her is one way that he manipulates her.*



*When Alina allows the Darkling to kiss her despite not liking it, she attempts to gain some power for herself by giving him what he wants. However, this backfires when the Darkling announces that he's going to kill Mal tomorrow.*



*The implication is that non-Grisha people are hostile to Ivan, which reminds readers that most laypeople in Ravka don't like or trust Grisha. This doesn't bode well for the Darkling's plan—he'll be taking control of a populace that emphatically doesn't want him or trust him. When Alina and Mal spend their night talking about their childhoods, it reminds readers that that was pretty much the only truly happy time they had together. It's also bittersweet, because it seems unlikely at this point that they'll ever experience that kind of happiness again.*



Alina tells Mal about how, one day when she was 15, she'd been mending a cup in the kitchen and was waiting for Mal to get back from a hunting trip. Mal had run to her when he got close and then lifted Alina up and spun her around. Alina had held Mal close, her heart pounding and a shard of the cup cutting into her clenched hand. Everything changed that day, and the cut has never stopped hurting. Mal kisses the scar, and they fall asleep together. Alina dreams of the **stag** in the glade—but this time, when the stag dies, it's Mal's blood that spills. In the morning, Ivan comes to lead Alina away.

Finally, Alina reveals how she got her scar and what it symbolizes to her: her love for Mal, and how painful that love has been for years. That Alina dreams of Mal's blood spilling in the glade suggests that she blames herself for Mal's impending death, again because she didn't kill the stag herself. In this way, she continues to interpret her choice as weakness rather than as kindness.



## CHAPTER 22

Ivan leads Alina back to her tent and soon after, Genya arrives to help Alina get dressed. Alina puts on the black silk **kefta** she wore to the winter fete and then Genya piles Alina's hair high on her head with gold pins—the better to show off **Morozova's collar**. Then, Ivan escorts Alina to the Darkling and they all walk to the drydocks. On the sandskiff, Alina meets Fjerdan ambassadors, a delegation from Shu Han, and an envoy from the King. The Darkling clearly brought them to witness his new power, but how far will he go? Summoners send wind into the sails and the sandskiff moves into the Fold. Alina isn't afraid like she was last time. She realizes she once looked forward to this: to pleasing the Darkling and becoming the orphan who changed the world.

Alina's entire look symbolizes that the Darkling controls her every move. Her black kefta, recall, is the Darkling's color, which highlights that her relationship to the Darkling is more important than what she can do. Morozova's collar, meanwhile, is also a symbol of the Darkling's power—though it's unclear if anyone else is aware of this at this point. As Alina enters the Fold, she can't ignore how much she's changed in the last year. She's no longer happy to please the Darkling and change the world, as she believes she's bringing about something terrible rather than something good.



When the skiff is well into the Fold, the Darkling tells the Inferni to release fire; this will draw the volcra to the sandskiff. Alina hears them coming and, now that she knows the volcra were once people, their cries sound almost human. When the volcra get close, the Darkling grips Alina's arm and draws her power out. The light bursts out of her, illuminating the Fold. There are shipwrecks on the sand and volcra above. Looking around, Alina thinks the Grisha principle "like calls to like" is true: this emptiness, this dead space populated by monsters, is just like the Darkling's soul.

The entirety of the Fold represents the Darkling's soul and his greed. He's willing to turn people into monsters if it makes him powerful—including the volcra, but also including Alina. He's left all manner of "shipwrecks" in his wake, as he doesn't care about anyone but himself. And the darkness also is a classic symbol for evil, strengthening the association even more.



Alina follows the Darkling's command to create a path. The sandskiff flies ahead and soon, Alina can see the West Ravkan village Novokribirsk ahead. People there are staring at the light in the Fold. But the skiff slows, and the Darkling raises his arms. He doesn't listen to Alina's cries and instead sends darkness rippling along the path Alina made. It engulfs the village, and the volcra begin killing villagers. Alina tries desperately to expand the light or somehow make the Darkling stop, but she can't.

While things felt different this time around, now, the trip into the Fold mirrors Alina's first, with the volcra killing innocent people. The difference, though, is that the Darkling clearly planned for the villagers here to die, just to make a point to those on the sandskiff about how powerful he is. Alina can't avoid how powerful the Darkling is, and she cannot wrest any of her power back from him.



Finally, the Darkling stops and turns to the passengers on the skiff. The message is clear: he could ravage the Shu Han or Fjerda tomorrow, if he wants. When the envoy says the King won't stand for this, the Darkling says the King will do as he's told. He says from now on, there are no individual countries. There's the Fold and whatever land is outside of it. There will be peace. Alina knows he's serious. Turning to the Grisha and the soldiers, he asks them to tell everyone about what they've seen and to say that a new age has begun. Most people cheer, though a few soldiers and several Grisha look concerned. Most people are afraid, but they don't care that the Darkling just slaughtered a village. They want the wars to end and Ravka to be powerful.

Then, at the Darkling's signal, Ivan throws Mal over the skiff's railing. Alina screams and punches Ivan, stunning him. The Darkling's power tells Alina to contract her circle of light, and Alina is powerless to resist. Alina sobs and screams, but Mal just stands in the sand. He shrieks as the darkness and the volcra reach him. Suddenly, Alina is back in the glade with the **stag**, and she realizes why he keeps visiting her dreams. He's not haunting her to taunt her for being weak. Rather, the stag has been trying to show Alina the power of mercy. Mercy is power, and the Darkling doesn't understand it. So, the stag's power belongs to Alina—not the Darkling. Gasping, Alina takes control of her power and expands the circle of light to include Mal.

The Darkling, confused, tries to take Alina's power back, but she shrugs him off. She knows he won't kill her; he needs her to get back out of the Fold. Sure of herself, Alina performs the Cut, sending one of the sandskiff's masts falling. The Darkling looks shocked, but he tells Alina she's not a murderer. Alina asks everyone assembled if they really want a dark world. If they work together, they can stop the Darkling. But everyone is too afraid to fight the Darkling. Knowing what she must do, Alina dives for the rail and lets the light go out. She runs toward Mal, surrounding them both in light. People shoot at Alina and Mal, and the Darkling shouts that she can't run.

Alina can't let the Darkling come after her. He has to die, though she's not sure everyone else on the skiff does. The Darkling says that Alina knows what will happen if she kills people, and he asks if this is her idea of mercy. Alina waves her hand, splitting the skiff in half. Then she grabs Mal and they race for West Ravka in a dome of light. They hide in an orchard once they leave the Fold and begin traveling toward the coast that evening. They reach the True Sea before dawn and stand there, staring at it.

*As Alina studies the Grisha, the soldiers, and the diplomats, she realizes just how bad of a position the King has left Ravka in. To many of these people, she can tell that they understand how powerful the Darkling is—and they believe that this kind of power, though it has the potential to be violent, is the only way forward. It is, again, seemingly the best of several bad options. However, it is worth noting that the Darkling targeted a village where, presumably, mostly lower-class people live. Due to the class strife in Ravka, the wealthy people on the ship simply don't care as much when the victims are poor.*



*Within the world of the novel, mercy, compassion, and kindness are far more powerful than greed and straightforward power grabs—and now, finally, Alina realizes this is the case. It's notable, too, that Alina realizes this as she tries to protect Mal, someone she loves. This is also how and why her power ultimately burst out of her at the beginning of the novel, suggesting that Alina can gain power for herself and gain more self-knowledge as she tries to help others. With this, she also emerges as the polar opposite of the Darkling, who wants only to help himself.*



*As Alina predicted, the Darkling has no idea Alina could even take her power back, since he doesn't understand that mercy itself is powerful. But he's still not without his own particular skills: he appeals to Alina's desire to essentially be a good person to try to convince her not to abandon or outright kill everyone on the sandskiff. Alina, though, now knows that she can't trust the Darkling to ever keep his word. So, her only option, as she sees it, is to leave him and run with Mal.*



*The Darkling essentially implies that if Alina kills people to save Mal, she's starting down a morally complicated path—and, perhaps, is just as bad as he is. But for now, the novel leaves this question for later installments and focuses instead on Alina and Mal's relief at escaping, and at Alina having taken her power back from the Darkling.*



Mal plucks a gold hairpin from Alina's hair; he'll use it to buy clothes. Alina's heart twists. She's never going to see Genya again. But she tries not to think about that, or about what she did in the Fold, as Mal leaves. Some part of Alina wants to feel as powerful as she did in the Fold, when she cut the skiff in half. Alina doesn't want to think of the people who died. Is the Darkling even dead? Alina spends the entire afternoon getting increasingly anxious and almost cries when Mal returns. She dresses in the ugly orange dress he brought for her and feels like she's putting down a huge burden as she drops the black **kefta** on the ground. Alina and Mal agree that she'll never wear black again.

Mal pulls out a scarf to cover **Morozova's collar**. He says they'll figure out how to get rid of the collar before summer, but Alina protests—it's the only way they can get rid of the Shadow Fold. She doesn't tell Mal how much it feels like the collar belongs to her. The stag's power feels like part of Alina's power, and she doesn't really want to lose it. As Mal studies Alina's face, Alina remembers the Darkling's warning. But she promises Mal they'll get rid of the collar. They burn the black **kefta** as Mal pulls the pins from Alina's hair, kisses her, and holds her.

## AFTER

Alina and Mal stand at the railing of the ship every day. The Kerch crew calls them *fantomen*, or ghosts—because they're pale and stare at the sea like they've never seen water before. Alina doesn't share that she's looking for a ship with black sails. Mal and Alina had to hide before they could book passage on this ship. They heard rumors about what happened in Novokribirsk and heard that some people blame the Darkling. They've heard that the Apparat disappeared, that foreign troops are missing, and that the Sun Summoner is dead. They never hear that the Darkling is dead.

Mal holds Alina tight every night, as she constantly has nightmares—she can hear the screaming people she left behind on the skiff. Alina and Mal are orphans again, alone in the world. But they have each other.

*Already, Alina begins to see what the Darkling was getting at when he warned her not to kill people in the Fold: using her power to do something as huge as the Cut is intoxicating, even if she did kill people. Still, Alina still doesn't think of herself as being associated with the Darkling. Taking off the kefta, for instance, symbolizes a shrugging off of the Darkling's hold on her. Now, she's her own person and can use her power however she wants.*



*Things are already getting complicated for Alina—power, her reaction to Mal's suggestion implies, is intoxicating. Again, though, this is a problem for later books in the series. With this novel ending with Mal and Alina burning the kefta, Alina symbolically frees herself from the Darkling in a very final way. She's chosen Mal, and she's chosen to destroy evidence that she ever belonged to the Darkling.*



*Alina discovers that being on the run means going without a lot of important information—such as who died in Novokribirsk and, specifically, if the Darkling is still out there. However, it is clear that there's unrest in Ravka due to what happened in the Fold, suggesting that the Darkling's takeover and Alina's departure haven't yet fixed anything.*



*Already, Alina's ghosts have come back to haunt her, suggesting that she will someday have to account for the people she allowed to die in the Fold. But she now knows who she is: someone who loves Mal, and someone who can make her own choices about her body and her power.*







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