**SHADOW AND BONE**(Leigh Bardugo)

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

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

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

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

Crouched beside the girl, the boy turned to her and whispered, “Why don’t you eat?”

“Because everything she cooks tastes like mud.”

“Tastes fine to me.”

“You’ll eat anything.”

They bent their ears back to the crack in the cupboard doors.A moment later the boy whispered, “I don’t think you’re ugly.”

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

In the summer, they endured long hours of chores followed by even longer hours of lessons in stifling classrooms. When the heat was at its worst, they escaped into the woods to hunt for birds’ nests or swim in the muddy little creek, or they would lie for hours in their meadow, watching the sun pass slowly overhead, speculating on where they would build their dairy farm and whether they would have two white cows or three.

In the winter, the Duke left for his city house in Os Alta, and as the days grew shorter and colder, the teachers grew lax in their duties, preferring to sit by the fire and play cards or drink kvas. Bored and trapped indoors, the older children doled out more frequent beatings. So the boy and the girl hid in the disused rooms of the estate, putting on plays for the mice and trying to keep warm.

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

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

“Grisha!” the girl whispered.

“Quick!” said the boy.

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

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

“There are just the two this year, then?” said a woman’s low voice.

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

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

“You think?” asked the man in blue.

“When the parents are deceased …”

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

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

Up in the balcony, the boy and the girl nodded sagely to each other. Their benefactor, Duke Keramsov, was a celebrated war hero and a friend to the people. When he had returned from the front lines, he converted his estate into an orphanage and a home for war widows. They were told to keep him nightly in their prayers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You’re witches!” blurted Mal.

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

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

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

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

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

Mal shook his head, his eyes wide.But Alina frowned and said, “Anyone can boil water.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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