



THE TAILOR

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A NEW SCENE FROM *SHADOW AND BONE*
TOLD FROM GENYA'S POINT OF VIEW

The Tailor

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“Have you been checking the casualty lists?”

It’s the right question to ask, though I’m almost ashamed of how easily it comes to my lips.

Alina gives a single sharp nod as her hands clench the edge of the infirmary sheet. I’m sorry to see her hurting, but I can’t help being fascinated by the play of emotion over her face. She hasn’t learned to hide what she feels. It’s all there for anyone to read from moment to moment: happiness, relief, fear, and always fatigue, the deep weariness she carries everywhere. That lack of caution is a novelty at court. I have to remind myself not to stare.

I bring her pen and paper so she can write out the tracker’s name: *Malyen Oretsev*. I know it well enough by now. He’s the only person she’s written to this whole time at the Little Palace. Instead of posting her letters, the servants bring them to me, and I pass them along. I don’t know if the Darkling reads them or if they sit unopened, a growing stack in some bureau drawer.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” I tell Alina as I slip the paper into my sleeve. Again, her face comes alive: Red in her cheeks—she’s ashamed to have asked. Lips pressed together—she hopes anyway. It’s almost painful to watch. I think she’s so used to being unnoticed that she doesn’t realize how much she shows. I have to bite back the urge to tell her to

be more careful. It's not my place to give her warnings, but I seem to keep finding myself doing so.

Before I go, I bully her into letting me fix the dark circles beneath her eyes. She grumbles and groans, and I burst out laughing when she finally relents, hurling herself back against the pillows as if I've insisted on reading her a sermon. Ridiculous girl.

My hands drift over her skin. Maybe it's my way of apologizing. And honestly, I can't help myself. It's like wiping the smudges off a looking glass or putting flowers just so in a vase—sometimes my fingers fairly itch to set her to rights. Besides, in this moment, I'm her friend. I can pretend all the little betrayals don't exist. I can ignore the paper with Oretsev's name on it burning a hole in my sleeve.

In the end, I leave Alina arguing with the Healer about checking out of the infirmary and turn my steps to the war room. I take the long way so I can pass by the big, sunlit windows of the Fabrikator workshops. I won't stop in, not today, but I can still treat myself to a glimpse of David's bent shoulders and messy brown hair. I'm deep in a daydream of him letting me cut it when I come around the corner and nearly slam into Zoya.

"Where are you rushing off to?" she says with a sniff. "Does the Queen have a party to attend?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," I say coolly. "But I have a few moments if you want me to see to your eyes. They're looking awfully red."

She keeps that haughty look, but her shoulders stiffen and she has to work a bit harder to lift her perfect nose in the air. I know I shouldn't enjoy her misery as much as I

do. I also shouldn't have a second buttered roll with my breakfast every morning, but sometimes one must indulge. Anyway, Zoya bought this trouble for herself.

"Hay fever," she mutters. "There's something new in the air here that irritates me."

"Yes," I say as I glide past her. "I hear you practically choked on it."

I learned a long time ago never to give Zoya a chance at the last word. That girl finds openings like water in a sieve.

I'd planned to leave a message for the Darkling with his guards, but I meet Ivan coming out of the war room.

"Back from visiting the invalid?" he asks as I follow him out of the Little Palace.

"She's hardly that."

"Well, she looks the part."

"Should she be leading a fencing lesson by the lake? Zoya broke two of her ribs."

"Shame," he drawls.

I arch a brow. "The Darkling thought so. Please tell me you were there when he told Zoya she'd be leaving Os Alta."

"I was."

"And?" I urge as we head down the hill to the birch grove. I'm a greedy thing, but how can I be expected to resist this gossip?

Ivan shrugs, scowling. "He just made it clear that she's replaceable and Starkov isn't."

I grin. "Does that worry you, Ivan?"

"No," he snaps.

"Careful," I say. "Keep frowning like that, and even I won't be able to fix your wrinkles."

Impossibly, his features twist into a deeper snarl, and I have to restrain a snort. Ivan struts around like a robin, all puffed up pride and red plumage. It's just so easy to ruffle his feathers. I know he begrudges me any word or confidence shared with the Darkling. Still, I like him. He treats me with disdain, but it's the exact same disdain he shows everyone else.

As we enter the birch grove, I glimpse a few *oprichniki* standing guard, nearly hidden in the gloom between the trees. I've never grown used to them. They're a brotherhood of their own, and they keep to a separate code. They never mix with the Grisha or the court.

When we finally arrive at the *banya*, the Darkling is just emerging from the baths, pulling a clean shirt over his head. He really is something to look at, all lean muscle and pale skin beaded with moisture from the steam.

He runs a hand through his damp hair and gestures me forward. "How is she?"

"Better," I reply. "She's asked to be moved from the infirmary."

"I'll approve it," he says with a nod to Ivan. Without a word, the Heartrender disappears back into the trees to see it done.

The Darkling takes his *kefta* from a waiting *oprichnik* and shrugs it on. I fall into step beside him on one of the narrow paths that winds through the grove.

“What else?” he asks.

“The Apparatus visited her last night to rant about Saints and saviors. From what I could piece together, he was either trying to scare her senseless or bore her to death.”

“I may need to have a word with the priest.”

“I told her he’s harmless.”

“Hardly that,” says the Darkling, “but he has the King’s ear. For now that’s all that matters.”

An uneasy silence descends as we emerge from the trees onto the dirt path that leads to the training rooms and the stables. The Darkling knows there’s more to tell and that I’m not quite ready to say it.

It’s deserted here at this time of day, no sound but the nicker of horses in their paddocks. The winter air carries their warm animal smell and, beneath it, the sweet scent of hay. I wrinkle my nose. Just steps from the Little Palace, and this place feels positively rural.

Six black horses are in the western paddock—the matched team that pulls the Darkling’s coach. When we reach the fence, the Darkling gives a low whistle and one of the horses ambles over to us, twitching its silky mane.

I slip the piece of paper from my sleeve and hand it to the Darkling.

“The tracker again,” he says, unsurprised.

“She’s afraid he was killed in action and hasn’t shown up on the lists yet.” I hesitate, then say, “But I think she’s almost as scared that he’s alive and well and through with her.”

He studies the paper for a moment, then gives it back to me. He strokes a hand over the horse's long, velvety nose.

"What should I tell her?" I ask.

He glances at me. "The truth. Tell her where the boy is stationed."

"She'll think—"

"I know what she'll think, Genya."

I lean against the fence, my back to the paddock, fingers worrying the scrap of paper as the Darkling murmurs softly to the horse, low words I can't make out.

I can't meet his eyes, but somehow I summon the courage to say, "Do you care about her at all?"

There's the briefest pause.

"What are you really asking, Genya?"

I shrug. "I like her. When this is all over—"

"You want to know if she'll forgive you."

I run my thumb over Alina's choppy writing, all graceless slashes and blunt lines. She's the closest thing I've had to a friend in a long time.

"Maybe," I say.

"She won't."

I suspect he's right. I certainly wouldn't. I just didn't think it would matter to me as much as it does.

"You decide," he says. "I'll have the letters brought to you."

"You kept them?"

“Post them. Give them back to her. Do whatever you think best.”

I watch him closely. This feels like some kind of trick. “You can’t mean that.”

He looks at me over his shoulder, his gray eyes cool. “Old bonds,” he says as he gives the horse a final pat and pushes off from the fence. “They can do nothing for Alina but tie her to a life long gone.”

The paper is starting to fray beneath my fingers. “She’s suffering.”

He stops my fidgeting with the briefest touch of his hand. His power flows through me, calming, the steady rush of a river. Best not to think where the current may take me.

“You’ve suffered, too,” he says.

He leaves me standing by the paddock, the tracker’s name folding and unfolding in my hands.

The Queen does have a party to attend that night. After I’ve changed my mud-spattered slippers and rid myself of the scent of the stables, I find her seated at her dressing table, a maid tending to her hair. There was a time when she wouldn’t let anyone else but me see to her preparations. “Genya does it better than any of you,” she would say, waving the servants away. “Go and bring us tea and something sweet.”

I’m pleased to see that the maid is doing a terrible job of it. The style is nice enough, but it isn’t suited to the Queen’s face. I would place the pins higher, leave a strand free to curl around her cheek.

“You’re late,” she snaps as she catches sight of me in the mirror.

I curtsy. “Apologies, *moya tsaritsa*.”

It takes me over an hour to finish working on her face and neck, and the maid is long gone by then. The skin pulls strangely at the Queen’s cheekbones, and the blue of her eyes is an indigo too vibrant to be believed. But she wanted the shade to match her gown, and I no longer argue. Still, it drives me nearly mad. It’s that itch again. I can’t walk by a crooked picture frame and not set it right. The Queen always pushes too far—a bit more, a bit more, until the angle is all wrong.

She hums to herself, sucking on a waxy bit of lokum flavored with rosewater, and coos to the dog curled in her lap. When I bend to adjust the bows on her slippers, she absently rests a hand on my shoulder—almost a caress, or maybe a scratch behind the ears. Sometimes it’s as if she forgets to hate me. It’s as if I were still the girl she treasured, the doll she loved to dress up and show off to her friends. I’d like to say I resisted such treatment, but I loved every minute of it.

I’d been ordinary among the Grisha, a pretty girl with a modicum of talent. At the Grand Palace, I was cherished. In the mornings, I would arrive with the Queen’s tea and she’d throw open her arms. “Pretty thing!” she’d exclaim, and I’d run to her. “Where shall we walk today? Shall we go to the gardens or take a trip into town? Shall we find a new gown for you?”

I didn’t realize then what I was giving up, the way the distance would grow between me and the Grisha, how I would lose their language when I didn’t take the same classes or know the right gossip or sleep under the same roof. But I didn’t have time to contemplate such things. The Queen fed me on candied plums and cherries

soaked in ginger syrup. We painted silk fans and discussed fashionable novels with her friends. She let me pick out which wriggling puppy would be hers and we spent hours choosing his name. She taught me to walk, to curtsy. It was easy to adore her.

Even now, it's hard not to fall back into the habit of loving her. She is so poised, so regal, a creature of sublime grace. I help her into her wrap, lush violet silk that makes her eyes glow even brighter. Then I tend to the veins on her hands.

"Do my knuckles look swollen?" she asks. Her fingers are heavy with jewels—sapphire bands and the Lantsov emerald wedged between them. "My rings feel tight."

"They look fine—" I begin.

She frowns.

"I'll fix them."

I'm not sure when things began to change, when I started to feel less easy in her company. I felt her slipping away from me, but didn't know what I'd done wrong or how to stop it. I only knew I had to work harder to coax smiles from her, that my presence seemed to bring her less pleasure.

I do remember the day I was working on her face, easing the faint furrows that had started to appear across her forehead.

When I was finished, she peered into the mirror. "I still see a line."

"It won't look right," I said, "if I keep going."

She rapped me once, hard, across my knuckles with the golden handle of her hairbrush. "You're not fooling anyone," she spat. "I won't let you make me look a hag."

I'd drawn back, cradling my hand, baffled. But I pushed down my confused tears and did as she asked, still hoping that whatever I'd broken might be repaired.

There were good days after that, but there were more when she would ignore me completely, or tug my curls so hard my eyes watered. She would pinch my chin between her fingers and mutter, "Pretty thing." It stopped sounding like praise.

Tonight, though, her mood is good. I snip a thread from her cuff, smooth the train of her gown. With her blond hair shining in the lamplight, she looks like a gilded painting of a Saint.

"You should wear the lily in your hair," I suggest, thinking of the blue glass comb I'd once helped to make for her in the Fabrikator workshops.

She glances at me, and for the briefest moment, I think I see warmth in her gaze. But it must be a trick of the light, because in the next second, she laughs in her brittle way and says, "That old thing? It's long out of fashion."

I know she hopes to wound me, but the girl who flinched at her barbs is long gone.

"You're right, of course," I say and curtsy deeply.

The Queen waves one smooth white hand. "Surely you're wanted elsewhere?" She says it like it's the last thing she believes.

When I finally get back to my chamber, the lamps have been lit and a fire burns merrily in the grate. One of the serving girls has set a fragrant bundle of kitchen sage on the mantel. They understand what it is to live beneath this King's rule. Or maybe it would be

the same under any Lantsov. I've met the heir, Vasily. He has his father's soft chin, his wet lower lip. I shudder.

If I could wish for anything in this world, it wouldn't be jewels or a coach or a palace in the lake district. I'd wish to be a true Grisha again, of course—but short of that, I'd settle for a lock on my chamber door.

I ring for a dinner tray, wriggle out of my ivory silk *kefta* and into a dressing gown. Only then do I see the ebony box resting on the plush cushions of the window seat. It is a simple object, completely out of place amid the frothing white and gold ornament of this room. Its elegance lies in the perfection of its angles, in its seamless sides, smooth as glass and polished to a high shine. It doesn't bear his symbol. It doesn't have to. And I don't need to open its gleaming lid to know what's inside.

I wash my face, take down my hair, toe off my satin slippers so that I can feel the grooves of the cool wood floor beneath my feet. All the while, the box lurks just out of my vision like a glossy black beetle.

The dinner tray arrives—a truffled cheese tart, wine-braised quail with crispy skin, and fish poached in butter. The food is rich, as always, but it never bothers me. No matter my worries, I can always eat.

When I've finished, I light the lamps in my closet. My *kefta* hang along one wall—wool for winter, silk for summer, thick folds of satin and velvet for when I am still asked to parties. There are two shelves stacked with rarely worn breeches and blouses, and a row of simple shifts made for me because the Queen does not approve of women wearing trousers.

The rest of the closet has been converted into my own little workshop, stocked with all the things I need for my kit: bottles of dye, sheets of gold leaf and coils of copper, tins of crushed carmine, and jars of pickled berries. They smell dreadful when opened, but the colors stay pure. There are other bottles too, full of more dangerous things that I've buried near the back of the shelf. There's one in particular that I like to take out when the day has been long. I made it myself and I love the liquid's warm golden color, its sweet cinnamon smell. *Dekora Nevich*, I call it. The Ornamental Blade.

Despite the trappings of my kit, there's plenty of room in my closet. Once I fell out of favor, the new gowns stopped coming. I outgrew the layers of ruffles and puffed sleeves, and had to slouch to hide how tight my bodice had grown, the way the hems rode up my ankles. The effect was almost obscene.

And then one morning I found my child's dresses gone and a *kefta*, a Grisha's most treasured possession outside of an amplifier, hanging on my door. It was white. White and gold. It was livery.

I told myself it meant nothing. It was just a color. I made myself put it on. I fixed my hair, held my head high. I was beautiful in this, as I was beautiful in everything else. Besides, I had nothing else to wear.

But I was wrong. That color meant everything. It was a command to the Queen's ladies that they shouldn't greet me or acknowledge that I'd entered a room. It was an indelible line drawn between me and the other Grisha. It was a signal to the King that he could follow me into my chambers and press me up against the wall, that I was available for his use. That there was no point to crying out.

There were no good days anymore, no sweets or outings, just long hours of tedium, waiting for the Queen's call, dreading the King's soft tread outside my door. One night, before a party, I was summoned to the Queen's dressing room. I darkened her lashes with black walnut, tinted her lips with peonies grown for me in the Grisha hothouses. I worked quietly, saying nothing, keeping my eyes downcast. I was to be in her retinue that night, and I'd been careful to style my own hair simply. I suppose I could have made myself plain to please her, but some part of me would not allow it.

Her gown was pale green that night, darker at the hem, fresh as new leaves. As I fastened the pearl buttons at her back, she said, "A lack of gratitude is unbecoming in a servant. You should wear the jewels my husband gives you."

I saw it then. I understood. She'd known it would happen. Maybe from the first day she'd brought me to the Little Palace. She knew him and what he was, but I was the one she resented for it. I stood there, paralyzed, buffeted by two competing winds. I wanted to fall to my knees and bury my head in her lap, to cry and beg for her protection. I wanted to smash the mirror she feared so much and cut her face to ribbons with it, stuff her mouth with glass and make her swallow every jagged edge of my hurt and shame.

Instead, I went to the Darkling. I don't know where I found the audacity. Even as I ran across the palace grounds, a voice in my head was cursing me for a fool, clamoring that I would never be granted audience, that I should turn back around and forget this madness. But I couldn't bear the idea of returning to the Queen's side, of spending the whole night with my nails digging into my palms, smelling her perfume, counting and

recounting the line of buttons on that leaf green dress as she held court. The thought drove my steps all the way to the Little Palace.

I wanted to avoid the Grisha in the main hall, so I used the entrance that led directly to the war room. As soon as I made my request to the *oprichnik* standing guard, I regretted it. The Darkling had given me to the Queen. He would turn me away now, maybe worse.

But the *oprichnik* returned and simply gestured for me to follow him down the hall. When I arrived at the war room, a group of Grisha were leaving—Ivan and several high-ranking Etherealki and Heartrenders I didn't know.

I'd told myself I would be dignified. I would plead my case rationally. But when Ivan closed the door, I started to cry. The Darkling might have chastised me or turned his back. But he put his arm around me, sat me down at the table. He poured me a glass of water and waited until I was calm enough to take a gulping sip.

"Do not let them humble you," he said softly.

I'd had a speech prepared, a hundred things I wanted to say. All of it went out of my head, and I sputtered the first thing that came into my mind. "I don't want to wear this anymore," I pleaded. "It's a servant's uniform."

"It's a soldier's uniform."

I shook my head, choking back another sob. He leaned forward and wiped the tears from my cheeks with the sleeve of his own *kefta*.

"If you tell me you cannot bear this, then I will send you from here and you need never wear those colors or walk the halls of the Grand Palace again. You will be safe, I promise you that."

I looked up at him, not quite believing. "Safe?"

"Safe. But I can promise you this, too: You *are* a soldier. You could be my greatest soldier. And if you stay, if you can endure this, one day all will know it." He lifted my chin with his finger. "Do you know the King once cut himself on his own sword?"

A little laugh escaped me. "He did?"

The Darkling nodded, the barest grin playing over his lips. "He wears it constantly—just for show, mind you. He forgets it is not a toy by his side, but a weapon." His face grew serious. "I can promise you safety," he said. "Or I can promise to see your suffering repaid a thousandfold." With the pad of his thumb, he brushed a stray tear from beneath my eye. "You decide, Genya."

That choice was hard, but this one is easy.

I straighten the rows of bottles and shut the closet door. I cross to the window. When I press my face to the glass, I can see the lanterns lit across the palace grounds, and I can just make out the sounds of music playing in one of the ballrooms, the high human wail of violins. If I could see past the trees, through the dark, I might glimpse the wooded tunnel and, beyond it, down that gentle slope, the golden domes that top the Little Palace.

I think of Alina's too-thin fingers gripping the edge of the sheet, the hope she can't hide in her pale, expressive face as she writes out the tracker's name.

I open the black wood box, and I feed the letters to the fire, one by one. It hurts, but I can bear it. Because I am a doll, and a servant. Because I am a pretty thing and a soldier all the same.