



# LITTLE KNIFE

LEIGH BARDUGO

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*illustration by*

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TOR·COM 

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It is dangerous to travel the northern road with a troubled heart. Just south of Arkesk is a break in the trees, a place where no bird sings and the shadows hang from the branches with strange weight. On this lonely mile, travelers stay close to their companions, they sing loud songs and beat the drum, for if you are lost to your own thoughts, you may find yourself stepping off the path and into the dark woods. And if you continue, ignoring the shouts of your companions, your feet may carry you to the silent streets and abandoned houses of Velisyana, the cursed city.

Weeds and wildflowers crowd the cobblestones. The shops are empty, and the doors have rotted on their hinges, leaving only gaping mouths. The town square is overgrown with brambles and the church roof has long since given way; amid the shattered pews, the great dome lies on its side, collecting rainwater, its gold leaf stripped away by time or some enterprising thief.

You may recognize this quiet as you stand in what was once Suitors' Square, staring up at the grand facade of a crumbling palace and the little window high above the street, its casement carved with lilies. This is the sound of a heart gone silent. Velisyana is a corpse.

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In days past, the town was known for two things: the quality of its flour—used by every kitchen for nearly a hundred miles—and the beauty of Yeva Luchova, the old Duke's daughter.

The Duke was not a particular favorite of the King, but he'd grown rich anyway. He'd installed dams and dykes to contain the river so that it no longer flooded his lands, and he'd built the great mill where Velisyana's flour was ground, commissioning a giant waterwheel with sturdy steel spokes, perfect in its balance.

There is some debate over what Yeva Luchova actually looked like, whether her hair was burnished gold or lustrous black, whether her eyes were blue as sapphires or green as new grass. It is not the particulars of her beauty but the power of it that concerns us, and we need only know that Yeva was lovely from the moment of her birth.

She was so beautiful, in fact, that the midwife attending her mother snatched up the wailing infant and locked herself in a linen closet, begging for just another moment to gaze upon Yeva's face and refusing to relinquish the baby until the Duke called for an axe to break down the door. The Duke had the midwife whipped, but that didn't stop several of Yeva's nursemaids from trying to steal the child away. Finally, her father hired a blind old woman to care for his daughter, and there was peace in his home. Of course, that peace did not last, for Yeva only grew more beautiful as she aged.

No one could make sense of it, for neither the Duke nor his wife were much to look at. There were rumors that Yeva's mother had found her way into the camp of a Suli traveler, and more jealous sorts liked to whisper that a handsome demon had crept in with the moonlight and tricked his way into her mother's bed. Most of the townspeople laughed away these stories, for no one could

know Yeva's kindness and think that she was anything but a good and righteous girl. And yet, when Yeva walked down the street, the wind lifting her hair, moving with such grace that her lovely feet barely seemed to touch the cobblestones, it was hard not to wonder. Every year on Yeva's birthday, under the guise of placing flowers in her braids, the blind nursemaid would check Yeva's scalp, feeling with trembling fingers for the bumps of new horns.

As Yeva's beauty grew, so did her father's pride. When she turned twelve, he had a portrait artist come all the way from Os Alta to paint her surrounded by lilies, and had her image stamped on every bag of flour from his mill. So women in their kitchens came to wear their hair like Yeva, and men from all over Ravka traveled to Velisyana to see if such a creature could be real.

Of course, the artist fell in love with Yeva too. He put dropwort in her milk and got all the way to Arkesk with her before he was apprehended. The Duke found his daughter sleeping soundly in the back of the pony cart, wedged between canvases and jars of pigments. Yeva was quite unharmed and had little memory of the event, though she forever had an aversion to portrait galleries, and the smell of oil paint would always make her drowsy.

By the time Yeva was fifteen, it was no longer safe for her to leave the house. She tried cutting her hair and covering her face in ashes, but this only made her more intriguing to the men who spied her on her daily walk, for when they saw her, their imaginations ran wild. When Yeva stopped to remove a stone from her shoe and unwittingly gave the

crowd a glimpse of her perfect ankle, a riot broke out, and her father decided she must be confined to the palace.

She spent her days reading and sewing, walking back and forth through the halls for exercise, always in a veil so as not to distract the servants. Every day, when the clock on the bell tower chimed the noon hour, she appeared at her window to wave at the people gathered in the square below, and to let her suitors come forward to declare their love and beg for her hand. They would sing songs or perform tricks or stage duels to prove their daring—though the duels sometimes got out of hand, and after the second death, the retired army colonel who acted as constable had to put a stop to them.

“Papa,” Yeva said to the Duke. “Why must I be the one to hide?”

The Duke patted her hand. “Enjoy this power, Yeva. For one day you will grow old and no one will notice when you walk down the street.”

Yeva did not think her father had answered her question, but she kissed his cheek and returned to her sewing.

On the morning of her sixteenth birthday, Uri Levkin appeared at the door with his son. He was one of the wealthiest men of the town, second only to the Duke, and had come to barter for a union between Yeva and his boy. But as soon as he stepped into the parlor and saw Yeva sitting by the fire, he declared that he would be the one to marry her.

Father and son took to arguing and then went at each other with their fists. The retired colonel was called upon to settle the dispute, but at his first real glimpse of Yeva, he



drew his sword and challenged both of her other suitors. Yeva's father sent her to her room and called for guards to pull the men apart. In time, free from the spell of Yeva's beauty, the men returned to their senses. They drank tea together and lowered their heads in shame at their madness.

"You cannot let this go on," said the colonel. "Every day the crowd in the square grows. You must choose a husband for Yeva and be done with this insanity before the town is torn apart."

Now, the Duke might have put an end to all of this by simply asking his daughter what she desired. But he enjoyed the attention Yeva received, and it certainly sold a lot of flour. So he devised a plan that suited his greed and his love for spectacle.

It happened that the Duke had many acres of forest that he wished to clear in order to plant more wheat. At noon the next day, he stepped out on the balcony that overlooked Suitors' Square and waved to the men below. The crowd sighed in disappointment when they saw the Duke instead of Yeva, but their ears perked up when they heard what he had to say.

"It is time for my daughter to marry." A cheer went up from the crowd. "But only a worthy man may have her. Yeva is delicate and must be kept warm. Each of you will bring a pile of lumber to the fallow field at the edge of the southern wood. At sunrise tomorrow, whoever has the tallest pile will win Yeva as his bride."

The suitors did not stop to contemplate the strangeness of this task, but bolted off to fetch their axes.

As the Duke shut the balcony doors, Yeva said, "Papa, forgive me, but what way is this to choose a husband? Tomorrow, I will certainly have a lot of firewood, but will I have a good man?"

The Duke patted her hand. "Darling Yeva," he said. "Do you think I am so foolish or so cruel? Did you not see the Prince standing in the square this past week, waiting patiently each day for a glimpse of you? He has gold enough to hire a thousand men to wield their axes for him. He will win this contest easily and you will live in the capital and wear only silk for the rest of your days. What do you think of that?"

Yeva doubted that her father had answered her question, but she kissed his cheek and told him that he was very wise indeed.

What neither Yeva nor her father knew was that deep in the shadows of the clock tower, Semyon the Ragged was listening. Semyon was a Tidemaker, and though he was powerful, he was poor. This was in the days before the Second Army, when Grisha were welcome in few places and greeted with suspicion everywhere. Semyon made his living traveling from town to town, diverting rivers when there were droughts, keeping rains at bay when the winter storms came too soon, or finding the right places to sink wells. It was simple to Semyon. "Water only wants direction," he would say on the rare occasion he was asked. "It wants to be told what to do."

He was usually paid in barley or trade and as soon as he was done with a task the villagers would ask him to move on. It was no kind of life. Semyon longed for a home and a

wife. He wanted new boots and a fine coat so that when he walked down the street people would look on him with respect. And as soon as he saw Yeva Luchova, he wanted her too.

Semyon made his way through town to the edge of the southern wood where the suitors were already hacking away at the trees and building their piles of timber. Semyon had no axe and no money to buy one. He was clever and even desperate enough to steal, but he'd seen the Prince loitering beneath Yeva's window and he thought he understood the Duke's plan well enough. His heart sank as he watched teams of men building the Prince's pile while the Prince himself looked on, golden haired and smiling, twirling an ivory-handled axe with an edge that glinted the dull gray of Grisha steel.

Semyon went down to the river to the sorry camp he had made, where he kept his bundle of rags and his few belongings. He sat on the banks and listened to the steady thump and splash of the waterwheel beside the great mill. Around people, Semyon was tongue-tied and sullen, but on the sloping riverbank, amid the soft rustle of reeds, Semyon spoke freely, unburdening his heart to the water, confiding all his secret aspirations. The river laughed at his jokes, listened and murmured assent, roared in shared anger and indignation when he'd been wronged.

But as the sun set and the axes fell silent in the distance, Semyon knew the men would go home with the last of the daylight. The contest was as good as over.

"What am I to do?" he said to the river. "Tomorrow Yeva will have a prince for a husband and I will still have nothing.

Always you have done my bidding, but what good are you to me now?"

To his surprise, the river burbled a high sweet sound, almost like a woman singing. It splashed left then right, breaking up against the rocks, frothing and foaming, as if troubled by a storm. Semyon stumbled backward, his boots sinking in the mud as the water rose.

"River, what do you do?" he cried.

The river swelled in a great, curling wave and roared toward him, breaching its banks. Semyon covered his head with his arms, sure he would be drowned, but just as the water was about to strike him, the river split and raced around his shaking body.

Through the woods the river tumbled, tearing ancient trees from the soil, stripping away branches. The river cut a path through the forest under the cover of night, all the way to the fallow field at the edge of the southern wood. There it swirled and eddied, and tree upon tree, branch upon branch, a structure began to take form. All night the river worked, and when the townspeople arrived in the morning, they found Semyon standing beside a massive tower of timber that dwarfed the sad little pile of kindling assembled by the Prince's men.

The Prince hurled his ivory-handled axe away in anger, and the Duke was most distressed. He could not break a promise made so publicly, but he could not bear the thought of his daughter married to such an unnatural creature as Semyon. He forced himself to smile and thump Semyon on his narrow back. "What fine work you've done!" he

declared. "I'm sure you will be just as successful at the second task!"

Semyon frowned. "But—"

"Surely you did not think I would set only one task for Yeva's hand? I'm certain you can agree, my daughter is worth more than that!"

All the townspeople and the eager suitors concurred—especially the Prince, whose pride was still smarting. Semyon did not want anyone to think he priced Yeva so low. He swallowed his protest and nodded.

"Very good! Then listen closely. A girl like Yeva must be able to behold her own lovely face. High in the Petrazoi lives Baba Anezka, the maker of mirrors. Whoever returns with a piece of her handiwork will have my daughter as his bride."

The suitors scattered in all directions while the Prince called orders to his men.

When her father had returned to the palace and Yeva heard what he had done, she said, "Papa, forgive me, but what way is this to find a husband? Soon I will have a fine mirror, but will I have a good man?"

"Darling Yeva," said the Duke. "When will you learn to trust in your father's wisdom? The Prince has Ravka's fastest horses and only he can afford such a mirror. He will win this contest easily and then you will wear a jeweled crown and eat cherries in winter. What do you think of that?"

Yeva wondered if her father had simply misheard her question, but she kissed his cheek and told him she was very fond of cherries indeed.

Semyon went down to the river and put his head in his hands. "What am I to do?" he said miserably. "I have no horse nor have I money to trade with the mountain witch. You helped me before, but what good are you now, river?"

Then Semyon gasped as the river once more breached its banks and grabbed hold of his ankle. It dragged him into its depths as he sputtered and gasped.

"River," cried Semyon, "what do you do?"

The river bubbled its reply, dunking him deep, then buoying him to the surface and carrying him safely along. It bore him south through lakes and creeks and rapids, west through tributaries and streams, mile after mile, until finally they came to the north-facing slopes of the Petrazoi, and Semyon understood the river's intent.

"Faster, river, faster!" he commanded as it carried him up the mountainside, and soon enough, he arrived soaked but triumphant at the entrance to the witch's cave.

"You have been a loyal friend, and so I think I must name you," Semyon said to the river as he tried to wring the water from his ragged coat. "I will call you Little Knife because of the way you flash silver in the sunlight and because you are my fierce defender."

Then he knocked on the witch's door. "I have come for a mirror!" he shouted. Baba Anezka opened the door, her teeth straight and sharp, her eyes golden and unblinking. Only then did Semyon remember he had no coin with which to pay. But before the ancient Fabrikator could shut the door in his face, the river splashed its way through, eddying around Baba Anezka's feet and then back out again.

Baba Anezka greeted the river with a bow, and with Semyon on her heels, followed the river over a high ridge and through a path hidden between two flat rocks. As they squeezed through, they found themselves at the edge of a shallow valley, its floor all gray gravel, barren and unwelcoming as the rest of the Petrazoi. But at its center lay a pool, nearly perfect in its roundness, its surface smooth as highly polished glass, reflecting the sky so purely that it looked as if one could step into it and fall straight through the clouds.

The witch smiled, showing all her sharp teeth. “Now *this* is a mirror,” she said, “and seems a fair trade.”

They returned to the cave, and when Baba Anezka handed Semyon one of her finest mirrors, he laughed in his joy.

“That gift is for the river,” she said.

“It belongs to Little Knife, and Little Knife does as I ask. Besides, what could a river want with a mirror?”

“That is a question for the river,” replied Baba Anezka.

But Semyon ignored her. He called out for Little Knife and once more the river grabbed his ankle and they went rushing down the mountainside together. When they roared past the Prince’s caravan trudging up the path, the soldiers turned to look, but only saw a great wave and a white curl of foam.

Once they arrived in Velisyana, Semyon put on his least threadbare tunic, combed his hair, and did his best to polish his boots. When he checked his reflection in the mirror, he was surprised at the sullen face and inky eyes that stared

back at him. He'd always thought himself quite handsome, and the river had never told him differently.

"There is something wrong with this mirror, Little Knife," he said. "But this is what the Duke demanded and so Yeva shall have it for her wall."

When the Duke looked out his window and saw Semyon striding across Suitors' Square with a mirror in his hands, he reeled back in shock.

"See what you have done with your foolish tasks?" said the retired colonel, who had come to await the contest's outcome with the Duke. "You should have given me Yeva's hand when you had the chance. Now she will be married to that outcast and no one will want to sit at your table. You must find a way to be rid of him."

But the Duke was not so sure. A Prince would make a fine son-in-law, but Semyon must have great power to accomplish such extraordinary tasks, and the Duke wondered if he might make use of such magic.

He sent the colonel away and when Semyon knocked on the palace door, the Duke welcomed him with much ceremony. He sat Semyon in a place of honor and had the servants wash his hands with perfumed water, then gave him sugared almonds, plum brandy, bowls of lamb dumplings resting in nests of musk mallow. Semyon had never eaten so well, and he'd certainly never been treated as a beloved guest. When at last he sat back, his belly ached and his eyes were bleary with wine and flattery.

The Duke said, "Semyon, we are both honest men and so can speak freely with one another. You are a clever fellow,



but how can you hope to care for one such as Yeva? You have no work, no home, no prospects.”

“I have love,” said Semyon, nearly toppling his glass, “and Little Knife.”

The Duke didn’t know what knives had to do with anything, but he said, “One cannot live on love or cutlery, and Yeva has had an easy life. She knows nothing of struggle or hardship. Would you be the one to teach her suffering?”

“No!” cried Semyon. “Never!”

“Then we must make a plan, you and I. Tomorrow I will set a final task and if you accomplish it, then you will have Yeva’s hand and all the riches you could ever want.”

Semyon thought the Duke might try to cheat him once more, but he liked the sound of this bargain and resolved to be on his guard.

“Very well,” he said, and offered the Duke his hand.

The Duke shook it, hiding his distaste, then said, “Come to the square tomorrow morning and listen closely.”

Word of the new task spread and the next day, the square was packed with even more suitors, including the Prince, who stood with his tired horses, his boots glittering with tiny shards of the mirror he had smashed in his frustration.

“There is an ancient coin forged by a great sorcerer and buried somewhere beneath Ravka,” the Duke declared. “Each time you spend it, it returns to you twofold, so your pockets will always be full. Bring back this coin so that Yeva will never want for anything and you will have her as your bride.”

The crowd raced off in all directions to gather shovels and pickaxes.

When the Duke stepped back from the balcony, Yeva said, "Papa, forgive me, but what way is this to find a husband? Soon I will be very rich, but will I have a good man?"

This time, the Duke looked on his daughter with pity. "When the coffers are empty and their bellies growl, even good men turn bad. Whoever may win this contest, the magic coin will be ours. We will dance in marble halls and drink from cups of frozen amber, and if you do not like your husband, we will drown him in a sea of gold, then send a silver ship to find you a new one. What do you think of that?"

Yeva sighed, weary of asking questions that went unanswered. She kissed her father's cheek and went to say her prayers.

The Prince called all his advisors together. The Royal Engineer brought him a machine that required fifty men to turn the crank. Once it was spinning, it could drill for miles beneath the earth. But the Engineer did not know how to stop it, and the machine and the fifty men were never heard from again. The Minister of the Interior claimed he could train an army of moles if he only had more time, and the King's spymaster swore that he had heard stories of a magic spoon that could dig through solid rock.

Meanwhile, Semyon returned to the river. "Little Knife," he called. "I need you. If I do not find the coin, then another man will have Yeva and I will have nothing."

The river splashed, its surface rippling in consternation. It sloshed against its banks, returning again and again to break upon the dam that bound the millpond. It took many minutes, but soon Semyon understood: the river was divided, too weak to dig beneath the ground.

He snatched up the ivory-handled axe he had taken from the woods when the Prince had cast it away, and hacked at the dam with all his might. The clang of Grisha steel against stone echoed through the forest, until finally, with a creaking sigh, the dam burst. The river roiled and frothed in its newfound strength, whole once more.

“Now slice through the ground and fetch me the coin, Little Knife, or what good are you to me?”

The river dove through the earth, moving with strength and purpose, leaving caverns and caves and tunnels in its wake. It crossed the length of Ravka, from border to border and back, as the rock tore at its current and the soil drank from its sides. The deeper the river plunged, the weaker it became, but on it went, and when it was at its most frail, little more than a breath of fog in a clump of earth, it felt the coin, small and hard. Whatever face the metal bore had been long worn away by time.

The river clutched the coin and hurtled to the surface, gathering its strength, growing dense with mud and rainwater, swelling as it reclaimed each rivulet and tiny stream. It erupted through the millpond, a gout of mist that glittered with rainbows, bouncing the coin this way and that.

Semyon bounded into the water to seize it, but the river swirled around him, making worried murmurs. Semyon paused and he wondered, *What if I bring the coin to the*

*Duke and he sets yet another task? What if he takes it and murders me where I sit?*

"I am no fool," said Semyon to the river. "Keep the coin in the shallows until I return."

Once more Semyon combed his hair and shined his boots and made the walk to the Duke's home. There he pounded on the door and announced that he had found the final prize. "Call the priest!" he demanded. "Let Yeva be dressed in her finery. We will say our vows by the river, and then I will give you your magic coin."

So Yeva was attired in a dress of gold and a thick veil to hide her miraculous face. The blind nursemaid cried softly as she hugged Yeva one last time, and helped to secure a jeweled *kokoshnik* in her hair. Then Yeva was led down to the river with her father and the priest, trailing all the townspeople and the grumbling Prince behind them.

They found Semyon by the shattered dam, the river spilling its banks.

"What has happened here?" asked the Duke.

Semyon still wore his threadbare rags, but now he spoke with pride. "I have your coin," he said. "Give me my bride."

The Duke held out his hand in expectation.

"Show them, Little Knife," said Semyon to the seething waters.

Yeva frowned. "What is little about the river?" she asked. But no one heard her question.

The coin shot from the river's depths to skip and dance on its surface.

"It's true!" exclaimed the Duke. "By all the Saints, he's found it!"

The Duke, Semyon, and the Prince all reached for the coin—and the river roared. It seemed to hunch its back like a beast preparing to charge, a wild, pulsing swell that crested over the crowd.

“Stop this!” demanded Semyon.

But the river did not stop. It twisted and turned, forming a mighty column that churned with reeds and broken rocks, rising high above the forest floor as the onlookers cowered in fear. What did they see in its waters? Some would later say a demon, others the pale and bloated bodies of a hundred drowned men, but most said they saw a woman with arms like breaking waves, with hair like storm-cloud lightning, and breasts of white foam.

“Little Knife!” cried Semyon. “What do you do?”

A voice spoke, terrible in its power, rumbling with the sound of rain-choked waterfalls, of tempests and floods. “I am no blunt knife to cut your sorry bread,” it said. “I feed the fields and drown the harvest. I am bounty and destruction.”

The people fell to their knees and wept. The Duke clutched the priest’s hand.

“Then who are you?” begged Semyon. “What are you?”

“Your tongue is not fit for my true name,” the river boomed. “I was once a spirit of the Isenvee, the great North Sea, and I roamed these lands freely, tumbling down through Fjerda, to the rocky coast and back again. Then, by unhappy accident, my spirit was trapped here, bound by this dam, free to run but doomed to return, forced to keep that cursed wheel spinning, in endless service to this

miserable hamlet. Now the dam is no more. Your greed and the Prince's axe have seen to that."

It was Yeva who found the courage to speak, for the question to ask seemed simple. "What do you want, river?"

"It was I who built the tower of trees," said the river. "And I who earned the mirror from Baba Anezka. It was I who found the magic coin. And now I say to you, Yeva Luchova: Will you remain here with the father who tried to sell you, or the Prince who hoped to buy you, or the man too weak to solve his riddles for himself? Or will you come with me and be bride to nothing but the shore?"

Yeva looked at Semyon, at the Prince, at her father standing beside the priest. Then she tore the veil from her face—her eyes were bright, her cheeks were flushed and glowing. The people cried out and shielded their gazes, for in that moment she was too lovely to look at. She was terrifying in her beauty, bright like a devouring star.

Yeva leapt from the banks and the river caught her up in its waters, keeping her afloat as her jeweled *kokoshnik* sank and her silken gown billowed around her. She hovered there on the surface, a flower caught in the current. Then as the Duke stood stunned and quaking in his wet boots, the river wrapped Yeva in its arms and carried her away. Through the woods the river thundered, leaving trees and fields drenched by her eddying skirts, smashing the mill to bits in her wake. The waterwheel snapped free of its moorings and rolled wildly down the banks, knocking the Prince and all his retainers to the ground before disappearing into the underbrush.

The townspeople trembled against each other and when the river was finally gone, they looked upon the empty riverbed, its damp rocks glittering in the sun. Where the millpond had been only minutes before, there was just a muddy basin. There was quiet, no sound but the croak of lost frogs and the slap of gasping fish flopping in the muck.

\* \* \*

The river was the heart of Velisyana, and when it went silent, all that was left was for the town to die.

Without the river, there could be no mill, and without the mill, the Duke lost his fortune. When he begged for relief from the King, the Prince suggested that his father set three tasks and that the price for failure be the Duke's head. The Duke left the capital in disgrace but with his head still on his shoulders.

The shops and houses of Velisyana emptied. The grates lay cold and the clock on the belltower chimed its hour for no one. The Duke remained in his crumbling palace, gazing out from Yeva's window onto the empty stones of Suitors' Square, and cursing Semyon. If you keep very still, you may see him there, surrounded by stone lilies, awaiting the water's return.

But you will not glimpse lovely Yeva. The river carried her all the way to the seashore, and there she stayed. She said her prayers in a tiny chapel where the waves ran right up to the door, and each day she sat by the ocean's edge and watched the tides come and go. She lived in happy solitude, and grew old, and never worried when her beauty faded, for in her reflection she always saw a free woman.

As for poor Semyon, he was driven out of town, blamed for the tragedy that had befallen it. His misery was short, however. Not long after he left Velisyana, he withered to a husk and died. He would not let any drop of water pass his lips, certain it would betray him.

Now, if you have been foolish enough to wander from the path, it is up to you to make your way back to the road. Follow the voices of your worried companions and perhaps this time your feet will lead you past the rusting skeleton of a waterwheel resting in a meadow where it has no right to be. If you are lucky, you will find your friends again. They will pat you on the back and soothe you with their laughter. But as you leave that dark gap in the trees behind, remember that to use a thing is not to own it. And should you ever take a bride, listen closely to her questions. In them you may hear her true name like the thunder of a lost river, like the sighing of the sea.

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