



THE DEATHLESS GIRLS

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HARGRAVE

ORION CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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That's how you get deathless, *volchitsa*. Walk the same tale over and over, until you wear a groove in the world, until even if you vanished, the tale would keep turning[.]

- from *Deathless* by Catherynne M. Valente

She shall not go into that unknown and terrible land alone.

- from *Dracula* by Bram Stoker

Glossary

Aurari	Goldsmith
Biserică	Church
Boyar	Lord
Draga	Darling
Gheață	Ice
Iele	Forest spirits
Lăutari	Singer
Pricolici	Demons
Strigoi	Undead
Ursari	Bear dancer
Voivode	Prince

Aftermath

There is a time here called aftermath.

After the Settled have pulled their harvests from the ground, and long bound and placed it in dark stores, shored against rats by cats starved in narrow houses where they fight and mate and sleep until they are loosed. After the turning seasons light the trees red gold in the cold, the ground hardening underfoot, wrinkling with frost. After the snow comes like a heavy, smothering blanket, pillowing the mountains and setting off the soft fury of avalanches, finding the cracks in rocks and splitting them easy as the seeds that are deeply furrowed in the stilled earth. After the melt and pivot of another year, after all this, comes the aftermath.

The first, green moments of a new harvest, the emergence of the slow work happening beneath the thawing soil. For the Settled, it is a heralding of the work to come, always the same, sure as seasons. For us, it is a time to move on.

The aftermath had just started that year when the soldiers

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came through the narrow mountain pass, up through the coppery trees, and onto this land we lived upon but laid no claim to. It was a beginning into which they arrived, bringing with them the end.

Chapter One

Kizzy saw the flames first. She always was the first to everything, always half a step ahead. I was out of Mamă eight minutes before, but ever since I've been falling behind.

We were under a spreading oak, late afternoon sunlight filtering to golden needles, piercing our dark skin as we searched the ground. We were looking for white mushrooms, bright and slender limbed as sapling birches.

The next day was our seventeenth birthday, our divining day. The day Old Charani would stretch our palms over her own gnarled one, and we'd learn what the rest of our lives held.

My whole body shimmered with nerves, as if my blood were mixed with crushed glass, but Kizzy could hardly wait. I could feel her humming with excitement as she snapped the mushrooms from their stems. But then my sister had spent months, years, her whole life knowing what her future would be. We were born under a blood moon, and whilst the Settled saw it as a bad omen, for us it was thought to be lucky - who knew? It was so rare I'd never heard of another child born to it, let alone two.

Perhaps both were true: perhaps it could be a curse or a blessing. I often wondered if that meant one of us was cursed, and another blessed. Kizzy certainly thought she was the latter. She'd wake from dreams, her face alight and smooth – peaceful – and say:

‘I’ve seen it again, Lil.’

Not ‘dreamt’. *Seen*.

Kizzy was always sure that she had the gift, too, like Old Charani, though it is unusual for a camp to have more than one true Seer, if that. Divining days are most powerful on the day of your birth, but Seers can read a person for a full moon-cycle after. The Settled think all Travellers are gifted, or at worst, sorcerers, but Old Charani says it is the rarest of all fates.

‘Plenty can read people,’ she’d say. ‘But very few can read their futures.’

Still, I wouldn’t be surprised if Kizzy does have some of Old Charani’s skill. The Gift is, at its most simple, about knowing more, seeing more. And Kizzy has always noticed things I miss.

She was certain she would be an *ursari*, a bear trainer, like Mamă. If Charani confirmed her gift, then our next route would take us through the highest parts of the mountains, and she would go with Mamă to steal her a cub from the dark mouth of a cave. She would train it as well as Mamă has her bear, Albu, and live out her fate the way she did all things – with an ease bordering on recklessness.

And me?

I guessed my place would be as it always had been: a step behind Kizzy. Perhaps an *ursari*, if I’m lucky. All the women

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in our family have been, from when our stories began. I used to believe it was this blood-bred affinity that meant Albu listened to me, obeyed my commands when Mamă helped us practise; but now I think it is more out of loyalty to Mamă than to me. I love the bear – his soft white fur, a rarity that is prized and combed daily, his gentle brown eyes set in his long face, all the fierceness bred out of him by Mamă's coddling – but there is no bone-deep understanding between us. No connection that runs like a gleaming golden line, twining us together.

In my wildest, most secret moments, I dreamed of being a *lăutari*, a singer. Kizzy said my voice is sweeter than any bird's, but she is only being kind. She's the only judge I've ever had – I've never sung for anyone else. Once, Kizzy dragged me to Mamă and demanded I sing, but my voice caught in my throat like a lump of unchewed bread.

Perhaps it was just as well, for the best living for a *lăutari* is in a boyar's court, and they were brutal places, far more dangerous for a Traveller than the forests. Worse than the lords, though, are the Voivodes, the princes that parcel up this country between them.

Power has made them beasts. There's a story of a Voivode in Northern Wallachia who had a particular liking for young Traveller girls with talent. They called him the Dragon, and it is said he made them perform until they were husks, the prettiest expected to do more than perform: he ruined them, then drank their blood, and so was immortal. It sounds like stories, but Old Charani said all stories have their roots in truth, however deeply buried.

Anyway, my becoming a *lăutari* was probably just a dream. Most likely even being a *ursari* was out of my reach and I would be a cobbler, or woodworker, like all those who have no talent and must instead learn a trade.

We should have moved on that very day, the wagons' stairs folded up, painted shutters secured, the horses saddled, and Albu and Dorsi, Erha's bear, shut in their travelling cages. But in honour of our divining day, Mamă asked Old Charani that we might stay the camp until the day after tomorrow, so she could spend it stewing the mushrooms overnight with wild garlic and sharp, green onions to make our favourite dish. If anyone else had asked, Old Charani would have refused. But no one refused Mamă. She and Kizzy had that alike.

Kizzy's apron was full, the plants torn neatly at the base so the roots were left intact and could feed us the next time we passed this way. Our lives had the cycle of slow seasons: we had been by this valley only once before, when we were swelling Mamă's belly. We try to leave no trace, take only what we need.

My apron was mucky with thick clods of mud that clung to the roots – no matter how I tried, I could not get them to break cleanly, each wrench a small destruction.

'You should have brought a knife,' sighed Kizzy, bending to snap another stem.

'You didn't.'

'I don't bite my nails to nothing,' she said, dropping the mushroom lightly into her heaving skirts and flashing her hand at me.

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Her nails were curved as crescent moons, sharp bright against the smooth brown of her fingers. How were they so clean, after an afternoon scrabbling in the dirt? I clenched my own ragged claws into fists. They were more like Albu's, rough and blunt, more paw than hand.

She scanned my apron. 'Lil, that's a death cap!' She pointed to a mushroom greener than the others, flecked with what I now saw was not dirt but dark grey specks. The difference was so subtle I had not seen, but of course she had.

'Throw it away!' she said.

I took it up, but as she bent to pick another mushroom, I put the death cap into my pocket, only to show myself I could do as I pleased. She looked up and saw my mutinous face.

Kizzy nudged me in the ribs. 'Don't be like that, Lil. I think we have enough to feed the camp twice over anyway.'

I looked down at my apron, the meagre assortment, roots drying sadly in their graves of mud.

'Between us, at least. Here,' said Kizzy, and tipped half of her collection into my apron. I loved my sister fiercely, but hated her most when she was kind. 'Let's head back.'

Our camp was halfway up the valley. Old Charani's ideal spot was somewhere where the only things higher than our wagons were the birds; but then birds did not need to struggle over scree, or transport bears, or walk to find water, so her desires for height were tempered by practicalities.

Mushrooms and other things that fed on the dark were found in the valley's deep forest, gouged through the mountain by a river that once ran fast and glinting as a knife.

Now it was slow and settled, lapping at the boulders it had once torn from the ground. If Old Charani were a river, she'd stay slicing and quick all her days, never easing.

Getting down had been a straight scramble, skidding on our heels in our thin leather shoes, Kizzy laughing like a child the whole way and me gritting my teeth to keep from biting my tongue. Getting back would not be so easy, which was why we had picked it.

Had the route been simpler, Mamă would have made us bring Kem. Our brother was ten years younger and quiet, intense. We were alike in that way, as alike to each other as Kizzy was to Mamă. But I was nearly seventeen, nearly a woman, and a twin, so I was protected from the loneliness, the left-behindness we inflicted on him in our role as older sisters. Kizzy and I would put our heads together and talk or not talk, and Kem would look on like an owl, large-eyed and silent. Even the other children his age ignored him, discomforted by his watchfulness. Albu was his only friend, similarly the youngest in the den when Mamă had taken him to train.

As we turned from the flickering shadows, I plucked a couple of fiddleheads, tightly furled young ferns, and placed them into my pocket for Mamă to fry for him. I could never stomach them, but he loved their bitterness.

Kizzy was already disappearing into the trees, bent at a slant, eyes fixed ahead. She was bigger than me, her body already settled into soft curves that made Fen and the other older boys stare, but she was deft and sure on her feet as a cat.

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She waited for me at the first plateau, biting flies swirling around her head, barely sweating by the time I caught up. She matched her stride with mine after that, apron held like a tray before her and yet she never stumbled. She was at ease in the forests, in a way I never was.

A grace, Old Charani called it. That you must be born with.

But why hadn't I, born under the same sky, been given it too? Kizzy had grace, likely had the gift. And I was uneasy with everything, the world too blunt and jagged all at once. It was a painful thing, this growing, and growing apart. To understand that forming inside the same body did not mean we were formed the same. And after the divining day, our childhood would be over for good.

I looked sideways at Kizzy as we walked. Her profile was the same as mine, but from the front we were not identical. Her lips were fuller, her cheeks plumper. Her hips were wider, her belly gently rounded. She was wearing Mamā's braced bodice over her purple top, but I had no need. My chest was flat as Kem's beneath my cotton dress.

Her eyes flicked sideways, and a smile tugged the corners of her lips.

'What are you staring at?'

'You've got dirt on your nose,' I lied, and she brought her wrist up to rub it, smearing it with mud.

'Better?'

I nodded, the spite sour as fiddleheads.

We were about a mile from camp when she stopped again, so suddenly some of my borrowed mushrooms went tumbling.

‘Kizzy, what—’

‘Do you smell that?’ She sniffed the air, like Albu when he caught the scent of a wolf near camp. I felt her fear like a coin under my own tongue.

I took a deep breath, and I did smell something, felt it hit the back of my throat.

Smoke.

‘It’s a fire,’ I said. ‘Mamă will be building one for the stew.’

‘It doesn’t smell right. Not just of wood . . .’ She began to walk again, faster now, jolting mushrooms from her skirts. ‘And the forest sounds wrong. Where are the birds?’

I ran to keep up, and a moment later there was a noise that broke the absence of sound, an inhuman bellow that struck at my chest like a stone.

Albu. Albu in pain.

Chapter Two

Kizzy dropped her skirts, mushrooms dropping like unpuzzled bones to the ground. She held out her hand to me.

‘Come on!’

I couldn’t move, couldn’t even let go of my apron. I had never heard Albu make that sound, not since the earliest days when Mamă took him, and he cried for his mother. But he had been a cub then, and his mewling had been pitiful. Now it was terrible, terrifying, seeming to crash through my chest to snatch at my heart.

‘Come on!’

Kizzy yanked at me, hard, and like always I followed her, mushrooms quickly trodden into the dirt, my legs and lungs tight, Kizzy pulling me on, on, onwards toward noises I wanted to do nothing but turn and run from.

Because now, it was not just Albu screaming.

We reached the border of our camp, usually invisible even up close, disguised by fallen branches and brush. But now, you could not miss it. Kizzy cried out, and though I did not want to look, I did.

Flames, higher and wilder than any cooking pit, strangely coloured with blues and purples, were dancing at the edge of camp. At first glance I thought them *Iele*, spirits of the wind and forests that dance in fires and whip them higher. But another blink, eyeballs scratched with smoke, and I saw I was wrong.

It was much, much worse.

Old Charani's wagon was on fire. The paint was bubbling, loosing its dyes, turning the smoke poisonous shades of green.

And a man, a man I did not recognise, with a white face and a blood-red beard that trailed down his black clothes, was placing a torch to the carefully carved wheels, holding it to one until it caught, before moving to another.

I shrank back, searching for cover in the shadows cast by the trees, but Kizzy charged forwards, right at him, knocking the torch from his hand. He spun around and I saw his beard was not red, but that he wore a crimson sash around his mouth and nose, like a bandit, the ends tied diagonally across his chest.

My airless mind raced. Were we being robbed? Did he not know we had nothing to take?

The world sharpened again as he kicked out at Kizzy like a dog, and my sister went down, rolling away from the hot ash, batting at her clothes as they smouldered. *Come on, Lillai*, I screamed at myself. *Move!*

I snatched up a branch from the boundary and ran before I could think better of it. As the man raised the torch to swing it at Kizzy, I parried it with the branch, and though he

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was far stronger it deflected the blow just enough for the torch to fly loose from his grip. He roared as I dropped the branch, my wrist aching at the impact of his strike, and pulled Kizzy to her feet.

The man's torch had lit the ground before him, and we stumbled away, briefly shielded from his advance by the rearing of flames. As we moved clear of the burning wagon, the wind gripped at the smoke and hurled it skywards, clearing our view of the camp beyond.

The circle of blazing wagons was crawling with black-clothed men in crimson sashes, wielding long, glinting sticks. They brought them down on bundles of cloth at the centre of the caravan, and Kizzy howled. I realised, a moment after she did, that they were not sticks, but swords. Now everything slowed to a nightmarish pace as one of the bundles reached up a hand—

A thin, dark hand on a delicate wrist, whorled with knotted bones and age. A hand that all my life had pressed kindness or punishment upon me. A hand that tomorrow would have taken mine and showed me my fate.

Old Charani's hand.

It fell as the sword sliced down again, and again, in an awful, ceaseless rhythm until she stirred no more. Beside her, Dika and Erha were on the ground too, and all of them wore crimson slashes like sashes.

Kizzy started forwards but I held her back. 'Kizzy, we need to find Mamă and Kem!'

We tore our gaze from the bodies, searching. In the far corner of the camp where the bears were staked, Albu was

rearing, his white fur singed dark and streaked with ash. His muzzle was leaking red spots of blood to the ground, and he slashed with his front paws, swiping at the men's arms. His long claws were marred with gore, and several men lay broken before him, dragging themselves away.

But more were advancing, swords raised. Beside him was a mangled heap of brown fur. Dorsi was dead, and the remaining men were drawing closer to Albu. 'He's still tied to his stake!' shouted Kizzy. 'Where's Mamă?'

The first thing Mamă would have done if Albu were threatened would be to free him, so he could either flee, or fight freely. He was doubtless our best warrior.

And then, in step for once, we both turned our gaze along the burning circle of the wagons and saw our home at the same moment, flames eating it faster than any other.

'Mamă!' Kizzy's scream seemed to tear my own throat. 'Kem!'

Kizzy ran at the wagon, and I followed, but it was too late. I could see a thick length of wood throttling the doors, which we never locked. The awful cruelty of the sight made me stumble.

The men had shut them inside.

The shutters were ashen already, and the curtains swallowed by flames. Those curtains had been dyed purple with elderberries, stitched with blessings. Mamă's bed was beneath them, and when she rose at dawn to feed Albu I'd untangle myself from Kizzy's stifling grasp and lie down in her cooling sheets, place the fine material of the curtains

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across my face, breathe in the mingled smells of cooking and herbs and Mamā.

Seeing them gone was to know, even as Kizzy danced at and away from the licking flames, trying to rip open the door. Know with the same certainty I knew my sister's face, my own hands.

Mamā and Kem were dead.

Pain slammed into my stomach, and I bent double, holding myself together. They had died trapped, not even able to fight for their lives. Not even able to raise their eyes to the sky one last time. Rage flared inside me like a swallowing flame.

Mamā and Kem were dead.

But Albu was not.

I straightened and picked up Mamā's axe where it lay in its block beside our flaming wagon. The men's backs were to me, occupied with Albu's flailing paws. I raised the axe.

One of the injured men crawling away cried out a warning, and another turned to see the axe coming towards him. He stepped aside, alerting his companions. The men scattered and converged, darting clear and circling closer to me, like buzzing black flies, but in the moment they scattered, I reached Albu.

He kept them back, bellowing, as I swung at the leather connecting the stake to the chain. Two desperate hacks, and the bear was free. He stood fully, swiping behind him, the chain flying. His claws caught one of the men across the cheek, spilling blood.

As he reared, I saw what Albu had been crouched over: a small, shivering shape.

I darted between Albu's thrashing paws. My broken heart swelled.

'Kem!' I pulled at my brother's shoulder, shaking with relief, and he cowered away. 'It's me, we have to go!'

He looked up at me, his owl eyes swollen with tears, but as his soot-stained hand reached out to me, an arm came around my waist, and with the force of a hook, yanked me back.

I dropped the axe. I could see Kem's knuckles whiten into a fist. Albu bounded forward, raising his paw to strike, but he had left Kem exposed. I held out my empty hands, just as I did in training. His wet nose touched me for just a moment, flaring nostrils filled my whole palm, his breath searing.

'Kem!' I said. 'Take Kem! Go!'

Albu did not hesitate. He scooped up my brother like a salmon, throwing him onto his enormous back. Kem's hands tightened in his fur as the men rattled their swords, raised them to hack, but Albu was fast with fear and fury. He turned and ran from the smoking camp, into the thick trees beyond.

Some of the men started after him, but the one holding me stayed them.

'Leave it!' he called. 'Catch the girls.'

He stank of smoke and sweat. My hands were covered in blood from Albu's muzzle, and I threw a wish to the forest that he was not badly hurt.

The man threw me into the bears' caged cart. I landed on something soft and sobbing. Dika's son, Morsh. He squealed as I crushed his leg, and I shifted off with a murmur of apology.

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He didn't respond, only curled tighter into his ball. As I looked around for Kizzy, I saw no one over sixteen was alive except Fen, whose divining day had fallen three weeks ago. He had a peculiarly-shaped bruise on his cheek, and it was flaring the same blue and purple as Old Charani's wagon.

I could not bear to look, but knew our mothers and fathers, older sisters and brothers lay slain in the ring of our scorched homes, or else were caught and burned inside them. My nostrils were full of the smell: wood-smoke and something sweeter, like meat. I swallowed down bile.

'Mamă. Mamă.' Morsh's murmurs span away from his lips like prayers, face slick with snot and soot. I placed my hand gently on his shoulder.

'Have you seen Kizzy, Morsh?'

He shrank back from my touch, still muttering.

I looked around the survivors. 'Has anyone seen Kizzy?'

Terror sank me deep inside myself, a gnawing cold like an icy stake through my chest. Had the men killed her, too? We were tall for our age, and she better formed than I. And her face had been twisted with such fury – could they have mistaken her for older?

Fen crawled forward to peer through the bars of the cage. His face was heavy with worry too – he loved my sister, though I don't think he had admitted it to even himself. But when Old Charani had flattened his rough palm over his mere weeks ago, and told him he was an *aurari*, a goldsmith, and that before the year was out a woman would be placing a promise ring onto his finger, his eyes had searched for Kizzy.

‘There!’ His arm stretched out through the bars. ‘She’s alive!’

I heard her before I saw her, howling like a *pricolici*. She was heaped over two men’s shoulders, writhing, hissing and biting. She was thrown into the cage a moment later, still kicking.

One of the men who threw her in was the same man who had caught me, only now his appearance was altered. He had scratch marks all down his face, and I saw Kizzy’s hands had been bound behind her back with one of their sashes. I felt pride in her then, and my own sickening shame at being taken so easily.

He spat at her as the cage door closed and she scrambled upright, tripping over her skirts, and spat right back, banging her head against the metal slats.

‘Kizzy,’ I reached out to her, but even I was afraid. ‘Kizzy, calm.’

She wheeled around on her knees, and her black hair was matted with blood, her dark, lovely face frenzied as a cornered wolf’s.

‘Kisaiya,’ I said. Only Mamă used our full names, and her eyes focused on me. ‘Look at me.’

I held up my hand to her, palm out, fingers splayed. It was a gesture we had always made to swear on, or calm each other, something so natural that I wondered if we had lain inside Mamă like that, our fingertips touching. Unable to bring her own hand to meet it, she leant her forehead into my palm. I leant down and kissed her head. She tasted of the sickening, sweet smoke.

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She started to moan. The other children, even Fen, shrank back, but I wrapped my arms around her.

She was heavy against me, and I looked down at her bound hands. Her fingers, her beautiful, careful fingers, were burned and raw, the neat crescents of her nails now blood moons.

‘Why?’ she keened. ‘Why?’

The camp was still behind us. Nothing stirred except the flames still licking the trees, the terrible heat of our homes making my arms slick with sweat. But I did not let go of Kizzy.

The men climbed atop our best horses, and I saw Erha’s beloved old mule still twitching as he died in the dirt.

‘Where are they taking us?’ said Morsh, eyes bright with panic. ‘Where are we going?’

‘They’re boyar’s men,’ said Fen. ‘See the sashes?’

I remembered Old Charani, wearing a sash of her own blood, and closed my eyes against the sight. My throat was sore with smoke and screaming.

‘Soldiers?’ I asked.

‘Or slave gatherers.’

‘Where will they take us now?’

Fen closed his brown eyes, and a tear licked a line through his sooted face, polishing the bruise, which I realised now was in the shape of the flat of a sword. ‘Wherever they want.’

The cart began to move. Within moments, the forest closed over our camp, over everything we’d ever known, like a mighty hand closing a book.

As the smoke receded into the distance, I drew the fiddleheads out of my pocket, shared them around. Uncooked they were more bitter than ever, but no one refused one except Kizzy.

The death cap was still in my pocket. I thought of slipping it into my mouth, swallowing it down. It made you sweat, then see bright colours, then it closed your throat and stopped your heart. Kizzy was heavy in my lap, and I pushed the thought away.

We watched the forest pass us by, as though it was the thing that moved, its great trunks of protection, its wise whorls like eyes, turning away from us. Even at this distance, I could smell the smoke that killed our mother, on the air and my skin and in my sister's hair.

I thought of Albu, and my brother caught like a seed in his fur, and prayed for the trees to cradle them safely, and carry them far, far away.