THE
DEATHLESS
GIRLS

Kiran
Millwood
Hargrave
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 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.
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 ursar, 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 ursar, if I’m lucky. All the women in our family have been, from when our stories began. I used to believe it was this blood-breathed 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 Voievodzi, the princes that parcel up this country between them.

Power has made them beasts. There’s a story of a Voievod 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 ușar 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.

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. ‘No Iele mushrooms,’ she sighed. Kizzy was obsessed with the idea that one day she would find a patch of ground blessed by forest spirits. If you ate of them, they would give you visions. ‘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 Kem. 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 boys stare, but she was deft and sure on her feet as a cat.

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 up, 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 Mamâ’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 half-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.