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Dear Leigh Bardugo,

Cruel judgement, I've discovered, is like a weed. A monstrous, pestering, behemoth thrust into our lives to create chaos. For I am a thousand thoughts and ideas intricately spawned together. I am beauty, destruction, and sin. But I must assure you, I am not a monster. I am not a slave chained to the insignia society has etched into my flesh. *Selfish. Freeloader. Nerd. Atrocious. Insane.* I am me.

I am the fifth in my family's ten member circus. My ferocious cinnamon waves cascade to my narrow waist, providing my sepia eyes shelter from the world. Yet the world always seemingly stares at me. Well, maybe their gaze never settles on me, for they classify me as a quirky, petulant, lonely child. But the size of my family astonishes them. *I am only the insignificant middle child. Nothing else.* Constantly, we packed into our little clown car, hitting the next stop on our road map. *Always moving and entertaining, never settling.*

I need a home. Not a house, I've known a plethora of those.

But a home?

As Aleksander Morozova fiercely assured himself he'd make a refuge for himself and all others like him, I too promised to build my own private world.

Diving into Ravka, this fictitious, fantasyland, you masterly devised from the darkest crevices of your conscience brought me home.

I formed friendships with the Grisha. For they were their own circus act. The Inferni's DNA breathed fire. The Tidemakers released delicate waves from the tips of their fingers. The Corporalnik seized a life by snapping their hand. Outsiders considered them magically gifted fiends. I deemed them delightedly unique creatures.

Although these creatures fascinated me, I especially concocted a deep obsession with the ring-master of this circus group, the attractive, dark-locked, slate-eyed dictator "The Darkling."

Dictator? How dare I assign him society's malicious label. For society made him malicious.

Cursed with the power of summoning darkness, The Darkling, much like I, was forced to live a childhood of loneliness. *Always moving and never settling.* Society glared at him because he was different. *When did it become a curse to be different?* How dare humans call him a party trick when he breathes and feels pain and happiness in the same manner as them? When did a life become so worthless?

The Darkling stirred a hurricane of emotions inside me. He wanted to reign the world yet he terrified everyone because of his power. Alina Starkov summoned light and Ravka adored her because of her celestial gift yet at the opportunity to save her world, she ran away from it. However, the Darkling, in his obsessive, crazed manner, longed to put his country back together yet because he was a being of darkness no one wanted him to piece together society.

How is it that a villain is in fact a victim of society?

How is it that society may turn someone as mad as the hatter and as lonely as Alice?

How is it that when we fell down the rabbit hole of humanity, I found refuge and he reached insanity?

The citizens of Ravka labeled him as a terrifying monster, so he became exactly that. Whereas like a rose, I grew and blossomed from my isolation.

When my family quit the circus act and settled in Nebraska, our new threshold ended up being in the wealthy district of Omaha. Before anyone actually knew the person I was, society had already placed a label on my shoulders. *Rich, selfish, living of her parents money.* Their opinions dictated my life much like the Darkling's controlled his. *They only see me as a label. Again.* I felt hollow. *Hollow with rage.* Time to prove them wrong. The money in my pocket would be my own. The books I bought, I'd buy with my money. My food. Everything. I would earn my own. *Prove those demons wrong.*

I could.

I would.

I did.

Sincerely,

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