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# RUIN AND RISING



LEIGH BARDUGO

Orion



## BEFORE



The monster's name was Izumrud, the great worm, and there were those who claimed he had made the tunnels that ran beneath Ravka. Sick with appetite, he ate up silt and gravel, burrowing deeper and deeper into the earth, searching for something to satisfy his hunger, until he'd gone too far and lost himself in the dark.

It was just a story, but in the White Cathedral, people were careful not to stray too far from the passages that curled around the main caverns. Strange sounds echoed through the dim warren of tunnels, groans and unexplained rumblings; cold pockets of silence were broken by low hisses that might be nothing or might be the sinuous movement of a long body, snaking closer through a nearby passage in search of prey. In those moments, it was easy to believe that Izumrud still lived somewhere, waiting to be woken by the call of heroes, dreaming of the fine meal he would have if only some hapless child would walk into his mouth. A beast like that rests; he does not die.

The boy brought the girl this tale, and others too, all the new stories he could gather, in the early days when he was allowed near her. He would sit beside her bed, trying to get her to eat, listening to the pained whistle of her lungs, and he would tell the story of a river, tamed by a powerful Tidemaker and trained to dive through layers

of rock, seeking a magic coin. He'd whisper of poor cursed Pelyekin, labouring for a thousand years with his magic pickaxe, leaving caverns and passages in his wake, a lonely creature in search of nothing but distraction, amassing gold and jewels he never intended to spend.

Then, one morning, the boy arrived to find his way to the girl's room barred by armed men. And when he would not leave, they dragged him from her door in chains. The priest warned the boy that faith would bring him peace and obedience would keep him breathing.

Locked in her cell, alone but for the drip of the water and the slow beat of her heart, the girl knew the stories of Izumrud were true. She had been swallowed whole, devoured, and in the echoing alabaster belly of the White Cathedral, only the Saint remained.



The Saint woke every day to the sound of her name being chanted, and each day her army grew, its ranks swollen with the hungry and the hopeless, with wounded soldiers and children barely large enough to carry rifles. The priest told the faithful that she would be Queen one day, and they believed him. But they wondered at her bruised and mysterious court: the raven-haired Squaller with her sharp tongue, the Ruined One with her black prayer shawl and hideous scars, the pale scholar who huddled away with his books and strange instruments. These were the sorry remnants of the Second Army – unfit company for a Saint.

Few knew that she was broken. Whatever power had blessed her, divine or otherwise, was gone – or at least out of reach. Her followers were kept at a distance so

they could not see that her eyes were dark hollows, that her breath came in frightened gasps. She walked slowly, tentatively, her driftwood bones fragile in her body, this sickly girl upon whom all their hopes rested.

On the surface, a new King ruled with his shadow army, and he demanded that his Sun Summoner be returned. He offered threats and rewards, but the answer he received came in the form of a challenge – from an outlaw the people had dubbed the Prince of the Air. He struck along the northern border, bombing supply lines, forcing the Shadow King to renew trade and travel across the Fold with nothing but luck and Inferni fire to keep the monsters at bay. Some said this challenger was a Lantsov prince. Some said he was a Fjerdan rebel who refused to fight alongside witches. All agreed he must have powers of his own.

The Saint rattled the bars of her underground cage. This was her war, and she demanded freedom to fight it. The priest refused.

But he'd forgotten that before she'd become a Grisha and a Saint, she'd been a ghost of Keramzin. She and the boy had hoarded secrets as Pelyekin hoarded treasure. They knew how to be thieves and phantoms, how to hide strength as well as mischief. Like the teachers at the Duke's estate, the priest thought he knew the girl and what she was capable of.

He was wrong.

He did not hear their hidden language, did not understand the boy's resolve. He did not see the moment the girl ceased to bear her weakness as a burden and began to wear it as a guise.



## CHAPTER I



I stood on a carved stone balcony, arms spread, shivering in my cheap robes, and tried to put on a good show. My *kefta* was a patchwork, sewn together from scraps of the gown I was wearing the night we fled the palace and garish curtains that I'd been told came from a defunct theatre somewhere near Sala. Beads from the lobby chandeliers made up the trim. The embroidery at the cuffs was already coming undone. David and Genya had done their best, but there were limited resources underground.

From a distance, it did the trick, sparkling gold in the light that seemed to emanate from my palms, sending bright glimmers over the ecstatic faces of my followers far below. Up close, it was all loose threads and false shine. Just like me. The threadbare Saint.

The Apparat's voice boomed through the White Cathedral, and the crowd swayed, eyes closed, hands raised, a field of poppies, arms like pale stalks shaken by some wind I couldn't feel. I followed a choreographed series of gestures, moving deliberately so that David and whichever Inferni was helping him this morning could track my movements from their position in the chamber hidden just above the balcony. I dreaded morning prayers, but according to the priest, these false displays were a necessity.

"It is a gift you give your people, Sankta Alina," he said. "It is hope."

Actually, it was an illusion, a pale suggestion of the light I'd once commanded. The golden haze was really Inferni fire, reflected off a beaten mirror dish that David had fashioned from salvaged glass. It was something like the dishes we'd used in our failed attempt to stave off the Darkling's horde during the battle in Os Alta. We'd been taken by surprise; and my power, our planning, all of David's ingenuity, and Nikolai's resourcefulness hadn't been enough to stop the slaughter. Since then, I'd been unable to summon so much as a sunbeam. But most of the Apparat's flock had never seen what their Saint could really do, and for now, this deception was enough.

The Apparat finished his sermon. That was the signal to end. The Inferni let the light flare bright around me. It jumped and wavered erratically, then finally faded as I dropped my arms. Well, now I knew who was on fire duty with David. I cast a scowl up at the cave. *Harshaw*. He was always getting carried away. Three Inferni had made it out of the battle at the Little Palace, but one had died just days later from her wounds. Of the two that remained, Harshaw was the most powerful and the most unpredictable.

I stepped down from the platform, eager to be out of the Apparat's presence, but my foot faltered and I stumbled. The priest grasped my arm, steadying me.

"Have a care, Alina Starkov. You are incautious with your safety."

"Thanks," I said. I wanted to pull away from him, from the turned-soil and incense stench he brought with him everywhere.

"You're feeling poorly today."

"Just clumsy." We both knew that was a lie. I was stronger than when I'd come to the White Cathedral – my bones had mended, I'd managed to keep down meals – but I was still frail, my body plagued by aches and constant fatigue.

"Perhaps a day of rest, then."

I gritted my teeth. Another day confined to my chamber. I swallowed my frustration and smiled weakly. I knew what he wanted to see.

"I'm so cold," I said. "Some time in the Kettle would do me good." Strictly speaking, it was true. The kitchens were the one place in the White Cathedral where the damp could be held at bay. By this time, at least one of the breakfast fires would be lit. The big round cavern would be full of the smells of baking bread and the sweet porridge the cooks made from stores of dried peas and powdered milk provided by allies on the surface and stockpiled by the pilgrims.

I added a shiver for good measure, but the priest's only reply was a noncommittal "hmm".

Movement at the base of the cavern caught my attention: pilgrims, newly arrived. I couldn't help but look at them with a strategic eye. Some wore uniforms that marked them as First Army deserters. All were young and able-bodied.

"No veterans?" I asked. "No widows?"

"It's a hard journey underground," the Apparat replied. "Many are too old or weak to move. They prefer to stay in the comfort of their homes."

Unlikely. It would take more than that to stop it. The pilgrims came on crutches and canes, no matter how old or sick. Even dying, they came to see the Sun Saint in their

last days. I cast a wary glance over my shoulder. I could just glimpse the Priestguards, bearded and heavily armed, standing sentinel in the archway. They were monks, scholar priests like the Apparat, and below ground they were the only people allowed to carry weapons. Above, they were the gatekeepers, ferreting out spies and unbelievers, granting sanctuary to those they deemed worthy. Lately, the pilgrims' numbers had been dwindling, and those who did join our ranks seemed more hearty than pious. The Apparat wanted potential soldiers, not just mouths to feed.

"I could go to the sick and elderly," I said. I knew the argument was futile, but I made it anyway. It was almost expected. "A Saint should walk amongst her people, not hide like a rat in a warren."

The Apparat smiled – the benevolent, indulgent smile that the pilgrims adored and that made me want to scream. "In times of trouble, many animals go to ground. That's how they survive," he said. "After fools wage their battles, it is the rats that rule the fields and towns."

*And feast on the dead*, I thought with a shudder. As if he could read my thoughts, he pressed a hand to my shoulder. His fingers were long and white, splaying over my arm like a waxen spider. If the gesture was meant to comfort me, it failed.

"Patience, Alina Starkov. We rise when the time is right and not before."

*Patience*. That was always his prescription. I resisted the urge to touch my bare wrist, the empty place where the firebird's bones were meant to reside. I had claimed the sea whip's scales and the stag's antlers, but the final piece in Morozova's puzzle was missing. We might have had the third amplifier by now if the Apparat had lent his support

to the hunt or just let us return to the surface. But that permission would only come at a price.

"I'm cold," I repeated, burying my irritation. "I want to go to the Kettle."

He frowned. "I don't like you huddling down there with that girl—"

Behind us, the guards muttered restlessly, and a word floated back to me. *Razrusha'ya*. I batted the Apparat's hand away and marched into the passage. The Priestguards came to attention. Like all their brothers, they were dressed in brown and wore the golden sunburst, the same symbol that marked the Apparat's robes. *My* symbol. And yet they never looked directly at me, never spoke to me or the other Grisha refugees. Instead, they stood silently at the edges of rooms and trailed me everywhere like bearded, rifle-wielding specters.

"That name is forbidden," I said. They stared straight ahead, as if I were invisible. "Her name is Genya Safin, and I'd still be the Darkling's prisoner if it weren't for her." No reaction. But I saw them tense at even the sound of her name. Grown men with guns, afraid of a scarred girl. Superstitious idiots.

"Peace, Sankta Alina," said the Apparat, taking my elbow to shepherd me across the passage and into his audience chamber. The silver-veined stone of the ceiling was carved into a rose, and the walls were painted with Saints in their golden halos. It must have been Fabrikator craft because no ordinary pigment could withstand the cold and damp of the White Cathedral. The priest settled himself in a low wooden chair and gestured for me to take another. I tried to hide my relief as I sank down into it. Even standing for too long left me winded.

He peered at me, taking in my sallow skin, the dark smudges beneath my eyes. "Surely *Genya* can do more for you."

It had been over two months since my battle with the Darkling, and I hadn't fully recovered. My cheekbones cut the hollows of my face like angry exclamations, and the white fall of my hair was so brittle it seemed to float like cobwebs. I'd finally talked the Apparat into letting Genya attend me in the kitchens with the promise that she might work her craft and make me more presentable. It was the only real contact I'd had with the other Grisha in weeks. I'd savoured every moment, every bit of news.

"She's doing her best," I said.

The priest sighed. "I suppose we must all be patient. You will heal in time. Through faith. Through prayer."

A surge of rage took hold of me. He knew damn well that the only thing that would heal me was using my power, but to do that, I needed to return to the surface.

"If you would just let me venture aboveground—"

"You are too precious to us, Sankta Alina, and the risk is far too great." He shrugged apologetically. "You will not have a care for your safety, so I must."

I stayed silent. This was the game we played, that we'd been playing since I'd been brought here. The Apparat had done a lot for me. He was the only reason any of my Grisha had made it out of the battle with the Darkling's monsters. He'd given us safe haven underground. But every day the White Cathedral felt more like a prison than a refuge.

He steepled his fingers. "Months gone by, and still you do not trust me."

"I do," I lied. "Of course I do."

"And yet, you will not let me help you. With the firebird