

LBRIS

We know  
books

ALSO BY LEIGH BARDUGO

The Shadow and Bone Trilogy

*Shadow and Bone*

*Siege and Storm*

*Ruin and Rising*

The Six of Crows Duology

*Six of Crows*

*Crooked Kingdom*

The King of Scars Duology

*King of Scars*

*Rule of Wolves*

The Anthologies

*The Language of Thorns*

*The Lives of Saints*

Also available

*Six of Crows Collector's Edition*

*Crooked Kingdom Collector's Edition*

*Shadow and Bone Collector's Edition*

KING  
OF  
SCARS

LEIGH BARDUGO

Orion

LBRIS

We know  
books

THE  
DROWNING  
MAN



DIMA HEARD THE BARN DOORS slam before anyone else did. Inside the little farmhouse, the kitchen bubbled like a pot on the stove, its windows shut tight against the storm, the air in the room warm and moist. The walls rattled with the rowdy din of Dima's brothers talking over one another, as his mother hummed and thumped her foot to a song Dima didn't know. She held the torn sleeve of one of his father's shirts taut in her lap, her needle pecking at the fabric in the uneven rhythm of an eager sparrow, a skein of wool thread trailing between her fingers like a choice worm.

Dima was the youngest of six boys, the baby who had arrived late to his mother, long after the doctor who came through their village every summer had told her there would be no more children. *An unexpected blessing*, Mama liked to say, holding Dima close and fussing over

him when the others had gone off to their chores. *An unwanted mouth to feed*, his older brother Pyotr would sneer.

Because Dima was so small, he was often left out of his brothers' jokes, forgotten in the noisy arguments of the household, and that was why, on that autumn night, standing by the basin, soaping the last of the pots that his brothers had made sure to leave for him, only he heard the damning *thunk* of the barn doors. Dima set to scrubbing harder, determined to finish his work and get to bed before anyone could think to send him out into the dark. He could hear their dog, Molniya, whining on the kitchen stoop, begging for scraps and a warm place to sleep as the wind rose on an angry howl.

Branches lashed the windows. Mama lifted her head, the grim furrows around her mouth deepening. She scowled as if she could send the wind to bed without supper. "Winter comes early and stays too long."

"Hmm," said Papa, "like your mother." Mama gave him a kick with her boot.

She'd left a little glass of kvas behind the stove that night, a gift for the household ghosts who watched over the farm and who slept behind the old iron stove to keep warm. Or so Mama said. Papa only rolled his eyes and complained it was a waste of good kvas.

Dima knew that when everyone had gone to bed, Pyotr would slurp it down and eat the slice of honey cake Mama left wrapped in cloth. "Great-grandma's ghost will haunt you," Dima sometimes warned. But Pyotr would just wipe his sleeve across his chin and say, "There is no ghost, you little idiot. Baba Galina was lunch for the cemetery worms, and the same thing will happen to you if you don't keep your mouth shut."

Now Pyotr leaned down and gave Dima a hard jab. Dima often wondered if Pyotr did special exercises to make his elbows more pointy. "Do you hear that?" his brother asked.

"There's nothing to hear," said Dima as his heart sank. The barn door . . .

"Something is out there, riding the storm."

So his brother was just trying to scare him. "Don't be stupid," Dima said, but he was relieved.

"Listen," said Pyotr, and as the wind shook the roof of the house and the fire sputtered in the grate, Dima thought he heard something more than the storm—a high, distant cry, like the yowl of a hungry animal or the wailing of a child. "When the wind blows through the graveyard, it wakes the spirits of all the babies who died before they could be given their Saints' names. *Malenchki*. They go looking for souls to steal so they can barter their way into heaven." Pyotr leaned down and poked his finger into Dima's shoulder. "They always take the youngest."

Dima was eight now, old enough to know better, but still his eyes strayed to the dark windows, out to the moonlit yard, where the trees bowed and shook in the wind. He flinched. He could have sworn—just for a moment, he could have sworn he saw a shadow streak across the yard, the dark blot of something much larger than a bird.

Pyotr laughed and splashed him with soapy water. "I swear you get more witless with every passing day. Who would want your little nothing of a soul?"

*Pyotr is only angry because, before you, he was the baby*, Mama always told Dima. *You must try to be kind to your brother even when he is older but not wiser*. Dima tried. He truly did. But sometimes he just wanted to knock Pyotr on his bottom and see how *he* liked feeling small.

The wind dropped, and in the sudden gust of silence, there was no disguising the sharp slam that echoed across the yard.

"Who left the barn doors open?" Papa asked.

"It was Dima's job to see to the stalls tonight," Pyotr said

virtuously, and his brothers, gathered around the table, clucked like flustered hens.

"I closed it," protested Dima. "I set the bar fast!"

Papa leaned back in his chair. "Then do I imagine that sound?"

"He probably thinks a ghost did it," said Pyotr.

Mama looked up from her mending. "Dima, you must go close and bar the doors."

"I will do it," said Pyotr with a resigned sigh. "We all know Dima is afraid of the dark."

But Dima sensed this was a test. Papa would expect him to take responsibility. "I am not afraid," he said. "Of course I will go close the doors."

Dima ignored Pyotr's smug look; he wiped his hands and put on his coat and hat. Mama handed him a tin lantern. "Hurry now," she said, pushing up his collar to keep his neck warm. "Scurry back and I'll tuck you in and tell you a story."

"A new one?"

"Yes, and a good one, about the mermaids of the north."

"Does it have magic in it?"

"Plenty. Go on, now."

Dima cast his eyes once to the icon of Sankt Feliks on the wall by the door, candlelight flickering over his sorrowful face, his gaze full of sympathy as if he knew just how cold it was outside. Feliks had been impaled on a spit of apple boughs and cooked alive just hours after he'd performed the miracle of the orchards. He hadn't screamed or cried, only suggested that the villagers turn him so the flames could reach his other side. Feliks wouldn't be afraid of a storm.

As soon as Dima opened the kitchen door, the wind tried to snatch it from his grip. He slammed it behind him and heard the latch turn from the other side. He knew it was temporary, a necessity, but

it still felt like he was being punished. He looked back at the glowing windows as he forced his feet down the steps to the dry scabble of the yard, and had the awful thought that as soon as he'd left the warmth of the kitchen his family had forgotten him, that if he never returned, no one would cry out or raise the alarm. The wind would wipe Dima from their memory.

He considered the long moonlit stretch he would have to traverse past the chicken coops and the goose shed to the barn, where they sheltered their old horse, Gerasim, and their cow, Mathilde.

"Faced with steel saw blades," he whispered, brushing his hand over the new plow as he passed, as if it were a lucky talisman. He wasn't sure why the blades were better, but when the plow had arrived, those were the words his father had proudly repeated to their neighbors, and Dima liked the strong sound of them. There had been long arguments at the kitchen table about the plow, along with all the king's agricultural reforms and what trouble or hope they might bring.

"We're on our way to another civil war," Mama had grumbled. "The king is too rash."

But Papa was pleased. "How can you worry with your belly full and the roof patched with fresh tar? This was the first year we were able to harvest enough of our crops to sell at market instead of just keeping ourselves fed."

"Because the king cut Duke Radimov's tithe to a scrap of what it was!" Mama exclaimed.

"And we should be sorry?"

"We will be when the duke and his noble friends murder the king in his bed."

"King Nikolai is a war hero!" said Papa, waving his hand through the air as if trouble could be banished like pipe smoke. "There will be no coup without the army to back it."

They talked in circles, debating the same things night after night. Dima didn't understand much of it, only that he was to keep the young king in his prayers.

The geese honked and rustled in their shed, riled by the weather or Dima's nervous footsteps as he passed. Ahead, he saw the big wooden barn doors swaying open and shut as if the building were sighing, as if the doorway were a mouth that might suck him in with a single breath. He liked the barn in the daytime, when sunlight fell through the slats of the roof and everything was hay smells, Gerasim's snorting, Mathilde's disapproving moo. But at night, the barn became a hollow shell, waiting for some terrible creature to fill it—some cunning thing that might let the doors blow open to lure a foolish boy outside. Because Dima *knew* he had closed those doors. He felt certain of it, and he could not help but think of Pyotr's *malenchki*, little ghosts hunting for a soul to steal.

*Stop it*, Dima scolded himself. *Pyotr unbarred the doors himself just so you would have to go out in the cold or shame yourself by refusing.* But Dima had shown his brothers and his father he could be brave, and that thought warmed him even as he yanked his collar up around his ears and shivered at the bite of the wind. Only then did he realize he couldn't hear Molniya barking anymore. She hadn't been by the door, trying to nose her way into the kitchen, when Dima ventured outside.

"Molniya?" he said, and the wind seized his voice, casting it away. "Molniya!" he called—but only a bit louder. In case something other than his dog was out there listening.

Step by step he crossed the yard, the shadows from the trees leaping and shuddering over the ground. Beyond the woods he could see the wide ribbon of the road. It led all the way to the town, all the way to the churchyard. Dima did not let his eyes follow it. It was too easy to imagine some shambling body dressed in ragged clothes traveling that road, trailing clods of cemetery earth behind it.

He heard a soft whine from somewhere in the trees. Dima shrieked. Yellow eyes stared back at him from the dark. The glow from his lantern fell on black paws, ruffled fur, bared teeth.

"Molniya!" he said on a relieved sigh. He was grateful for the loud moan of the storm. The thought of his brothers hearing his high, shameful yelp and running outside just to find their poor dog cowering in the brush was too horrible to contemplate. "Come here, girl," he coaxed. Molniya had pressed her belly to the ground, her ears flat against her head. She did not move.

Dima looked back at the barn. The plank that should have lain across the doors and kept them in place lay smashed to bits in the brush. From somewhere inside, he heard a soft, wet snuffling. Had a wounded animal found its way into the barn? Or a wolf?

The golden light of the farmhouse windows seemed impossibly far away. Maybe he should go back and get help. Surely he couldn't be expected to face a wolf by himself. But what if there was nothing inside? Or some harmless cat that Molniya had gotten a piece of? Then all his brothers would laugh, not just Pyotr.

Dima shuffled forward, keeping his lantern far out in front of him. He waited for the storm to quiet and grabbed the heavy door by its edge so it would not strike him as he entered.

The barn was dark, barely touched by slats of moonlight. Dima edged a little deeper into the blackness. He thought of Sankt Feliks' gentle eyes, the thorny apple bough piercing his heart. Then, as if the storm had just been catching its breath, the wind leapt. The doors behind Dima slammed shut, and the weak light of his lantern sputtered to nothing.

Outside, he could hear the storm raging, but the barn was quiet. The animals had gone silent as if waiting, and he could smell their sour fear over the sweetness of the hay—and something else. Dima

LIBRIS | We know books  
knew that smell from when they slaughtered the geese for the holiday table: the hot copper tang of blood.

*Go back*, he told himself.

In the darkness, something moved. Dima caught a glint of moonlight, the shine of what might have been eyes. And then it was as if a piece of shadow broke away and came sliding across the barn.

Dima took a step backward, clutching the useless lantern to his chest. The shadow wore the shredded remains of what might have once been fine clothes, and for a brief, hopeful moment, Dima thought a traveler had stumbled into the barn to sleep out the storm. But it did not move like a man. It was too graceful, too silent, its body unwinding in a low crouch. Dima whimpered as the shadow prowled closer. Its eyes were mirror black, and dark veins spread from its clawed fingertips as if its hands had been dipped in ink. The tendrils of shadow tracing its skin seemed to pulse.

*Run*, Dima told himself. *Scream*. He thought of the way the geese came to Pyotr so trustingly, how they made no sound of protest in the scant seconds before his brother broke their necks. *Stupid*, Dima had thought at the time, but now he understood.

The thing rose from its haunches, a black silhouette, and two vast wings unfurled from its back, their edges curling like smoke.

“Papa!” Dima tried to cry, but the word came out as little more than a puff of breath.

The thing paused as if the word was somehow familiar. It listened, head cocked to the side, and Dima took another step backward, then another.

The monster’s eyes snapped to Dima, and the creature was suddenly bare inches away, looming over him. With the gray moonlight falling over its body, Dima could see that the dark stains around its mouth and on its chest were blood.

The creature leaned forward, inhaling deeply. Up close it had the

features of a young man—until its lips parted, the corners of its mouth pulling back to reveal long black fangs.

It was smiling. The monster was smiling—because it knew it would soon be well fed. Dima felt something warm slide down his leg and realized he had wet himself.

The monster lunged.

The doors behind Dima blew open, the storm demanding entry. A loud *crack* sounded as the gust knocked the creature from its clawed feet and hurled its winged body against the far wall. The wooden beams splintered with the force, and the thing slumped to the floor in a heap.

A figure strode into the barn in a drab gray coat, a strange wind lifting her long black hair. The moon caught her features, and Dima cried harder, because she was too beautiful to be any ordinary person, and that meant she must be a Saint. He had died, and she had come to escort him to the bright lands.

But she did not stoop to take him in her arms or speak soft prayers or words of comfort. Instead she approached the monster, hands held out before her. She was a warrior Saint, then, like Sankt Juris, like Sankta Alina of the Fold.

“Be careful,” Dima managed to whisper, afraid she would be harmed. “It has . . . such teeth.”

But his Saint was unafraid. She nudged the monster with the toe of her boot and rolled it onto its side. The creature snarled as it came awake, and Dima clutched his lantern tighter as if it might become a shield.

In a few swift movements, the Saint had secured the creature’s clawed hands in heavy shackles. She yanked hard on the chain, forcing the monster to its feet. It snapped its teeth at her, but she did not scream or cringe. She swatted the creature on its nose as if it were a misbehaving pet.