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Ruin and Rising

Written by

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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 1

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

in our possession, all this might change."

"David is working his way through Morozova's journals. I'm sure the answer is there."

The Apparat's flat black gaze burrowed into me. He suspected I knew the location of the firebird – Morozova's third amplifier and the key to unlocking the only power that might defeat the Darkling and destroy the Fold. And he was right. At least, I hoped he was. The only clue we had to its location was buried in my scant childhood memories and the hope that the dusty ruins of Dva Stolba were more than they seemed. But right or wrong, the firebird's possible location was a secret I intended to keep. I was isolated underground, close to powerless, spied upon by the Priestguards. I wasn't about to give up the one bit of leverage I had.

"I want only the best for you, Alina Starkov. For you and your friends. So few remain. If anything were to happen to them—"

"You leave them be," I snarled, forgetting to be sweet, to be gentle.

The Apparat's look was too keen for my liking. "I simply meant that accidents happen underground. I know you would feel each loss deeply, and you are so very *weak*." On the last word, his lips stretched back over his gums. They were black like a wolf's.

Again, rage coursed through me. From my first day in the White Cathedral, threat had hung heavy in the air, suffocating me with the steady press of fear. The Apparat never missed an opportunity to remind me of my vulnerability. Almost without thinking, I twitched my fingers in my sleeves. Shadows leapt up the walls of the chamber.

The Apparat reared back in his chair. I frowned at him, feigning confusion. "What's wrong?" I asked.

He cleared his throat, eyes darting right and left. "It's . . . nothing," he stammered.

I let the shadows fall. His reaction was well worth the wave of dizziness that came when I used this trick. And that's all it was. I could make the shadows jump and dance but nothing more. It was a sad little echo of the Darkling's power, some remnant left behind in the wake of the confrontation that had nearly killed us both. I'd discovered it when trying to summon light, and I'd struggled to hone it to something greater, something I could fight with. I'd had no success. The shadows felt like a punishment, ghosts of greater power that served only to taunt me, the Saint of shams and mirrors.

The Apparat rose, attempting to regain his composure. "You will go to the archives," he said decisively. "Time in quiet study and contemplation will help to ease your mind."

I stifled a groan. This really was punishment – hours spent fruitlessly perusing old religious texts for information on Morozova. Not to mention that the archives were damp, miserable, and crawling with Priestguards. "I will escort you," he added. Even better.

"And the Kettle?" I asked, trying to hide the desperation in my voice.

"Later. *Razru* – Genya will wait," he said as I followed him into the passage. "You needn't scurry off to the Kettle, you know. You could meet with her here. In privacy."

I glanced at the guards, who had fallen into step behind us. Privacy. That was laughable. But the idea of being kept from the kitchens was not. Maybe today the master flue

would open for more than a few seconds. It was a slim hope, but it was all the hope I had.

"I prefer the Kettle," I said. "It's warm there." I gave him my meekest smile, let my lip tremble slightly, and added, "It reminds me of home."

He loved that – the image of a humble girl, huddling by a cookstove, hem trailing in ash. Another illusion, one more chapter in his book of Saints.

"Very well," he said at last.

It took a long while to wend our way down from the balcony. The White Cathedral took its name from the alabaster of its walls and the massive main cavern where we held services every morning and evening. Yet it was much more than that – a sprawling network of tunnels and caves, a city underground. I hated every inch of it. The moisture that seeped through the walls, dripped from the ceilings, clustered in beads on my skin. The chill that couldn't be dispelled. The toadstools and night flowers that bloomed in cracks and crevices. I hated the way we marked time: morning services, afternoon prayer, evening services, Saints' days, days for fasting and half fasting. But mostly I hated the feeling that I really was a little rat, pale and red-eyed, scrabbling at the walls of my maze with feeble pink-tinged claws.

The Apparat led me through the caverns north of the main basin, where the Soldat Sol trained. People backed against the rock or reached out to touch my golden sleeve as we passed. We set a slow pace, dignified – necessary. I couldn't move any faster without becoming winded. The Apparat's flock knew I was sick and said prayers for my health, but he feared there would be a panic if they discovered just how fragile – how very human – I was.

The Soldat Sol had already begun their training by the time we arrived. These were the Apparat's holy warriors, sun soldiers who bore my symbol tattooed on their arms and faces. Most of them were First Army deserters, though others were simply young, fierce, and willing to die. They'd helped to rescue me from the Little Palace, and the casualties had been brutal. Holy or not, they were no match for the Darkling's *nichevo'ya*. Still, the Darkling had human soldiers and Grisha in his service too, so the Soldat Sol trained.

But now they did it without real weapons, with dummy swords and rifles loaded with wax pellets. The Soldat Sol were a different kind of pilgrim, brought to the cult of the Sun Saint by the promise of change, many of them young and ambivalent about the Apparat and the old ways of the church. Since my arrival underground, the Apparat had kept them on a far tighter leash. He needed them, but he didn't wholly trust them. I knew the feeling.

Priestguards lined the walls, maintaining a close eye on the proceedings. Their bullets were real, and so were the blades of their sabres.

As we entered the training area, I saw that a group had gathered to watch Mal spar with Stigg, one of our two surviving Inferni. He was thick-necked, blond, and utterly humourless – Fjerdan to the core.

Mal dodged an arc of fire, but the second spurt of flame caught on his shirt. The onlookers gasped. I thought he might draw back, but instead he charged. He dove into a roll, dousing the flames on the ground and knocking Stigg's feet from beneath him. In a flash, he had the Inferni pinned face down. He secured Stigg's wrists, preventing another attack.

The watching sun soldiers broke into appreciative applause and whistles.

Zoya tossed her glossy black hair over one shoulder. "Well done, Stigg. You're trussed and ready for basting."

Mal silenced her with a look. "Distract, disarm, disable," he said. "The trick is not to panic." He rose and helped Stigg to his feet. "You all right?"

Stigg scowled, annoyed, but nodded and moved to spar with a pretty young soldier.

"Come on, Stigg," the girl said with a wide grin. "I won't go too rough on you."

The girl's face was familiar, but it took me a long moment to place her – Ruby. Mal and I had trained with her at Poliznaya. She'd been in our regiment. I remembered her as giggling, cheerful, the kind of happy, flirtatious girl who made me feel awkward and hopeless in my skin. She still had the same ready smile, the same long blonde braid. But even from a distance, I could see the watchfulness in her, the wariness that came with war. There was a black sun tattooed over the right side of her face. Strange to think that a girl who had once sat across from me in the mess hall now thought I was divine.

It was rare that the Apparat or his guards took me this way to the archives. What was different today? Had he brought me here so I could look over the shreds of my army and remember the price of my mistakes? To show me how few allies I had left?

I watched Mal pair sun soldiers with Grisha. There were the Squallers: Zoya, Nadia, and her brother Adrik. With Stigg and Harshaw, they made up the last of my Etherealki. But Harshaw was nowhere to be seen. He'd probably rolled back into bed after summoning flame

for me during morning prayers.

As for the Corporalki, the only Heartrenders on the training floor were Tamar and her massive twin, Tolya. I owed them my life, though the debt didn't rest easy with me. They were close to the Apparat, charged with the instruction of the Soldat Sol, and they'd lied to me for months at the Little Palace. I wasn't quite sure what to make of them. Trust was a luxury I could ill afford.

The remaining soldiers would have to wait for a turn to fight. There were simply too few Grisha. Genya and David kept to themselves, and weren't much for combat, anyway. Maxim was a Healer and preferred to practise his craft in the infirmary, though few of the Apparat's flock trusted Grisha enough to take advantage of his services. Sergei was a powerful Heartrender, but I'd been told he was too unstable to be considered safe around students. He'd been in the thick of the fighting when the Darkling launched his surprise attack, had seen the girl he loved torn open by monsters. We'd lost our only other Heartrender to the *nichevo'ya* somewhere between the Little Palace and the chapel.

Because of you, said a voice in my head. *Because you failed them.*

I was drawn from my bleak thoughts by the Apparat's voice. "The boy oversteps."

I followed his gaze to where Mal was moving between the soldiers, speaking to one or correcting another. "He's helping them train," I said.

"He's giving orders. Oretsev," the priest called, beckoning him over. I tensed, watching Mal approach. I'd barely seen him since he'd been banned from my chamber. Aside from my carefully rationed interactions with Genya,

the Apparat kept me isolated from potential allies.

Mal looked different. He wore the peasant roughspun that had served as his uniform at the Little Palace, but he was leaner, paler from time spent below ground. The narrow scar on his jaw stood out in sharp relief.

He stopped before us and bowed. It was the closest we'd been allowed to each other in months.

"You are not the captain here," said the Apparat. "Tolya and Tamar outrank you."

Mal nodded. "They do."

"So why are you leading the exercises?"

"I wasn't leading anything," he said. "I have something to teach. They have something to learn."

True enough, I thought bitterly. Mal had got very good at fighting Grisha. I remembered him bruised and bleeding, standing over a Squaller in the stables of the Little Palace, a look of challenge and contempt in his eyes. Another memory I could do without.

"Why haven't those recruits been marked?" the Apparat asked, gesturing towards a group sparring with wooden swords near the far wall. None of them could have been more than twelve years old.

"Because they're children," Mal replied, ice in his voice.

"It's their choice. Would you deny them the chance to show fealty to our cause?"

"I'd deny them regret."

"No one has that power."

A muscle ticked in Mal's jaw. "If we lose, those tatoos will brand them as sun soldiers. They might as well sign up to face the firing squad now."

"Is that why your own features bear no mark? Because you have so little faith in our victory?"

Mal glanced at me, then back at the Apparat. "I save my faith for Saints," he said evenly. "Not men who send children to die."

The priest's eyes narrowed.

"Mal's right," I interjected. "Let them remain unmarked." The Apparat scrutinised me with that flat black gaze. "Please," I said softly, "as a kindness to me."

I knew how much he liked that voice – gentle, warm, a lullaby voice.

"Such a tender heart," he said, clucking his tongue. But I could tell he was pleased. Though I'd spoken against his wishes, this was the Saint he wanted me to be, a loving mother, a comfort to her people. I dug my fingernails into my palm.

"That's Ruby, isn't it?" I asked, eager to change the subject and divert the Apparat's attention.

"She got here a few weeks ago," Mal said. "She's good – came from the infantry." Despite myself, I felt the tiniest twinge of envy.

"Stigg doesn't look happy," I said, bobbing my head towards where the Inferni seemed to be taking out his loss on Ruby. The girl was doing her best to hold her own, but she was clearly outmatched.

"He doesn't like getting beaten."

"I don't think you even broke a sweat."

"No," he said. "It's a problem."

"Why is that?" asked the Apparat.

Mal's eyes darted to me for the briefest second. "You learn more by losing." He shrugged. "At least Tolya's around to keep kicking my ass."

"Mind your tongue," the Apparat snapped.

Mal ignored him. Abruptly, he put two fingers to his

lips and gave a sharp whistle. "Ruby, you're leaving yourself open!"

Too late. Her braid was on fire. Another young soldier ran at her with a bucket of water and tossed it over her head.

I winced. "Try not to get them too crispy."

Mal bowed. "*Moi soverenyi.*" He jogged back to the troops.

That title. He said it without any of the rancour he had seemed to carry at Os Alta, but it still hit me like a punch to the gut.

"He should not address you so," complained the Apparat.

"Why not?"

"It was the Darkling's title and is unfitting for a Saint."

"Then what should he call me?"

"He should not address you directly at all."

I sighed. "Next time he has something to say, I'll tell him to write me a letter."

The Apparat pursed his lips. "You're restless today. I think an extra hour in the solace of the archives will do you good."

His tone was chiding, as if I were a cross child who had stayed up past her bedtime. I made myself think of the promise of the Kettle and forced a smile. "I'm sure you're right." *Distract*, *disarm*, *disable*.

As we turned down the passage that would take us to the archives, I looked over my shoulder. Zoya had flipped a soldier on his back and was spinning him like a turtle, her hand making lazy circles in the air. Ruby was talking to Mal, her smile broad, her expression avid. But Mal was watching me. In the ghostly light of the cavern, his eyes

were a deep and steady blue, the colour at the centre of a flame.

I turned away and followed the Apparat, hurrying my steps, trying to temper the wheeze of my lungs. I thought of Ruby's smile, her singed braid. A nice girl. A normal girl. That was what Mal needed. If he hadn't taken up with someone new already, eventually he would. And someday I'd be a good enough person to wish him well. Just not today.



We caught David on his way into the archives. As usual, he was a mess – hair going every direction, sleeves blotted with ink. He had a glass of hot tea in one hand and a piece of toast tucked into his pocket.

His eyes flickered from the Apparat to the Priestguards.

"More salve?" he asked.

The Apparat curled his lip slightly at this. The salve was David's concoction for Genya. Along with her own efforts, it had helped to fade some of the worst of her scarring, but wounds from the *nichevo'ya* never healed completely.

"Sankta Alina has come to spend her morning in study," the Apparat declared with great solemnity.

David gave a twitch that vaguely resembled a shrug as he ducked through the doorway. "But you're going to the Kettle later?"

"I will have guards sent to escort you in two hours," said the Apparat. "Genya Safin will be waiting for you." His eyes scanned my haggard face. "See that she gives better attention to her work."

He bowed deeply and vanished down the tunnel. I

looked around the room and blew out a long, dejected breath. The archives should have been the kind of place I loved, full of the smell of ink on paper, the soft crackle of quills. But this was the Priestguards' den – a dimly lit maze of arches and columns carved from white rock. The closest I'd come to seeing David lose his temper had been the first time he'd laid eyes on these little domed niches, some of them caved in, all of them lined with ancient books and manuscripts, their pages black with rot, their spines bloated with moisture. The caves were damp enough that puddles had seeped up through the floors. "You can't . . . you can't have kept Morozova's journals in here," he'd practically shrieked. "It's a *bog*."

Now David spent his days and most of his nights in the archives, poring over Morozova's writings, jotting down theories and sketches in a notebook of his own. Like most other Grisha, he'd believed that Morozova's journals had been destroyed after the creation of the Fold. But the Darkling would never have let knowledge like that go. He'd hidden the journals away, and though I'd never been able to get a straight answer from the Apparat, I suspected the priest had somehow discovered them in the Little Palace and then stolen them when the Darkling had been forced to flee Ravka.

I slumped down on a stool across from David. He had dragged a chair and a table into the driest of the caves, and stocked one of the shelves with extra oil for his lanterns and the herbs and unguents he used to make Genya's salve. Usually, he hunched over some formula or bit of tinkering and didn't look up for hours, but today he couldn't seem to settle, fussing with his inks, fidgeting with the pocket watch he'd propped up on the table.

I thumbed listlessly through one of Morozova's journals. I'd come to loathe the sight of them – useless, confusing, and most importantly, *incomplete*. He described his hypotheses regarding amplifiers, his tracking of the stag, his two-year journey aboard a whaler seeking the sea whip, his theories on the firebird, and then . . . nothing. Either there were journals missing or Morozova had left his work unfinished.

The prospect of finding and using the firebird was daunting enough. But the idea that it might not exist, that I might have to face the Darkling again without it? The thought was too terrifying to contemplate, so I simply shoved it away.

I made myself turn the pages. The only means I had of keeping track of time was David's watch. I didn't know where he'd found it, how he'd got it working, or if the time he'd set it to had any correlation to time on the surface, but I glared at its face and willed the minute hand to move faster.

The Priestguards came and went, always watching or bent to their texts. They were meant to be illuminating manuscripts, studying holy word, but I doubted that was the bulk of their work. The Apparat's network of spies reached throughout Ravka, and these men considered it their calling to maintain it, deciphering messages, gathering intelligence, building the cult of a new Saint. It was hard not to compare them to my Soldat Sol, most of them young and illiterate, locked out of the old mysteries these men guarded.

When I couldn't bear any more of Morozova's ramblings, I twisted in my seat, trying to release a crick from my back. Then I pulled down an old collection of

what were mostly debates on prayer, but that turned out to also contain a version of Sankt Ilya's martyrdom.

In this one, Ilya was a mason, and the neighbour boy was crushed beneath a horse – that was new. Usually, the boy was cut down by a plough blade. But the story ended as all the tellings did: Ilya brought the child back from the brink of death, and for his trouble, the villagers threw him into the river, bound by iron chains. Some tales claimed he never sank but floated out to sea. Others vowed his body had emerged days later on a sandbank miles away, perfectly preserved and smelling of roses. I knew them all, and none of them said a word about the firebird or indicated that Dva Stolba was the right place to start looking for it.

All our hope for finding the firebird resided in an old illustration: Sankt Ilya in Chains, surrounded by the stag, the sea whip, and the firebird. Mountains could be glimpsed behind him, along with a road and an arch. That arch had long since fallen, but I thought the ruins could be found at Dva Stolba, not far from the settlements where Mal and I had been born. At least, that's what I believed on my good days. Today, I felt less sure that Ilya Morozova and Sankt Ilya were the same man. I couldn't bring myself to look at the copies of the *Istorii Sankt'ya* anymore. They lay in a mouldy stack in a forgotten corner, seeming less like portents of some grand destiny than children's books that had fallen out of fashion.

David picked up his watch, put it down, reached for it again, knocked over a bottle of ink then righted it with fumbling fingers.

"What's the matter with you today?" I asked.

"Nothing," he said sharply.

I blinked at him. "Your lip is bleeding."

He wiped his palm across it, and the blood beaded up again. He must have bitten it. Hard.

"David—"

He rapped his knuckles against his desk, and I nearly jumped. There were two guards behind me. Punctual and creepy as always.

"Here," David said, handing me a small tin. Before I could take it, a guard had snatched it up.

"What are you doing?" I asked angrily. Though I knew. Nothing passed between me and the other Grisha without being thoroughly inspected. For my safety, of course.

The Priestguard ignored me. He ran his fingers over the top and bottom of the tin, opened it, smelled the contents, investigated the lid, then closed it and handed it back without a word. I plucked it from his hand.

"Thanks," I said sourly. "And thank you, David."

He had already bent back over his notebook, seemingly lost in whatever he was reading. But he gripped his pen so hard I thought it might snap.



Genya was waiting for me in the Kettle, the vast, almost perfectly round cavern that provided food for all those in the White Cathedral. Its curved walls were studded with stone hearths, reminders of Ravka's ancient past that the kitchen staff liked to complain weren't nearly as convenient as the cookstoves and tile ovens above. The giant spits had been made for large game, but the cooks rarely had access to fresh meat. So instead they served salt pork, root vegetable stews, and a strange bread made from coarse grey flour that tasted vaguely of cherries.

The cooks had nearly got used to Genya, or at least they didn't cringe and start praying when they saw her any more. I found her keeping warm at a hearth on the Kettle's far wall. This had become our spot, and the cooks left a small pot of porridge or soup there for us every day. As I approached with my armed escort, Genya let her shawl drop away, and the guards flanking me stopped short. She rolled her remaining eye and gave a catlike hiss. They dropped back, hovering by the entrance.

"Too much?" she asked.

"Just enough," I replied, marvelling at the changes in her. If she could laugh at the way those oafs reacted to her, it was a very good sign. Though the salve David had created for her scars had helped, I was pretty sure most of the credit belonged to Tamar.

For weeks after we'd arrived at the White Cathedral, Genya had refused to leave her chambers. She simply lay there, in the dark, unwilling to move. Under the supervision of the guards, I'd talked to her, cajoled her, tried to make her laugh. Nothing had worked. In the end, it had been Tamar who lured her out into the open, demanding that she at least learn to defend herself.

"Why do you even care?" Genya had muttered to her, pulling the blankets up.

"I don't. But if you can't fight, you're a liability."

"I don't care if I get hurt."

"I do," I'd protested.

"Alina needs to watch her own back," Tamar said. "She can't be looking after you."

"I never asked her to."

"Wouldn't it be nice if we only got what we asked for?" Tamar said. Then she'd pinched and prodded and generally

harassed, until finally Genya had thrown off her covers and agreed to a single combat lesson – in private, away from the others, with only the Priestguards as audience.

"I'm going to flatten her," she'd grumbled to me. My skepticism must have been evident, because she'd blown a red curl off her scarred forehead and said, "Fine, then I'll wait for her to fall asleep and give her a pig nose."

But she'd gone to that lesson and the next one, and as far as I knew, Tamar hadn't woken up with a pig nose or with her eyelids sealed shut.

Genya continued to keep her face covered and spent most of her time in her chamber, but she no longer hunched, and she didn't shy away from people in the tunnels. She'd made herself a black silk eye patch from the lining of an old coat, and her hair was looking distinctly redder. If Genya was using her power to alter her hair colour, then maybe some of her vanity had returned, and that could only mean progress.

"Let's get started," she said.

Genya turned her back to the room, facing the fire, then drew her shawl over her head, keeping the fringed sides spread wide to create a screen that would hide us from prying eyes. The first time we'd tried this, the guards had been on us in seconds. But as soon as they'd seen me applying the salve to Genya's scars, they'd given us distance. They considered the wounds she bore from the Darkling's *nichevo'ya* some kind of divine judgement. For what, I wasn't sure. If Genya's crime was siding with the Darkling, then most of us had been guilty of it at one time or another. And what would they say to the bite marks on my shoulder? Or the way I could make shadows curl?

I took the tin from my pocket and began applying salve

to her wounds. It had a sharp green scent that made my eyes water.

"I never realised what a pain it is to sit still this long," she complained.

"You're not sitting still. You're wriggling around."

"It itches."

"How about I jab you with a tack? Will that distract you from the itching?"

"Just tell me when you're done, you dreadful girl." She was watching my hands closely. "No luck today?" she whispered.

"Not so far. There are only two hearths going, and the flames are low." I wiped my hand on a grubby kitchen towel. "There," I said. "Done."

"Your turn," she said. "You look—"

"Terrible. I know."

"It's a relative term." The sadness in her voice was unmistakable. I could have kicked myself.

I touched my hand to her cheek. The skin between the scars was smooth and white as the alabaster walls. "I'm an idiot."

The corner of her lip pulled crookedly. Almost a smile. "On occasion," she said. "But I'm the one who brought it up. Now be quiet and let me work."

"Just enough so that the Apparat lets us keep coming here. I don't want to give him a pretty little Saint to show off."

She sighed theatrically. "This is a violation of my most core beliefs, and you *will* make it up to me later."

"How?"

She cocked her head to one side. "I think you should let me make you a redhead."

I rolled my eyes. "Not in this lifetime, Genya."

As she began the slow work of altering my face, I fiddled with the tin in my fingers. I tried to fit the lid back on, but some part of it had come loose from beneath the salve. I lifted it with the tips of my fingernails – a thin, waxy disc of paper. Genya saw it at the same time I did.

Written on the back, in David's nearly illegible scrawl, was a single word: *today*.

Genya snatched it from my fingers. "Oh, Saints. Alina—"

That was when we heard the stomp of heavy-booted feet and a scuffle outside. A pot hit the ground with a loud *clang*, and a shriek went up from one of the cooks as the room flooded with Priestguards, rifles drawn, eyes seeming to blaze holy fire.

The Apparat swept in behind them in a swirl of brown robes. "Clear the room," he bellowed.

Genya and I shot to our feet as the Priestguards roughly herded the cooks from the kitchen in a confusion of protests and frightened exclamations.

"What is this?" I demanded.

"Alina Starkov," said the Apparat, "you are in danger."

My heart was hammering, but I kept my voice calm. "Danger from what?" I asked, glancing at the pots boiling in the hearths. "Lunch?"

"Conspiracy," he proclaimed, pointing at Genya. "Those who would claim your friendship seek to destroy you."

More of the Apparat's bearded henchmen marched through the door behind him. When they parted ranks, I saw David, his eyes wide and frightened.

Genya gasped and I laid a hand on her arm to keep her from charging forward.

Nadia and Zoya were next, both with wrists bound to prevent them from summoning. A trickle of blood leaked from the corner of Nadia's mouth, and her skin was white beneath her freckles. Mal was with them, his face badly bloodied. He was clutching his side as if cradling a broken rib, his shoulders hunched against the pain. And worse was the sight of the guards who flanked him – Tolya and Tamar. Tamar had her axes back. In fact, they were both armed as thoroughly as the Priestguards. They would not meet my eyes.

"Lock the doors," the Apparat commanded. "We will have this sad business done in private."