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Opening extract from

Siege and Storm

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Chapter 1

Two weeks we'd been in Cofton, and I was still getting lost. The town lay inland, west of the Novyi Zem coast, miles from the harbour where we'd landed. Soon we would go further, deep into the wilds of the Zemeni frontier. Maybe then we'd begin to feel safe.

I checked the little map I'd drawn for myself and retraced my steps. Mal and I met every day after work to walk back to the boarding house together, but today I'd got completely lost when I'd detoured to buy our dinner. The calf and collard pies were stuffed in my satchel and giving off a very peculiar smell. The shopkeeper had claimed they were a Zemeni delicacy, though I had my doubts. It didn't much matter. Everything tasted like ashes to me lately.

Mal and I had come to Cofton to find work that would finance our trip west. It was the centre of the *jurda* trade, surrounded by fields of the little orange flowers that people chewed by the bushel. The stimulant was considered a luxury in Ravka, but some of the sailors aboard the *Verrhader* had used it to stay awake on long watches. Zemeni men liked to tuck the dried blooms between lip and gum, and even the women carried them in embroidered pouches that dangled from their wrists. Each store window I passed advertised different brands:

Brightleaf, Shade, Dhoka, the Burly. I saw a beautifully dressed girl in petticoats lean over and spit a stream of rust-coloured juice right into one of the brass spittoons that sat outside every shop door. I stifled a gag. That was one Zemeni custom I didn't think I could get used to.

With a sigh of relief, I turned onto the city's main thoroughfare. At least now I knew where I was. Cofton still didn't feel quite real to me. There was something raw and unfinished about it. Most of the streets were unpaved, and I always felt as if the flat-roofed buildings with their flimsy wooden walls might tip over at any minute. And yet they all had glass windows. The women dressed in velvet and lace. The shop displays overflowed with sweets and baubles and all manner of finery instead of rifles, knives, and tin cookpots. Here, even the beggars wore shoes. This was what a country looked like when it wasn't under siege.

As I passed a gin shop, I caught a flash of crimson out of the corner of my eye. *Corporalki.* Instantly, I drew back, pressing myself into the shadowy space between two buildings, heart hammering, my hand already reaching for the pistol at my hip.

Dagger first, I reminded myself, sliding the blade from my sleeve. *Try not to draw attention. Pistol if you must. Power as a last resort.* Not for the first time, I missed the Fabrikator-made gloves that I'd had to leave behind in Ravka. They'd been lined with mirrors that gave me an easy way to blind opponents in a hand-to-hand fight – and a nice alternative to slicing someone in half with the Cut. But if I'd been spotted by a Corporalnik Heartrender, I might not have a choice in the matter. They were the Darkling's favoured soldiers and could stop my heart or crush my lungs without ever landing a blow.

I waited, my grip slippery on the dagger's handle, then finally dared to peek around the wall. I saw a cart piled high with barrels. The driver had stopped to talk to a woman whose daughter danced impatiently beside her, fluttering and twirling in her dark red skirt.

Just a little girl. Not a Corporalnik in sight. I sank against the building and took a deep breath, trying to calm down.

It won't always be this way, I told myself. *The longer you're free, the easier it will get.*

One day I would wake from a sleep free of nightmares, walk down a street unafraid. Until then, I kept my flimsy dagger close and wished for the sure heft of Grisha steel in my palm.

I pushed my way back into the bustling thoroughfare and clutched at the scarf around my neck, drawing it tighter. It had become a nervous habit. Beneath it lay Morozova's collar, the most powerful amplifier ever known, as well as the only means of identifying me. Without it, I was just another dirty, underfed, Ravkan refugee.

I wasn't sure what I would do when the weather turned. I couldn't very well walk around in scarves and high-necked coats when summer came. But by then, hopefully, Mal and I would be far from crowded towns and unwanted questions. We'd be on our own for the first time since we'd fled Ravka. The thought sent a nervous flutter through me.

I crossed the street, dodging wagons and horses, still scanning the crowd, sure that at any moment I would see a troop of Grisha or *oprichniki* descending on me. Or maybe it would be Shu Han mercenaries, or Fjerdan assassins, or the soldiers of the Ravkan King, or even the

Darkling himself. So many people might be hunting us. *Hunting me*, I amended. If it weren't for me, Mal would still be a tracker in the First Army, not a deserter running for his life.

A memory rose unbidden in my mind: black hair, slate eyes, the Darkling's face exultant in victory as he unleashed the power of the Fold. Then I'd snatched that victory away.

News was easy to come by in Novyi Zem, but none of it was good. Rumours had surfaced that the Darkling had somehow survived the battle on the Fold, that he had gone to ground to gather his forces before making another attempt on the Ravkan throne. I didn't want to believe it was possible, but I knew better than to underestimate him. The other stories were just as disturbing: that the Fold had begun to overflow its shores, driving refugees east and west; that a cult had risen up around a Saint who could summon the sun. I didn't want to think about it. Mal and I had a new life now. We'd left Ravka behind.

I hurried my steps, and soon I was in the square where Mal and I met every evening. I spotted him leaning against the lip of a fountain, talking with a Zemeni friend he'd met working at the warehouse. I couldn't remember his name . . . Jep, maybe? Jef?

Fed by four huge spigots, the fountain was less decorative than useful, a large basin where girls and house servants came to wash clothes. None of the washerwomen were paying much attention to the laundry, though. They were all gawking at Mal. It was hard not to. His hair had grown out of its short military cut and was starting to curl at the nape of his neck. The spray from the fountain had left his shirt damp and it clung to skin bronzed by

long days at sea. He threw his head back, laughing at something his friend had said, seemingly oblivious to the sly smiles thrown his way.

He's probably so used to it, he doesn't even notice any more, I thought irritably.

When he caught sight of me, his face broke into a grin and he waved. The washerwomen turned to look and then exchanged glances of disbelief. I knew what they saw: a scrawny girl with stringy, dull brown hair and sallow cheeks, fingers stained orange from packing *jurda*. I'd never been much to look at, and weeks of not using my power had taken their toll. I wasn't eating or sleeping well, and the nightmares didn't help. The women's faces all said the same thing: What was a boy like Mal doing with a girl like me?

I straightened and tried to ignore them as Mal threw his arm around me and drew me close. "Where were you?" he asked. "I was getting worried."

"I was waylaid by a gang of angry bears," I murmured into his shoulder.

"You got lost again?"

"I don't know where you get these ideas."

"You remember Jes, right?" he said, nodding to his friend.

"How do you go?" Jes asked in broken Ravkan, offering me his hand. His expression seemed unduly grave.

"Very well, thank you," I replied in Zemeni. He didn't return my smile, but gently patted my hand. Jes was definitely an odd one.

We chatted a short while longer, but I knew Mal could see I was getting anxious. I didn't like to be out in the open for too long. We said our goodbyes, and before

Jes left, he shot me another grim look and leaned in to whisper something to Mal.

"What did he say?" I asked as we watched him stroll away across the square.

"Hmm? Oh, nothing. Did you know you have pollen in your eyebrows?" He reached out to gently brush it away.

"Maybe I wanted it there."

"My mistake."

As we pushed off from the fountain, one of the washerwomen leaned forward, practically spilling out of her dress.

"If you ever get tired of skin and bones," she called to Mal, "I've got something to tempt you."

I stiffened. Mal glanced over his shoulder. Slowly, he looked her up and down. "No," he said flatly. "You don't."

The girl's face flushed an ugly red as the others jeered and cackled, splashing her with water. I tried for a haughtily arched brow, but it was hard to restrain the goofy grin pulling at the corners of my mouth.

"Thanks," I mumbled as we crossed the square, heading towards our boarding house.

"For what?"

I rolled my eyes. "For defending my honour, you dullard."

He yanked me beneath a shadowed awning. I had a moment's panic when I thought he'd spotted trouble, but then his arms were around me and his lips were pressed to mine.

When he finally drew away, my cheeks were warm and my legs had gone wobbly.

"Just to be clear," he said, "I'm not really interested in defending your honour."

"Understood," I managed, hoping I didn't sound too ridiculously breathless.

"Besides," he said, "I need to steal every minute I can before we're back at the Pit."

The Pit was what Mal called our boarding house. It was crowded and filthy and afforded us no privacy at all, but it was cheap. He grinned, cocky as ever, and pulled me back into the flow of people on the street. Despite my exhaustion, my steps felt decidedly lighter. I still wasn't used to the idea of us together. Another flutter passed through me. On the frontier there would be no curious boarders or unwanted interruptions. My pulse gave a little jump – whether from nerves or excitement, I wasn't sure.

"So what did Jes say?" I asked again, when my brain felt a bit less scrambled.

"He said I should take good care of you."

"That's all?"

Mal cleared his throat. "And . . . he said he would pray to the God of Work to heal your affliction."

"My *what*?"

"I may have told him that you have a goiter."

I stumbled. "I beg your pardon?"

"Well, I had to explain why you were always clinging to that scarf."

I dropped my hand. I'd been doing it again without even realising.

"So you told him I had a goiter?" I whispered incredulously.

"I had to say something. And it makes you quite a tragic figure. Pretty girl, giant growth, you know."

I punched him hard in the arm.

"Ow! Hey, in some countries, goiters are considered very fashionable."

"Do they like eunuchs, too? Because I can arrange that."

"So bloodthirsty!"

"My goiter makes me cranky."

Mal laughed, but I noticed that he kept his hand on his pistol. The Pit was located in one of the less savoury parts of Cofton, and we were carrying a lot of coin, the wages we'd saved for the start of our new life. Just a few more days, and we'd have enough to leave Cofton behind – the noise, the pollen-filled air, the constant fear. We'd be safe in a place where nobody cared what happened to Ravka, where Grisha were scarce and no one had ever heard of a Sun Summoner.

And no one has any use for one. The thought soured my mood, but it had come to me more and more lately. What was I good for in this strange country? Mal could hunt, track, handle a gun. The only thing I'd ever been good at was being a Grisha. I missed summoning light, and each day I didn't use my power, I grew more weak and sickly. Just walking beside Mal left me out of breath, and I struggled beneath the weight of my satchel. I was so frail and clumsy that I'd barely managed to keep my job packing *jurda* at one of the fieldhouses. It brought in mere pennies, but I'd insisted on working, on trying to help. I felt like I had when we were kids: capable Mal and useless Alina.

I pushed the thought away. I might not be the Sun Summoner any more, but I wasn't that sad little girl either. I'd find a way to be useful.

The sight of our boarding house didn't exactly lift my spirits. It was two storeys high and in desperate need of

a fresh coat of paint. The sign in the window advertised hot baths and tick-free beds in five different languages. Having sampled the bath and the bed, I knew the sign lied no matter how you translated it. Still, with Mal beside me, it didn't seem so bad.

We climbed the steps of the sagging porch and entered the tavern that took up most of the lower floor of the house. It was cool and quiet after the dusty clamour of the street. At this hour, there were usually a few workers at the pockmarked tables drinking away their day's wages, but today it was empty, save for the surly-looking landlord standing behind the bar.

He was a Kerch immigrant, and I had the distinct impression he didn't like Ravkans. Or maybe he just thought we were thieves. We'd shown up two weeks ago, ragged and grubby, with no baggage and no way to pay for lodging except a single golden hairpin that he probably thought we'd stolen. But that hadn't stopped him from snapping it up in exchange for a narrow bed in a room that we shared with six other boarders.

As we approached the bar, he slapped the room key on the counter and shoved it across to us without being asked. It was tied to a carved piece of chicken bone. Another charming touch.

In the stilted Kerch he'd picked up aboard the *Verrhader*, Mal requested a pitcher of hot water for washing.

"Extra," the landlord grunted. He was a heavy-set man with thinning hair and the orange-stained teeth that came from chewing *jurda*. He was sweating, I noticed. Though the day wasn't particularly warm, beads of perspiration had broken out over his upper lip.

I glanced back at him as we headed for the staircase

on the other side of the deserted tavern. He was still watching us, his arms crossed over his chest, his beady eyes narrowed. There was something about his expression that set my nerves jangling.

I hesitated at the base of the steps. "That guy really doesn't like us," I said.

Mal was already headed up the stairs. "No, but he likes our money just fine. And we'll be out of here in a few days."

I shook off my nervousness. I'd been jumpy all afternoon.

"Fine," I grumbled as I followed after Mal. "But just so I'm prepared, how do you say 'you're an ass' in Kerch?"

"*Jer ven azel.*"

"Really?"

Mal laughed. "The first thing sailors teach you is how to swear."

The second floor of the boarding house was in considerably worse shape than the public rooms below. The carpet was faded and threadbare, and the dim corridor stank of cabbage and tobacco. The doors to the private rooms were all closed, and not a sound came from behind them as we passed. The quiet was eerie. Maybe everyone was out for the day.

The only light came from a single grimy window at the end of the hall. As Mal fumbled with the key, I looked down through the smudged glass to the carts and carriages rumbling by below. Across the street, a man stood beneath a balcony, peering up at the boarding house. He pulled at his collar and his sleeves, as if his clothes were new and didn't quite fit right. His eyes met mine through the window, then darted quickly away.

I felt a sudden pang of fear.

"Mal," I whispered, reaching out to him.

But it was too late. The door flew open.

"No!" I shouted. I threw up my hands and light burst through the corridor in a blinding cascade. Rough hands seized me, pinning my arms behind my back. I was dragged inside the room, kicking and thrashing.

"Easy now," said a cool voice from somewhere in the corner. "I'd hate to have to gut your friend so soon."

Time seemed to slow. I saw the shabby, low-ceilinged room, the cracked washbasin sitting on the battered table, dust motes swirling in a slender beam of sunlight, the bright edge of the blade pressed to Mal's throat. The man holding him wore a familiar sneer. *Ivan.* There were others, men and women. All wore the fitted coats and breeches of Zemeni merchants and labourers, but I recognised some of their faces from my time with the Second Army. They were Grisha.

Behind them, shrouded in shadow, lounging in a rickety chair as if it were a throne, was the Darkling.

For a moment, everything in the room was silent and still. I could hear Mal's breathing, the shuffle of feet. I heard a man calling a hello down on the street. I couldn't seem to stop staring at the Darkling's hands – his long white fingers resting casually on the arms of the chair. I had the foolish thought that I'd never seen him in ordinary clothes.

Then reality crashed in on me. *This* was how it ended? Without a fight? Without so much as a shot fired or a voice raised? A sob of pure rage and frustration tore free from my chest.

"Take her pistol, and search her for other weapons," the Darkling said softly. I felt the comforting weight of

my firearm lifted from my hip, the dagger pulled from its sheath at my wrist. "I'm going to tell them to let you go," he said when they were done, "with the knowledge that if you so much as raise your hands, Ivan will end the tracker. Show me that you understand."

I gave a single stiff nod.

He raised a finger, and the men holding me let go. I stumbled forward and then stood frozen in the centre of the room, my hands balled into fists.

I could cut the Darkling in two with my power. I could crack this whole saintsforsaken building right down the middle. But not before Ivan opened Mal's throat.

"How did you find us?" I rasped.

"You leave a very expensive trail," he said, and lazily tossed something onto the table. It landed with a *plink* beside the washbasin. It was one of the golden pins Genya had woven into my hair so many weeks ago. We'd used them to pay for passage across the True Sea, the wagon to Cofton, our miserable, not-quite-tick-free bed.

The Darkling rose, and a strange trepidation crackled through the room. It was as if every Grisha had taken a breath and was holding it, waiting. I could feel the fear coming off them, and that sent a spike of alarm through me. The Darkling's underlings had always treated him with awe and respect, but this was something new. Even Ivan looked a little ill.

The Darkling stepped into the light, and I saw a faint tracery of scars over his face. They'd been healed by a Corporalnik, but they were still visible. So the volcra had left their mark. *Good*, I thought with petty satisfaction. It was small comfort, but at least he wasn't quite as perfect as he had been.

He paused, studying me. "How are you finding life in hiding, Alina? You don't look well."

"Neither do you," I said. It wasn't just the scars. He wore his weariness like an elegant cloak, but it was still there. Faint smudges showed beneath his eyes, and the hollows of his sharp cheekbones cut a little deeper.

"A small price to pay," he said, his lips quirking in a half smile.

A chill snaked up my spine. *For what?*

He reached out, and it took everything in me not to flinch backwards. But all he did was take hold of one end of my scarf. He tugged gently and the rough wool slipped free, gliding over my neck and fluttering to the ground.

"Back to pretending to be less than you are, I see. The sham doesn't suit you."

A twinge of unease passed through me. Hadn't I had a similar thought just minutes ago? "Thanks for your concern," I muttered.

He let his fingers trail over the collar. "It's mine as much as yours, Alina."

I batted his hand away and an anxious murmur rose from the Grisha. "Then you shouldn't have put it around my neck," I snapped. "What do you want?"

Of course, I already knew. He wanted everything – Ravka, the world, the power of the Fold. His answer didn't matter. I just needed to keep him talking. I'd known this moment might come, and I'd prepared for it. I wasn't going to let him take me again. I glanced at Mal, hoping he understood what I intended.

"I want to thank you," the Darkling said.

Now, that I hadn't expected. "Thank me?"

"For the gift you gave me."

My eyes flicked to the scars on his pale cheek.

"No," he said with a small smile, "not these. But they do make a good reminder."

"Of what?" I asked, curious despite myself.

His gaze was grey flint. "That all men can be made fools. No, Alina, the gift you've given me is so much greater."

He turned away. I darted another glance at Mal.

"Unlike you," the Darkling said, "I understand gratitude and I wish to express it."

He raised his hands. Darkness tumbled through the room.

"Now!" I shouted.

Mal drove his elbow into Ivan's side. At the same moment, I threw up my hands and light blazed out, blinding the men around us. I focused my power, honing it to a scythe of pure light. I had only one goal. I wasn't going to leave the Darkling standing. I peered into the seething blackness, trying to find my target. But something was wrong.

I'd seen the Darkling use his power countless times before. This was different. The shadows whirled and skittered around the circle of my light, spinning faster, a writhing mass that clicked and whirred like a fog of hungry insects. I pushed against them with my power, but they twisted and wriggled, drawing ever nearer.

Mal was beside me. Somehow he'd got hold of Ivan's knife.

"Stay close," I said. Better to take my chances and open a hole in the floor than to just stand there doing nothing. I concentrated and felt the power of the Cut vibrate through me. I raised my arm . . . and something stepped out of the darkness.

It's a trick, I thought as the thing came towards us. *It has to be some kind of illusion.*

It was a creature wrought from shadow, its face blank and devoid of features. Its body seemed to tremble and blur, then form again: arms, legs, long hands ending in the dim suggestion of claws, a broad back crested by wings that roiled and shifted as they unfurled like a black stain. It was almost like a volcra, though its shape was more human. And it did not fear the light. It did not fear me.

It's a trick, my panicked mind insisted. *It isn't possible.* It was a violation of everything I knew about Grisha power. We couldn't make matter. We couldn't create life. But the creature was coming for us, and the Darkling's Grisha were cringing against the walls in very real terror. This was what had so frightened them.

I pushed down my horror and refocused my power. I swung my arm, bringing it down in a shining, unforgiving arc. The light sliced through the creature. For a moment, I thought it might just keep coming. Then it wavered, glowing like a cloud lit by lightning, and blew apart into nothing. I had time for the barest surge of relief before the Darkling lifted his hand and another monster took its place, followed by another, and another.

"This is the gift you gave me," said the Darkling. "The gift I earned on the Fold." His face was alive with power and a kind of terrible joy. But I could see strain there too. Whatever he was doing, it was costing him.

Mal and I backed towards the door as the creatures stalked closer. Suddenly, one of them shot forward with astonishing speed. Mal slashed with his knife. The thing paused, wavered slightly, then grabbed him and tossed him aside like a child's doll. This was no illusion.

"Mal!" I cried.

I lashed out with the Cut and the creature burned away to nothing, but the next monster was on me in seconds. It seized me and revulsion shuddered through my body. Its grip was like a thousand crawling insects swarming over my arms.

It lifted me off my feet, and I saw how very wrong I'd been. It *did* have a mouth, a yawning, twisting hole that spread open to reveal row upon row of teeth. I felt them all as the thing bit deeply into my shoulder.

The pain was like nothing I'd ever known. It echoed inside me, multiplying on itself, cracking me open and scraping at the bone. From a distance, I heard Mal call my name. I heard myself scream.

The creature released me. I dropped to the floor in a limp heap. I was on my back, the pain still reverberating through me in endless waves. I could see the water-stained ceiling, the shadow creature looming high above, Mal's pale face as he knelt beside me. I saw his lips form the shape of my name, but I couldn't hear him. I was already slipping away.

The last thing I heard was the Darkling's voice – so clear, as if he was lying right next to me, his lips pressed against my ear, whispering so that only I could hear: *Thank you.*