



**RULE  
OF  
WOLVES**

#1 NEW YORK TIMES—BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**LEIGH BARDUGO**



# RULE OF WOLVES

LEIGH BARDUGO

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*To EDA, who helped me find my place among the wolves*

# THE GRISHA

SOLDIERS OF THE SECOND ARMY  
MASTERS OF THE SMALL SCIENCE

## CORPORALKI

(THE ORDER OF THE LIVING AND THE DEAD)

Heartrenders

Healers

## ETHEREALKI

(THE ORDER OF SUMMONERS)

Squallers

Inferni

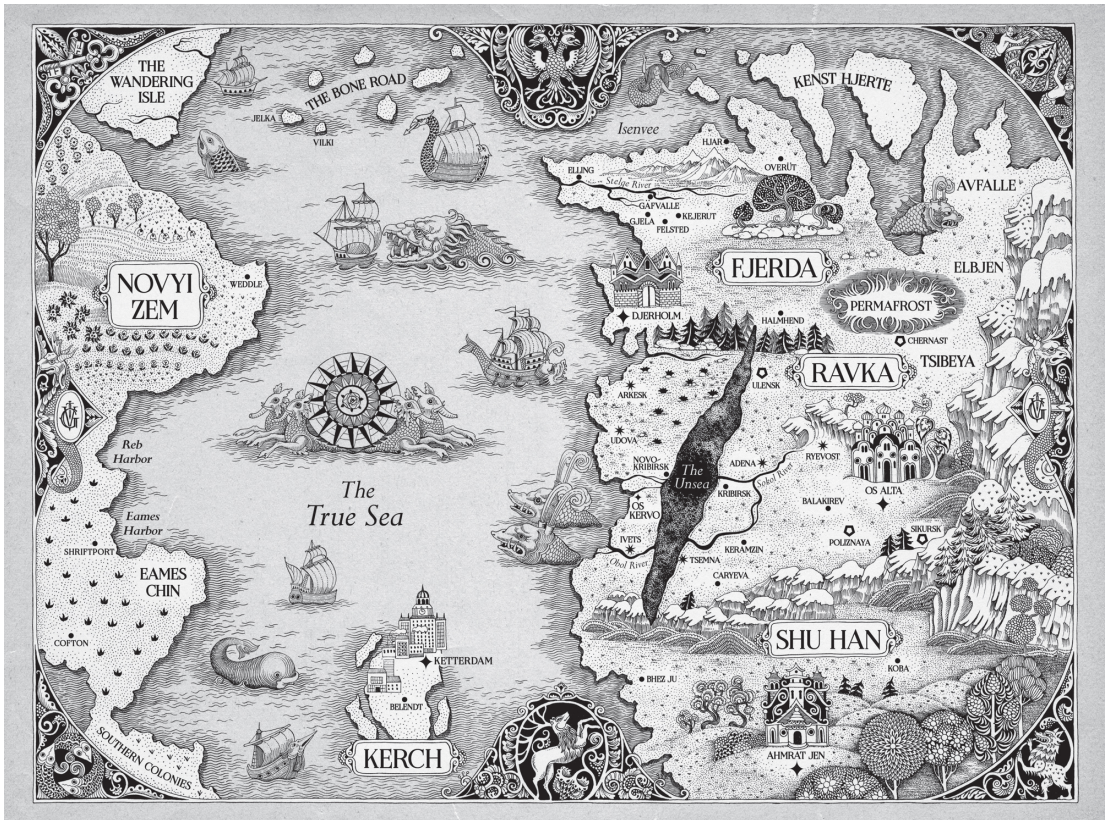
Tidemakers

## MATERIALKI

(THE ORDER OF FABRIKATORS)

Durasts

Alkemi



# THE DEMON KING



# 1

## QUEEN MAKHI

MAKHI KIR-TABAN, BORN OF HEAVEN, was a queen from a long line of queens.

*And they were all fools, she thought, her pulse quickening as she read the invitation in her hand. If they hadn't been fools, I wouldn't be in this predicament right now.*

No rage showed on her face. No blood rushed to her smooth cheeks. She was a queen and conducted herself accordingly—back erect, body poised, expression composed. Her fingers did not tremble, though every muscle in her body longed to crush the elegantly lettered paper to dust.

*King Nikolai Lantsov, Grand Duke of Udova, sole sovereign of the great nation of Ravka, and Princess Ehri Kir-Taban, Daughter of Heaven, most Ethereal of the Taban Line, would welcome Queen Makhi Kir-Taban to a celebration of matrimony in the royal chapel of Os Alta.*

The wedding would take place one month from now. Enough time for Makhi's servants to pack the appropriate gowns and jewels, to assemble her royal retinue, to ready her contingent of the Tavgharad, the elite soldiers who had guarded her family

since the first Taban queen took the throne. Plenty of time to make the journey over land or in the new luxury airship her engineers had constructed.

Plenty of time for a clever queen to start a war.

But right now, Makhi had to perform for the ministers arrayed before her in the council chamber. Her mother had passed only a month ago. The crown could have returned to Makhi's grandmother, but Leyti Kir-Taban was nearly eighty and was done with the troubles of running a nation. She wanted only to prune her roses and rusticate with a series of wildly handsome lovers, and so she had given Makhi her blessing and retired to the country. Makhi had been crowned scant days after her mother's funeral. Her reign was a new one, but she intended to ensure it was long. She would usher in an age of prosperity and empire for her people—and that required the support of the royal ministers currently gazing up at her, their faces full of expectation.

"I see no personal message from Ehri," she said, leaning back on her throne. She rested the invitation in her lap and allowed her brow to furrow. "It is a concern."

"We should be rejoicing," said Minister Nagh. He wore the dark green, brass-buttoned coat of the bureaucrat class—as all the ministers did, the two crossed keys of the Shu pinned at their lapels. They looked like a forest of stern trees. "Is this not the result we hoped for? A wedding to seal an alliance between our nations?"

*The result you hoped for. You would have us cower behind our mountains forever.*

"Yes," she said with a smile. "It is why we risked our precious Princess Ehri in such a savage land. But she should have written a note to us in her hand, given some sign that all is well."

Minister Zihun cleared her throat. “Your Most Celestial Highness, Ehri may not actually be happy, but only resigned to this. She has never wanted a public life, let alone a life led away from the only home she has ever known.”

“We are Taban. What we want is what our country needs.”

The minister bowed her head respectfully. “Of course, Your Majesty. Shall we pen your reply?”

“I will do it myself,” said the queen. “As a sign of respect. It’s best we begin this new partnership on the right foot.”

“Very good, Your Majesty,” Nagh said, as if Makhi had executed a particularly fine curtsy.

Somehow the minister’s approval made Makhi prickle even more than his opposition.

She rose and, as one, the ministers took a step back, following protocol. She descended from her throne, and her Tavgharad guards fell into step behind her as she made her way down the long hallway that led to the queen’s sanctuary. The silk train of her gown sighed against the marble floor, as fretful as one of her advisers. Makhi knew exactly how many steps it took to reach the privacy of her rooms from the council chamber. She had made the walk innumerable times with her mother, and her grandmother before that. Now she counted down—fifty-six, fifty-five—trying to release her frustration and think clearly.

She sensed Minister Yerwei behind her, though the sound of his slippered feet was masked by the rhythmic thump of Tavgharad boots. It was like being pursued by a ghost. If she told her guards to slit his throat, they would do it without hesitation. And then when she was tried for murder, as even a queen could be in Shu Han, they would give testimony against her.

When they reached the queen’s sanctuary, Makhi passed beneath a gilded arch and entered a small receiving room of pale

green marble. She waved off the waiting servants and turned to the Tavgharad. “Do not disturb us,” she instructed.

Yerwei followed her through the sitting room and on to the music room, until they reached the grand parlor where Makhi had once sat at her mother’s knee, listening to stories of the first Taban queens—warriors who, accompanied by their retinue of tame falcons, had come down from the highest mountains in the Sikurzoi to rule the Shu. *Taban yenok-yun*, they were called. The storm that stayed.

The palace had been built by those queens, and it was still a marvel of engineering and beauty. It belonged to the Taban dynasty. It belonged to the people. And for this brief moment—just a few measured steps in the march of the Taban line—it belonged to Makhi. She felt her spirits lift as they entered the Court of the Golden Wing. It was a room of gilded light and flowing water, the slender, repeating arches of its terrace framing the groomed hedges and burbling fountains of the royal gardens below, and beyond them, the plum orchards of Ahmrat Jen, the trees standing like a regiment of soldiers in tidy rows. It was winter in Ravka, but here in the Shu Han, in this blessed land, the sun still shone warm.

Makhi walked out onto the terrace. This was one of the few places she felt safe talking, away from the prying eyes and curious ears of servants and spies. A green glass table had been set with pitchers of wine and water and a platter of late figs. In the garden below, she saw her niece Akeni playing with one of the gardener’s boys. If Makhi didn’t conceive daughters with one of her consorts, she had decided Akeni would one day inherit the crown. She wasn’t the oldest of the Taban girls, but even at eight years old she was clearly the brightest. A surprise, given that her mother had the depth of a dinner plate.



“Aunt Makhi!” Akeni shouted from below. “We found a bird’s nest!”

The gardener’s boy did not speak or look directly at the queen, but stood silently beside his playmate, eyes on his battered sandals.

“You must not touch the eggs,” Makhi called down to them. “Look but do not touch.”

“I won’t. Do you want flowers?”

“Bring me a yellow plum.”

“But they’re sour!”

“Bring one to me and I’ll tell you a story.” She watched as the children ran toward the southern wall of the garden. The fruit was high in the trees and would take time and ingenuity to reach.

“She is a good child,” said Yerwei from the archway behind her. “Perhaps too biddable to make a good queen.”

Makhi ignored him.

“Princess Ehri is alive,” he said.

She grabbed the pitcher and hurled it down onto the paving stones below.

She tore the curtains from the windows and shredded them with her fingernails.

She buried her face in the silk pillows and screamed.

She did none of those things.

Instead she tossed the invitation onto the table and removed the heavy crown from her head. It was pure platinum, thick with emeralds, and always made her neck ache. She set it beside the figs and poured herself a glass of wine. Servants were meant to attend to these needs, but she didn’t want them near her right now.

Yerwei slithered onto the balcony and helped himself to wine without asking. “Your sister is not supposed to be alive.”

Princess Ehri Kir-Taban, most beloved of the people, most precious—for reasons Makhi had never been able to grasp. She wasn't wise or beautiful or interesting. All she could do was simper and play the *khatuur*. And yet she was adored.

Ehri was meant to be dead. What had gone wrong? Makhi had made her plans carefully. They should have ended with both King Nikolai and Princess Ehri dead—and Fjerda blamed for the assassinations. On the pretext of avenging her beloved sister's murder, she would march into a kingless, rudderless country, claim its Grisha for the *khergud* program, and use Ravka as a base for waging war with the Fjerdans.

She had chosen her agent well: Mayu Kir-Kaat was a member of Princess Ehri's own Tavgharad. She was young, a talented fighter and swordswoman, and most importantly, she was vulnerable. Her twin brother had vanished from his military unit and his family had been told that the young man had been killed in action. But Mayu had guessed the truth: He'd been selected to become one of the *khergud*, inducted into the Iron Heart program that would make him stronger and more lethal, and not entirely human. Mayu had begged that he be released before his conversion could take place and returned to service as an ordinary soldier.

Queen Makhi knew the process of becoming *khergud*—of having Grisha steel fused to one's bones or mechanical wings attached to one's back—was painful. But there was talk that the process did something else, that the soldiers brought into the program emerged changed in terrible ways, that the *khergud* lost some fundamental part of themselves through the conversion, as if the pain burned away a piece of what had made them human. And of course, Mayu Kir-Kaat didn't want that for her brother.

They were twins, *kebben*. There was no closer bond. Mayu would take her own life and the life of a king to save him.

Queen Makhi set down her wine and poured herself a glass of water instead. She needed a clear head for what was to come. Her nursemaid had once told her that she'd been meant to be a twin, that her brother had been brought into the world stillborn. "You ate his strength," she'd whispered, and even then, Makhi had known that she would one day be a queen. What might have happened had her brother been born? Who might Makhi have been?

It made no difference now.

Ravka's king was still very much alive.

And so was her sister.

This was bad. But Queen Makhi couldn't be sure of how bad. Did Nikolai Lantsov know of the plot against him? Had Mayu lost her nerve and told Princess Ehri of the true plan? No. It couldn't be. She refused to believe it. The bond of the *kebben* was too strong for that.

"This invitation feels like a trap," she said.

"Most marriages are."

"Spare me your wit, Yerwei. If King Nikolai knows—"

"What can the king prove?"

"Ehri might have much to say. Depending on what she knows."

"Your sister is a gentle soul. She would never believe you capable of such subterfuge, and she would certainly never speak against you."

Makhi swatted the invitation. "Then explain this!"

"Perhaps she fell in love. I hear the king is quite charming."

"Don't be absurd."

Princess Ehri had taken Mayu's place in the Tavgharad. Mayu had masqueraded as Princess Ehri. Mayu's task was to get close to King Nikolai, murder him, then take her own life. As far as Princess Ehri knew, that would be the end of it. But in the invasion that would ensue, lives would invariably be lost, and the Tavgharad had orders to make sure Ehri was one of the casualties. They had been assigned to Ehri's household, but they followed the queen's orders alone. Makhi's ministers would never know of the plan she had put into place. So what had gone wrong?

"You must attend this wedding," Yerwei lectured. "All of your ministers will expect it. This is the realization of their plans for peace. They think you should be thrilled."

"Did I not seem thrilled enough for your liking?"

"You were as you always were, a perfect queen. Only I saw the signs."

"Men who see too much have a way of losing their eyes."

"And queens who trust too little have a way of losing their thrones."

Makhi's head snapped around. "What do you mean by that?"

Only Yerwei knew the truth—and not just the details of her plan to murder the Ravkan king and her own sister. He had served as personal physician to her mother and her grandmother. He had been a witness on her mother's deathbed when Queen Keyen Kir-Taban, Born of Heaven, had chosen Ehri as her heir instead of Makhi. It was the right of a Taban queen to choose her successor, but it was almost always the oldest daughter. It had been that way for hundreds of years. Makhi was *meant* to be queen. She had been born for it, raised for it. She was as strong as a member of the Tavgharad, a skilled horsewoman, a brilliant strategist,



cunning as a spider. And yet. Her mother had chosen Ehri. Soft, sweet, beloved Ehri, whom the people adored.

“Promise me,” her mother had said. “Promise me you will abide by my wishes. Swear it on the Six Soldiers.”

“I promise,” Makhi had whispered.

Yerwei had heard it all. He was her mother’s longest-serving adviser, so old Makhi had no idea how many years he’d been on this earth. He never seemed to age. She’d looked to him, to his watery eyes in his wizened face, wondering if he’d told her mother of the work they’d pursued together, the secret experiments, the birth of the *khergud* program. All of that would end with Ehri on the throne.

“But Ehri does not want to rule—” Makhi had attempted.

“Only because she has always assumed you would.”

Makhi had taken her mother’s hand in hers. “But I should. I have studied. I have trained.”

“And yet no lesson has ever taught you kindness. No tutor has ever taught you mercy. You have a heart hungry for war and I do not know why.”

“It is the falcon’s heart,” Makhi had said proudly. “The heart of the Han.”

“It is the falcon’s will. That is a different thing. Swear to me that you will do this. You are a Taban. We want what the country needs, and this nation needs Ehri.”

Makhi had not wept or argued; she’d only given her vow.

Then her mother had breathed her last. Makhi said her prayers to the Six Soldiers, lit candles for the fallen Taban queens. She’d tidied her hair and brushed her hands over the silk of her robes. She would have to wear blue soon, the color of mourning. And she had so much to mourn—the loss of her mother, the loss of her crown.

“Will you tell Ehri or shall I?” she’d asked Yerwei.

“Tell her what?”

“My mother—”

“I heard nothing. I’m glad she went peacefully.”

That was the way their pact had been formed over her mother’s cooling corpse. And how a new queen had been made.

Now Makhi leaned her arms on the balcony and breathed in the scents from the garden—jasmine, sweet oranges. She listened to the laughter of her niece and the gardener’s boy. When she’d taken her sister’s crown, she hadn’t realized how little it would solve, that she would be forever competing with kind, oblivious Ehri. Only one thing would end that suffering.

“I will see my sister wed. But first I must send a message.”

Yerwei moved closer. “What is it you intend? You know your ministers will read the note, even if it is sealed.”

“I’m not a fool.”

“One can be foolish without being a fool. If—”

Yerwei’s sentence broke without warning.

“What is it?” asked Makhi, following his gaze.

A shadow was moving over the plum orchards beyond the palace wall. Makhi looked up, expecting to see an airship, but the skies were clear. The shadow kept growing, spreading like a stain, speeding toward them. The trees it touched toppled, their branches turning black, then vanishing, leaving nothing behind but gray earth and a curl of smoke.

“What is this?” Yerwei gasped.

“Akeni!” the queen screamed. “Akeni, get down from the tree! Come away from there right now!”

“I’m picking plums!” the girl shouted, laughing.

“I said right now!”

Akeni couldn't see beyond the walls, this black tide of death that came on without a sound.

"Guards!" the queen yelled. "Help her!"

But it was too late. The shadow slid over the palace wall, turning the golden bricks black and descending over the plum tree. It was as if a dark veil descended over Akeni and the gardener's boy, silencing their laughter.

"No!" Makhi cried.

"My queen," said Yerwei urgently. "You must come away."

But the blight had stopped, right on the edge of the fountain, clear as the mark of high tide on the sand. All it had touched lay gray and wasted. All that lay beyond was lush and green and full of life.

"Akeni," the queen whispered on a sob.

Only the wind answered, blowing in off the orchard, scattering the last, faint tendrils of shadow. Nothing remained but the sweet smell of flowers, happy and unknowing, their faces turned to the sun.