



From The Ashes

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By

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The tall stone building stained dark with age stood out like a beacon among the squat white buildings of the surrounding city. Rue shivered as she walked past it and pulled the thin, long sleeved workman's shirt tightly around her. She glanced up at the gargoyle perched on a column on one side of the church's large wrought iron gate. Wings splayed, one clawed arm reached down towards the pavement where she stood, as if the creature meant to take a step off its resting spot and pounce on anyone unlucky enough to be underneath it. Its mate, on the other large column on the other side of the entrance gate had long since disappeared, destroyed either by age, or the war. All that remained of it was a segment of the arm that rested on its platform, and its two stubby clawed feet.

'Don't dawdle,' said Kieran from behind, pushing Rue slightly and urging her past the church. 'I hate that place,' she mumbled, casting another quick glance at the building and the large cross roughly hewn into the face of the building.

'Hurry!' hissed Kieran into Rue's ear, 'the light is going quickly, and we do not want to be seen outside of here. People know that we aren't believers. And we don't want to get stopped by the watchmen.

'I'm not a believer,' said Rue in a whisper, barely turning her head to speak to Kieran who was still behind her. 'But you used to be, so I don't know what the problem is,' she said.

'That's even more a problem!' said Kieran as they walked past an abandoned shop. It was dark inside, and the large front window of the store was missing, large jagged pieces of glass still clinging to parts of the frame. From deep inside the darkness of the room, there was a flickering orange glow.

Before Kieran could open his mouth to say anything, Rue jumped lightly

through the open display window, her feet crunching loudly on the broken glass that still lay on the sill. 'What's that?' she said loudly.

Kieran reached through the window but Rue was already beyond his reach, moving quickly further into the darkness. 'Rue!' he said as loudly as he dared. 'You shouldn't just go wandering into abandoned places!'. He sighed and moved around to the shop door that stood ajar. He was getting too old to be climbing through windows.

Kieran moved as quickly as he dared through the velvety dark, tripping slightly on an overturned chair and bumping heavily into what he thought might be a counter. As he got closer to the source of the light, he could see bright orange sparks flying into the air and quickly fizzling to nothing. He reached Rue, who had sensibly hidden behind a narrow wall and was peering into the open doorway.

Kieran cautiously looked around the door, above Rue's head. He saw a man wearing thick goggles over his eyes and holding a welding torch which flared nearly bright white with heat. Rue simply stood with wide eyes. 'What *is* that?' she whispered in awe to Kieran.

Standing in the middle of the small back room was a large man shaped figure, black against the brightness of the torch. The man with the goggles directed his torch at the torso of large looming figure and sparks flew high into the air. A second man, also wearing goggles and thick gloves stood on the other side of the dark man-shape. 'Okay, that's good!' shouted the second man. The man with the torch stopped, and the room suddenly went dim, save for a small gas-lamp on top of a wooden crate in the corner of the room. The second man, who stood with his back to Rue and Kieran took a large pair of pliers and put it at the figures' throat.

'What are they doing?' asked Rue again, softly.

'That must be a golem,' whispered Kieran. 'I've heard of them, I've just never seen one.'

'What's a golem?' asked Rue, looking up at Kieran and the strange shadows flickering over his face cast by the glow of the torch that had started up again, making him look haggard and even older than he was.

'It's a man made of metal – steel and iron mostly, I think,' said Kieran watching as the man with his back to them tightened more rivets and bolts on the massive metal body. 'They're used in the war. The soldiers use them.' Kieran pointed. 'Look at the hands. See there? Those are guns fused into the

hands.'

'How does it work?' asked Rue, even more quietly. She tried to keep her voice from wavering.

'The soldier climbs inside. From the back, you can't see it here. They move the golem with levers and dials. The legs are pistons, powered by steam. The fingers as well, pistons that fire the guns.' He shook his head.

'Dangerous things I've heard. To be the drivers of, I mean,' he said speaking to the top of Rue's head, not wanting to take his eyes from the men in front of them. 'The drivers can get steam burns. And burns getting out of it after. The metal of the body heats up with the steam power. So the drivers have to jump clear. And they can get trapped.'

'Trapped?' said Rue, unable to keep the fear from her voice.

'They have to get locked in. Someone on the outside has to use latches down the back. And the driver can lock himself in on the inside. For protection. But I've heard of ones getting lost. And if they have no-one to open it from the outside...' Kieran trailed off.

'Oh,' Rue said simply.

Suddenly there was silence. 'What's that?' said man with the torch peering around the side of the golem.

'Oi!' yelled the man with the pliers. 'What're you doing?' he said, moving swiftly towards them.

'Run!' yelled Rue grabbing Kieran's arm. And they ran.

'Come on, hurry!' whispered Kieran impatiently, now pulling Rue down the dark alley strewn with garbage and rubble. They had run blindly through the darkened alleys, the man with the pliers had given up chase only a block or so away from the abandoned storefront that held the strange metal man.

Rue yanked her arm out of Kieran's grip and stood defiantly in the middle of the narrow alley, glaring at him in the quickly fading light. 'I don't need to go anywhere!' she spat, crossing her arms over her chest, the light from Kieran's portable gas lamp flickered casting strange shadows across her face.

'But you don't want to get caught out here by the nightwatchmen!' Kieran said as loudly as he dared. 'Remember what happened last time? And I don't want to have to go against the Council again to get you back,' he said, holding a small strangely shaped gun tightly in the hand that had been holding Rue's arm.

Rue sighed, rolled her eyes, and kicked a large chunk of rubble near her foot. The stone bounced away and hit a glass bottle in the shadows. Kieran flinched at the noise and turned to move away again. 'Come *on*,' he hissed. 'We're not that far away. We should get back before darkness falls completely.'

Rue fell in close behind as Kieran picked his way as quickly as he could through the darkening alley. As he came to the end, he slowly poked his head around the corner of the squat white washed stone building and looked up the street, keeping his small lamp out of sight behind him. He breathed a sigh of relief after looking up and down the empty wide cobbled stoned street.

'Okay, run!' he half-yelled to Rue as he dashed out into the brightly light road under the golden glow from the gas street lamps overhead. They ran back into the shadows on the other side of the road, moving past broken windows with glass sprinkling the sidewalks.

Kieran took out the small strange gun as he reached a door, and turned down the flame in the gas lamp. He inserted the barrel of the gun into the lock and turned, opening the door quickly and dragging Rue through behind him. He closed the door with a soft bang and exhaled. Moving towards heavy black curtains at the front of the small living area, he flicked aside one and glanced outside warily before moving it carefully back into place.

He turned around and looked at Rue who was sitting on the edge of a thin, lumpy bed, swinging her legs back and forth and scuffing her already worn shoes. 'Ruth,' Kieran said pleadingly, heading towards her. Rue glared at him from under dark bangs that fell into her eyes and stopped swinging her legs.

'Rue', he corrected. 'I don't understand why you can't wear a dress like all the other girls,' he said leaning against the kitchen worktop and gesturing towards her cut off trousers with the ragged bottoms.

'Because, didn't you know there's a *war* going on?' Rue said sarcastically. 'Who wants to be running around in a long skirt with all the gangs in the streets and the Emperor's stupid airships flying around. You can't run easily in a dress!'

'You shouldn't be running around and going outside anyways with the Coalition's airships flying around during the day.' Kieran said, not even blinking an eye when a black and white flash ran past him on the counter, jumped off and then bounded onto the bed beside Rue. She absentmindedly stroked the long wiry white and black mottled coat of the ferret that was trying to burrow its way under the bed covers.

'Maddie!' said Kieran running over and grabbing the animal around the stomach and holding it up to his face, its little pink nose with black spots and whiskers quivering. 'I've told you before not to hide in the bed covers!' he placed it on his shoulder, its long thin body wrapping itself across the back of his neck. 'Silly girl!' he chastised, wagging a finger at her. Madigan playfully nipped at his fingertip.

Rue pouted. 'I don't know why the stupid Emperor started this silly war in the first place!' she whined. 'I don't understand why everyone doesn't want to have steam-powered cars, instead of slow and smelly horse and carriages. I don't know why he wants to still have gaslights, and not the new electricity that other places have. I've heard that England has electricity now. Why don't we?'

'Well they need electricity. They live underground. Gas flame doesn't do as well underground as electric powered lights,' explained Kieran.

'Well, I still think he's crazy,' Rue said jumping down from the bed and going over to the small icebox in the corner of the room and removing a small glass bottle of milk. 'Making war against your own country and killing innocent people for no reason.'

Kieran looked down at the dirty and cracked hardwood floor, not wanting to look at Rue and be reminded of what happened to her parents.

'He has no idea what it's like!' she continued, slamming the icebox door closed. 'He just lives in his big, fancy manor house and has servants to do whatever he wants. He doesn't see what it's like for the rest of us in the cities. He doesn't know that we have to steal things to live!' she nearly yelled.

Kieran's head snapped up. 'Keep your voice down!' he harshly. 'And we don't have to steal things to live.'

Rue's eyes flashed. 'Yes. We do. If I didn't, we wouldn't have hardly anything to eat or any good clothes to wear. We have hardly any money, and no one can really work with these airship attacks and the warning alarms going off all the time and people having to run and hide from soldiers patrolling what's left of the city! You should be glad I stole those sticky buns from the baker's down the street this morning, otherwise you'd be complaining of being hungry!'

Kieran looked into the face of the strong-willed young girl taking a sip of milk. *She's gone through so much, for someone so young. Sometimes, she doesn't even seem like she is only fourteen,* he thought sadly. He took Madigan down from his shoulders and grabbed a canvas bag that was hanging from a long strap over the back of a chair and