

SHADOWBORN

Light & Shadow Book 1



MOIRA KATSON

Shadowborn
Light and Shadow, Book 1

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By Moira Katson

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***Thank you to my friends and family,
whose support, encouragement, and feedback
have helped me to take this leap!***

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Cast of Characters

The Duke's Household

Catwin – servant to the Duke, Miriel's Shadow

Donnett – a member Palace Guard, who fought with the Duke at the Battle of Voltur

Eral Celys – Duke of Voltur

Emmeline DeVere – younger sister of the Duke, Miriel's mother

Miriel DeVere – niece of the Duke, daughter of Emmeline and Roger DeVere

Temar – servant to the Duke, the Duke's Shadow

Roine – a healing woman, foster mother to Catwin

Members of the Royal Family: Heddred

Anne Warden Conradine – sister of Henry, aunt of Garad; Duchess of Everry

Arman Dulgurokov – brother of Isra

Cintia Conradine – daughter of Anne and Gerald Conradine

Elizabeth Warden de la Marque – cousin of Henry, mother of Marie

Henry Warden – father of Garad (*deceased*)

Garad Warden – King of Heddred

Gerald Conradine – husband of Anne; Duke of Everry

Guy de la Marque – husband of Elizabeth Warden, father of Marie; Royal Guardian to Garad

Isra Dulgurokov Warden – mother to Garad, widow of Henry; the Dowager Queen

Marie de la Marque – daughter of Elizabeth and Guy

Wilhelm Conradine – son of Anne and Gerald; heir to the throne

William Warden – Garad's uncle, Henry's older brother (*deceased*)

Members of the Royal Family: Ismir

Dragan Kraal – brother of Dusan, father of Kasimir (*deceased*)

Dusan Kraal – King of Ismir

Jovana Vesely Kraal - Queen of Ismir

Kasimir Kraal – nephew to Dusan

Marjeta Kraal Jelinek – daughter of Dusan and Jovana

Vaclav Kraal – son of Dusan and Jovana, heir to the Ismiri throne

Heddrian Peerage

Edward DeVere – courtier; Duke of Derrion

Efan of Lapland - courtier

Elias Nilson – son to Piter; betrothed to Evelyn DeVere

Elizabeth Cessor – daughter of Henry and Mary Cessor

Evelyn DeVere – daughter of Edward, betrothed to Elias Nilson

Henri Nilson – brother of Piter

Henry Cessor – courtier, father of Elizabeth

Henry DeVere – courtier, younger brother to Edward

Linnea Torstensson – a young maiden at Court; daughter of Nils

Maeve d’Orleans – a young maiden at Court

Piter Nilson – Earl of Mavol

Roger DeVere – father of Miriel DeVere (*deceased*)

Other

Anna – a maidservant in service to the Duke

The High Priest – head of the Church in Heddred; advisor to the Dowager Queen

Jaces – leader of a populist rebellion in the Norstrung Provinces

Chapter 1

I was an ice child, having the ill luck to be born early, in the deepest storms of the winter, when the drifts of snow can bury whole caravans without a trace, and the winds will cut a man open with slivers of ice. So they say, in any case, in the village in which I was born, the village huddled at the base of the mountain that houses the Winter Castle, the last outpost before the road winds west into Ismir.

And so, ill luck to me, and ill luck to my mother, for I came months early. The peasants who make their living in the unforgiving world of the mountains are notoriously superstitious, but it does not take superstition to make ill luck of a birth in a blizzard. With no way to call for a midwife, the birth nearly killed her, small as I was, and when it was over, she and I huddled together in the drafty little hovel, wrapped in the only blankets the family could afford. I, despite being undersized and weak, screamed to high heaven, and my mother, being half-dead of blood loss, slipped into a fever and spoke like a madwoman.

So it was that the sorceress Roine was called from the great castle itself, and she made her way down the steep steps, in the biting cold, to see me and cure my mother. Her poultices and teas—"Ay and spells," the maids whispered knowingly—brought down the fever, and at last my mother's soul returned from its wandering in the lands of the dead, and came back to her body.

Roine begged my mother's leave to take me to the castle itself until I was stronger. The Lady had given birth not a month past, Roine told my mother. The wet nurse could take another child, and there was goat's milk as well, and Roine had all of her herbs. It would spell my mother, so she could recover as well. When I was healthy and strong, Roine would bring me back.

"And then what?" I begged to know when I first heard the story. I was six years old, and in the way of children, I had taken a liking to one of the maids, Anna, and had followed her on all of her chores, dogging her heels and clinging to her dress despite her sharp words to go sit by the fire. Finally, when she had told me that she had no time for a cuckoo's child, I had demanded to know what that meant. Anna, tired of my questions and eager to teach me a lesson, had been only too happy to tell me the story.

"And then," she said, leaning towards me, and smiling, eyes bright with malice, "your mother said not to bring you back. She didn't want you back at all, for she said you were a cursed child." I stared at her.

"So?" I asked. I had been raised by Roine, a woman I knew was not my mother. I knew that other people had mothers, but I had only the dimmest concept of what mothers actually were. In the self-centered way of children, I had never wondered much about them, and so I could not be entirely sure what to think about this new development—although I was somewhat offended, even at that young age, that someone had not wanted me around.

"Cursed," Anna repeated.

"Well, what does *that* mean?" It was my favorite question at the time. Anna did not think much of it, having been subjected to an entire morning of the query.

"Go ask Father Whitmere if you don't know," she said rudely, and I—not thinking highly of Father Whitmere—heaved a great sigh and went to go find Roine instead.

Roine sighed as well when she heard my question, and she set aside her spindle and lifted me on

her lap, where she ran her fingers through my fair hair as she talked. I leaned back and looked up in her beloved face, and I wondered, as I often did, why it was that Roine always looked sorrowful.

“Your mother did not say you were cursed,” she said. “She told me that you were born to be betrayed.”

“Well, what does *that* mean?” I demanded at once, and Roine considered.

“What do you think it means?” she asked, finally, and I shook my head so that my braid flopped about.

“I don’t know.”

“Neither do I.” Roine kissed my forehead and set me down on the floor again. “Maybe it means nothing.”

“I don’t think so,” I said stoutly. “How could it mean nothing?”

Roine had a peculiar look on her face. “One can always hope,” she said.

“Did anyone ever say something like that about you?” I asked, for a moment she went quite pale.

“Not quite like that,” she said. “Now run along, and keep out of the way. The Duke is coming, and there is much to prepare.”

The Duke. The one terror of my childhood was the Duke, the Lady’s brother. Her husband had died in the war, and the Lady had never remarried; she lived in this castle on the charity of the Duke, some said as a half-prisoner. I heard servants whisper that she wished to go back to the court, but he would not allow her—not after what had happened the last time. When they spoke of it, the servants would laugh in a way that I, as a child, could not quite understand, and once or twice it was murmured that Miriel was lucky she had her father’s hair, her father’s eyes.

The Lady might plead with the Duke—and, to be sure, there were always eavesdroppers to those conversations, and whispered accounts of her begging, and his cold refusals—but she would never defy him. No one defied the Duke. When he rode into the Winter Castle, it was with a great train of retainers and soldiers and priests, all wearing black and looking as grim as their lord. As if the soldiers were not terrifying enough, and the priests in their robes, like a flock of ravens, the Duke went nowhere but that he was accompanied by Tamar, the man they called his shadow—and, some would whisper, his assassin.

Worse, this grim man was the sole authority in my world. If the Lady could not make a decision, she would say, “I will write to the Duke.” If someone would not obey, she said, “it is the Duke’s order.” If I misbehaved, from stealing a pastry to breaking a statue, the maids told me, “I’ll tell the Duke on you,” and I was told, in excruciating detail, just how the Duke had tortured a man to death once, or how he had put down a rebellion in the south, or just how he had won the Battle of Voltur, or how... until I ran away in tears.

Having a mortal terror of the Duke, who had most likely never noticed me at all, I had decided that the best way to avoid his wrath was to avoid being seen, and so I had become very good at that. I practiced by sneaking around after the maids on their chores, or the soldiers on their rounds. I knew where to stand so that the candlelight would not glint off of my hair as much, and I knew how shadows fell in doorways, and I knew how to move very quietly, and very quickly.

On his visit that day, the Duke took not the slightest notice of me. Nor did he see me the next time he came, or the next, or the time after that. For each visit, there were feasts in his honor, and Miriel, the Lady’s daughter, was paraded out and shown off. Each time, he was said to test her, to make sure that she was perfect. Never mind that the little girl was as isolated from the world as a girl could be—she must still be able to dance, and sing, and dress as finely as any lady of the Court. The Duke

expected perfection from her, it was said.

“So why does she not go to court?” I asked Roine, and she only pursed her lips and shook her head. “Is it the secret about the Lady?” I asked, thinking myself very clever. The servants laughed behind their hands sometimes at the Lady, and they talked amongst themselves, about something of her past—but no one would tell me.

“Don’t gossip,” Roine reprimanded. Her tone was harsh; Roine hated gossip. Other servants were fascinated by the Lady and the Duke, but Roine did not share their interest, nor did she approve anyone who loved scandal.

After that, I was careful to hide my interest in the Lady’s past, and the Duke’s doings. I was fascinated by him—not seeking scandal, as Roine would think, but only observing, daring myself to see him and yet not be seen. The Duke did not care in the slightest about me, but each time he came on visit, I melted away into the background, and I later congratulated myself on my success at evading him. I saw no further than the next test, the next opportunity to—I thought—outwit this man and thus keep myself safe.

I had no thought that the Duke might have greater worries than the whereabouts of a serving girl, for I had not the slightest idea of what went on in the world beyond the castle walls. I knew that Heddred had been at war once, and knew that there had been a great battle near the castle itself, that the Duke had fought in very bravely; the guardsmen sang songs about it sometimes, very blood-soaked indeed, and I was never allowed to sing them myself. I knew that some talked still of the war, and some of the guardsmen muttered darkly about Ismiri soldiers, but that was the way of things. Guardsmen muttered. It was to be expected.

But that was nothing to me. The life of the castle, now, was the only life I knew: I ran errands and helped Roine with her chores, made a nuisance of myself stealing pies from the kitchen, and learned to sneak as well as a growing child can. Years passed in the sheltered conclave of the mountains, and I grew from a dirty, disheveled child to an only marginally better-behaved young woman. Being wholly unmarriageable by birth, having no standing with any family in the village, and being no proper part of the Lady’s retinue, I was given leave to wear britches, to run around as carefree as any young lady, and to get into scrapes with the servant boys.

I could laugh, now, to think on such a simple life: no intrigue beyond distracting the cook, no lies beyond covering up the grass stains on my tunic. But it was all I knew; we were isolated from the machinations of the Court, from news of the world. I lived my life as a peasant indeed, seeing no further than the next meal, or the next terrifying visit from the Duke. He was an organized man, with the Duke, arriving every three months, to the day, to inspect his lands, his keep, and his niece.

And then, late in my thirteenth year, the Duke came for an unexpected visit. That day, as ever when Roine told me that the Duke would be arriving, I felt my stomach turn over. The Duke was coming to the Castle. He would arrive in a great clatter in the courtyard, and his retinue would follow after. First would come his hand-picked retainers: any fellow lords and his priest, his two guards—and the Shadow. Then would come the soldiers, horses lathered from the climb up the winding steps to the Castle.

The Duke would not dismount until he was surrounded by his men, and while he waited, his eyes would sweep from one side of the courtyard to the other, as if even here he was looking to scent out traitors to the crown, and every person there would look away to avoid meeting his eyes. No one was to be in the courtyard when the Duke appeared, save the Lady and her daughter, the hostlers, and the guards—and no one in their right mind disobeyed the Duke.

But that day, I wondered foolishly if I was so good at being unseen that I could stand in the

courtyard and be invisible to the man. At the mere thought of it, I was gripped with excitement, such a mix of daring and fear that I felt my stomach twist as if I would be ill, but all the day long I could not keep from wondering: could I, little sneak that I was, creep into the courtyard where the Duke was waiting on his horse, and he would not see me?

As much as I could, I loitered in the courtyard. I took messages from the soldiers, and I brought them their lunch. I dawdled in the shadows by the steps up to the parapet, I snuck behind the barrels along the walls. I made a bet with myself, and with Tomas, the baker's boy, that I could creep from the stairs at the back of the courtyard, to the barrels at the front without any of the Duke's retinue ever seeing me.

In the end, that was easy enough. I thought I had timed my errands with care, but I was in the courtyard when the shout went up, and the soldiers pounded across the yard to lift the portcullis and let the Duke in. Like a frightened rabbit, I shot into the corner of the courtyard and huddled in the shadow of the stair. It was too soon, I was not ready; suddenly I was afraid that I had made a terrible mistake.

The Duke's big warhorse was the first into the yard, sweat glistening on its night-black flank, and the Duke thundered almost to the great doors before he pulled up sharply. As I saw his head turn, I shrank further back, hoping against hope that the stone could swallow me whole and keep me hidden.

I was saved only by the great double doors swinging open. Forgetting my fear for a moment, I craned forward to look, for I knew the Lady would appear, and raised in the servants quarters as I had been, I had never seen her close to me before. Dinner without the Duke and his retinue was a quiet affair, and I would never have been chosen to serve.

Now I had the opportunity to watch her. I thought that she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen; she was dressed in blue like the sky, with her shining pale hair piled below a tall headdress. She curtsied to the Duke so gracefully that I could scarcely believe she was human. She moved like a whisper, she moved like a dream, and trailing in her wake came a girl with hair the color of darkest night.

That was the first time I ever saw Miriel up close. She was my age—indeed, born a month to the day before me, sheltered from the blizzards by the thick walls of the castle—but there was a world of difference between the two of us. As soon as I had been weaned, I had been sent back to Roine's care in a drafty tower far from Miriel's cozy nursery. Never would the Lady have allowed her precious daughter, born of a noble father, to be raised with a servant's child. The Lady might have been born a merchant girl, but she was proud of her noble marriage, and she considered herself and her daughter far above the companionship of servants. Miriel had been raised in almost total seclusion, given the company only of ladies' maids, while I had run wild around the castle since I was old enough to walk.

Now my skin was browned with grime and sun, and Miriel's skin was the same perfect ivory as her mother's. My hair had darkened from the white-blonde of childhood to the half-brown, half-blonde nothing color of the hill people, and Miriel's hair was a tumble of gleaming curls the color of ebony. My eyes were the same grey as the storm clouds that crept slowly over us in the winter, weighted down with their bellies full of snow, and Miriel's eyes—I could see even from this distance—were the same color as sapphires, a deep blue so beautiful I ached to stare into them. And when Miriel wore a version of her mother's gown, a fine blue silk with slashing on the sleeves, I wore boy's clothes, a shirt that was too large and pants held up with a frayed belt.

I disliked the girl on sight.

But there was no time to think: the moment had come to move: the Duke's retinue was assembled, and the men were dismounting, handing their horses off to the hostlers who moved

amongst them. I felt a terror like I had never felt before in my life, and although I wanted nothing more than to curl into the corner and hope desperately that they would go away, I felt myself begin to creep along the stone wall. I moved slowly, a shadow amongst the flickering shadows of the evening, careful of where I moved and where I stopped, and in what seemed both like an eternity and only half a moment, I was crouched behind the barrels at the front of the courtyard.

That was where I erred. The bet had been too easy, I decided. Why, I could sneak anywhere. The guards said I moved like a little cat. Tomas would be impressed that I had made good on the dare, but I knew I could do better: I could steal the dagger from the soldier who had just walked over to stand the edge of the formation.

Breathless, heart pounding, I eased forward in a half crouch, my leg muscles screaming. Closer, crept, and closer. The Lady and the Duke were speaking formalities, but I had a little time still. Closer...

I stretched out my fingers for the dagger—

And nearly screamed with the speed with which the soldier's hand clamped down on mine. When he twisted my wrist and brought me down in front of him, I did scream. My arm was on fire. I looked up into his black eyes and saw that I had chosen for my target not a soldier, not one of the rank and file of the Duke's guard, but instead Temar, the Duke's fabled assassin himself.

Chapter 2

There was a moment of horrified silence, and then I heard myself whimper in pain. Worse, I heard the clank of the Duke's boots on the cobblestones and in my terror, I felt tears seep out of my eyes. Still, everyone was silent. Everyone was horrified.

Everyone save Miriel, who let out a giggle—it could only have been her who laughed so beautifully. I tossed my head up to look at her, angrier than I could remember having been in my short life, and my chin was seized by the Duke himself, my face wrenched about so I could look him in the face. It was an honor I could have done without.

“What,” he said, in a voice as chill as the winter air, “do you think you are doing?”

“She was trying to steal my dagger,” the assassin offered dryly.

The Duke's hand closed around my throat. “Did you think to kill me, whores-get?” His fingers tightened, and stars burst across my vision. I tried to gasp a denial, but could not make out the words.

It was Temar who saved me. He laughed. “This child? An assassin?” No one else could have laughed at the Duke and lived, but Temar was different. He was the Duke's Shadow, and I would learn later that the Duke trusted Temar like he trusted no one else, even his own family.

Temar was still laughing. “No, my Lord, this is just a servant. But I did not see her until she was behind the barrels there, and I am certain she was not there when I came in. She moves very quietly. His voice dropped, so that the soldier next to him could not have heard it. Even I, pinioned between the two of them, could barely make out the words. “I would say she moves like a shadow. Wouldn't you, my Lord?”

They stared at each other for a moment, then the Duke looked down at me. He took his time to stare at me, and the moment stretched. I could not move, frozen by the pain in my shoulder and the Duke's grip on my throat. I stared at him like a snared beast.

His smile, when it broke across his face, was the single coldest thing I had ever seen in my life shivered convulsively.

“I would say that,” the Duke agreed. “Like a shadow.”

Within an hour, I was standing in the Lady's private receiving room, awed into sullen silence. I had been soaped and scrubbed and rinsed, dunked under the water until I thought I might drown. Ann had been the one to yank the tangles out of my wet hair with a comb, and braid it so tightly that I could scarcely move my face. As a last effort to make me seem more like a respectable servant and less like a grimy orphan, I had been dressed in an old gown found in a linen closet, free of stains but smelling musty.

“I don't like this,” the Lady complained. “Why her?”

“Why me what?” I asked, my head coming up. She narrowed her eyes at me.

“You will speak when spoken to,” she said coldly. I dropped my eyes back to the floor, biting my lip against a retort, and so I did not see her face as she said,

“She's practically a street urchin. She has no manners—she is no fit company for a Lord's daughter. Why not a noble girl?”

I could hear the Duke's impatience. “I will not explain this again.”

“But—“ He must have gestured to her, for she fell silent. I peeked out of the corner of my vision and saw Temar watching me closely. I would have been afraid, but he gave a half-smile, a conspirator's smile, and I felt oddly cheered.

My cheer disappeared abruptly when the Duke said, "Look at me, girl."

My head jerked up. I stared at him. "What's your name?"

"Catwin."

"Who're your parents?"

"Dunno," I said sullenly. The Duke's eyes flashed.

"You will speak properly when spoken to by a noble." He sat back and waited until I muttered, "I don't know," and continued to wait until I added, "Sir."

"That's better." He considered. "Why do you not know?"

"Roine took me in when I was a baby. Sir." It seemed an unimportant piece of information to me, but the Duke's eyebrows shot up.

"Roine? The sorceress?"

"She's a healer," the Lady interjected. "I'd have no unnatural dealings in my household."

"Be quiet," the Duke said, absently. He had leaned back in his chair and was studying me, tapping one finger against his mouth. "What do you know of politics, girl?" I stared at him mutely. I did not even know what the word meant. "Do you know who your king is?" the Duke asked. I shook my head. All I knew of the King was that he was the Boy King, young and sick, and he lived far away in the East somewhere. "Do you know the family of your Lady?" Again, I shook my head. "Can you read, child?" the Duke was beginning to sound impatient. I shook my head, wide-eyed, and he sighed. "Ignorant as a pig-herder."

"She can be taught," Temar said pacifically. He looked at me. "Child, how many rooms are there in the Castle?"

"Four hands and three fingers. And the courtyard."

"How many guard towers?" I held up five fingers.

"And the one down the hill," I volunteered. "It's carved into the rock so you wouldn't see it, but you can hide there and there's a chain to ring the alarm bells at the castle."

"How do you know that?" Temar asked. He had leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and he was staring at me.

"I went exploring one day and I found it through the tunnels."

"Interesting. If you needed to hide two people in the castle, where would you do it?"

I considered this question.

"There's a tunnel that goes down into the rock."

"What if someone found you?" Temar asked. "How would you escape them?"

I shook my head at him. "No one would find us. I'm the only one who knows my way down there."

"You can never assume that you are the only one with knowledge," Temar said seriously. His face was very grave. I stared at it, and found myself surprised by how young he was, his face smooth and unlined in contrast to the Duke's grizzled scowl. It was a color I had never seen as skin before, a warm brown like chestnuts, browner even than my skin had been from sun and dirt before my forced baptism. "If some other person had explored those caverns, they could find you. And then you would have nowhere to run, would you?"

"No," I admitted grudgingly. I knew I had given the wrong answer, and for some reason I knew that I did not want to look stupid. Not in front of the Lady, whom I had found I hated; not in front of

the Duke, who terrified me; most of all, not in front of Temar, whose eyes were so unexpectedly kind.

“There are two main things to consider when choosing a hiding place,” Temar said. “First, you must choose a place that no one will think to look. Second, you must have a plan for escape if you are found.” I looked up at him, and found him watching me steadily. “Can you remember that, Catwin?”

“Choose a place no one will think to look, and have a plan to escape,” I repeated promptly. I wanted to make him proud, and I flushed when I saw him smile.

The Duke snorted; he was clearly tired of this interlude. “Listen, girl,” he said, and the moment was broken. I looked over at him. “Temar thinks you can be taught. I have my doubts. So. You will stay here until my next visit. Lady Miriel’s tutors will try to teach you the rudiments of a noble education: that means reading, writing, geography, history—“

“Miriel’s tutors?” the Lady interrupted. The Duke had only to look at her for her to close her mouth, but her eyes still blazed.

“You will learn all that you can—“ his tone indicated that he did not think this would be much. “—and when I return, I will be the one to test your knowledge. If I am impressed with your progress, you will study with Miriel for the next year, and accompany her when she leaves for Court. If not, you will go back to scrabbling in the mud. Is that clear?” His eyes bored into me. I wondered if this was a nightmare.

“Yes, sir.” He smiled; I was rapidly coming to the conclusion that he smiled for the express purpose of terrifying people.

“I do not like to be disappointed, Catwin. Be warned.”

So eager was I to be gone from his cold stare, and the Lady’s anger, that I hardly spared a smile for Temar as I bobbed a bow and ran out of the room. I dragged the leather bindings out of my hair and combed it free as soon as I was gone, shaking my head around to feel the freedom of movement again. Anna pursed her lips when she saw me, but said no more, only helped me out of my borrowed gown and into a tunic and breeches once more.

They were new, the fabric soft to the touch and not a patch to be seen. There were boots of supple leather, to go over thick woolen socks. I had never had such finery in my life; my fingers traced the embroidery of the Duke’s crest on my armband.

“Why do I get new clothes?” I asked Anna.

“Hush,” she said shortly, and she braided my hair back, just as tightly.

“Ow!”

“Be still. Act like a young lady for once.” She would say no more, and I left her to go find Roine. Fear beating in my temples, making my pulse pound. It was sharp terror, the fear of looking into the Duke’s eyes, and confusion, the fear of some new world to which I should be a part—and to which the Lady believed I should not belong. And it was something softer, the sense that the world was changing, and I could not know where it would settle.

Awkward in my new boots, I clomped up the stairs to Roine’s tower, tugging at my braid with one hand. As I approached the door, I heard voices, and I stopped. After a moment’s hesitation, I slipped off my boots and carried them, and I crept up the stairs to hover outside the door.

“But why?” It was a man’s voice, smooth and persuasive.

“Because I am her guardian, and I say so!” It was Roine’s voice. “Because I know her place here, where she is safe.”

There was a pause. “I think you know that she will be safe nowhere,” the man said, and

recognized his voice; it was Temar. “Not one such as her. You have only to look at her to see it. And hear there are rumors about her. Rumors about prophecies.”

“Her mother cast her out,” Roine explained wearily. “She said that Catwin was born to be betrayed.” I frowned in the darkness. We had not spoken of the prophecy, she and I, since my childhood. I had forgotten it, the whole castle had forgotten it. Roine had not.

“Interesting,” Temar said, and for all his city drawl, he seemed to mean it. Then he said thoughtfully, “Do you know, I think you have only half the prophecy. Why, anyone could say they have been betrayed, if they lived long enough. Are you sure there was no more to it?”

“That’s all there is,” Roine said impatiently. “But do you not see why I would keep her here? Here, a betrayal is nothing—a young man’s promise, perhaps. But at court...”

“Fate will pull her where it wills, regardless of your doings. And the fates do not take kindly to those who meddle. Mistress, you see it as well as I do. She is a fate-touched child, and you must know that she was born to more than this. You know she will seek it out one day. No, you cannot keep her safe by keeping her here.”

“She will be safer here than at court! Nobles playing their games, and a rebellion against the crown—and you would have me send her to the center of it all! No. Perhaps there is no sheltering her, but I may at least try.”

“You would not be prevented from doing so—the Duke would have you accompany us when we leave.” There was a silence, and then Temar’s voice dropped. I crept closer. “You could still look after her. And I would look out for her, and all of her tutors. You know that even the Duke would, in his own way.”

There was a pause, and then Temar said, his voice tinged with something I could not name. “You’re very well informed for a healer at the edge of the Kingdom. The rebellion is letters and murmurs in taverns. It can never come to anything. Whoever told you of this rebellion, you should tell them that the Duke won a battle against the army of Ismir—and he will not hesitate to march south to the King’s defense. But no matter.” I could tell from his voice that he was smiling, but I did not think it was a nice smile. “Have Catwin prepared to leave in a year’s time. I do not think she will fail at her lessons three months hence.”

“You must tell your master...” Roine’s defiance was weak, and Temar spoke over her.

“You know that you cannot prevent this.” He raised his voice, “Come out of hiding, little one.” I froze. He could not have heard me, could he?

“Catwin.” Roine sounded weary. “Come out, child.”

Shamefaced, I opened the door and stepped into the room. I knew that I should not have been listening, but I could not contain my curiosity.

“What were you talking about?”

“Your safety,” Temar said. “Roine only wants to make sure you are safe, little one.”

“And Temar has assured me that you will be,” Roine said.

I looked from one to the other of them, and marveled at the strange world of grown-ups. They were telling a story, a story that fit with the words I had heard, and yet it was not the right story. Only a moment ago, they had been fighting; I was sure that what I had heard was a fight. Yet now there was no crack in their unity, not a flicker in their expressions to betray the lie.

Later, I would remember that moment, the concern on Roine’s face and the easy smile of Temar’s. I would remember that although their expressions fit with their story, their eyes were a blank

as polished jet, and I would think that perhaps I should have known the tell-tales of betrayal hanging in the air.

But how could I have known? Here was the woman who stood in a mother's place for me, the woman who had fed and clothed and nurtured me all my life. Here was Temar, the young man who had singled me out and made something special of me and defended me to the Duke, the man for whom I had the easy adoration of a young child. How could I have suspected either of them—I, who knew nothing of betrayal and intrigue, who could not have dreamed the loyalties they held?

And so I, foolish child that I was, put it out of my head, especially when Temar bent forward to look into my eyes.

"Catwin, I have a task for you," he said, and he smiled. "A little test, just between the two of us."

"What is it?" I piped, as if it mattered. As if I would not have said yes to anything he asked of me. I took a moment to drink in the details of his face: he was clean-shaven, with a smooth line to his jaw and dusky-skinned. His hair was cut short, and it fell fine and soft around his face, as dark a brown as hair could be without being black. His eyes were a true black, set above high cheekbones.

"I want you to follow the Duke's party every day that we are here," he said, and he smiled. "I want you to learn as much as you can, and every night I will come and ask you what you have seen and what you have heard. You must not let anyone notice you as you do this." Roine drew a breath, as if she would speak, but when I looked to her she only smiled at me; it did not reach her eyes.

"But why?" I asked. "You know everything the Duke does, you go with him everywhere."

"Yes, that's true. But I want to see what you can learn. Try to make sure that even I do not notice you." I swallowed down a multitude of fearful questions, and nodded. Temar

smiled at me. "Well, then, I will be back tomorrow. Good night, Catwin. Good night, Mistress Roine." Roine nodded to him, and it seemed as if he was gone in a moment.

Temar always moved quickly.

"I'm glad you're coming with us to court," I said, cautiously, to Roine. It was no lie—even knowing that I might not go, were the Duke not sufficiently impressed with me, even knowing that my departure would be over a year hence, I was grateful beyond words to know that Roine would come with me. But she came swiftly across the room to take my hands in hers.

"Neither of us are going," she said, her voice low and urgent. "I will not let them take you away. It is to put you in the gravest danger—the Duke can do as he wants with Miriel, but he shall not have you."

"But you said to Temar—" I protested, and she cut me off.

"I let him think what he would. But, Catwin, believe me when I say that the court is no good place to be."

"Well, what do I do, then?" I challenged her. I was angry—singled out by Temar one moment and the next moment denied the opportunity to make him proud. "Do we just run away tonight? Do we go to my lessons with Miriel's tutors? Do I follow the Duke about?"

Roine chewed her lip, she was impervious to my anger. "Yes," she decided. "Do that for now. We don't need to run away tonight. We can find a way out of it before the Duke comes back next time."

Chapter 3

The Duke left two days later, having concluded his usual business of hearing petitions, settling disputes, and overseeing his holdings. He took his duties very seriously, I learned, and when he worked on the business of his estates, he applied himself wholly to it. When he listened to the disputes of the peasants, his eyes were fixed on the petitioners, his brow furrowed; his expression said that he would not take kindly to being troubled for a little matter, but I saw that he listened to each dispute fully, and decided fairly, even against his own soldiers and retainers.

He rode out with the builders himself to oversee the maintenance of the defenses—an important piece of our lives here, on the border of Ismir. The peace of my childhood had been hard-fought and hard-won by the Duke himself, but whatever memories he might have had, looking over the place where he had led his men to battle and glory and death, were hidden deep beneath his habitual scowl.

He would work through the dinner hour with the record-keepers, the stewards, the guard captain, leaving his chair empty in the great hall—though we served a dinner to it in any case, and the cooks made rich meals fit for a feast, to celebrate his presence there.

The Lady presided over these meals like a queen, calling for wine and music. She had done her hair very fine under her headdress, I noticed, and she wore gowns with gold embroidery and all her jewels. She had dressed the little Lady Miriel finely as well, although Miriel's hair was allowed to tumble over her shoulders. The girl was wearing velvets and silks, even little chains of gold and silver at her waist and pearls at her neck.

On the last night of the Duke's visit, I was serving wine to his soldiers, and so was standing by the little side hallway as he came into the hall. I knew, from creeping partway up the stairs to his tower chamber, that he had been discussing the increasing number of raids on our outlying villages, and I thought he looked tense. He looked up as he came into the hall, a figure in all black, hidden in the shadows at the edge of the room, and only I saw the look of contempt on his face as he observed the high table.

Later Temar would tell me, *sometimes one moment can give you the whole key to a person*. I do not know enough yet to have the whole key to the Duke, but this moment gave me one of many keys. It reminded me that he was a man, a man who could be spurred to anger like any other. For now, I saw that although the Duke publicly observed every pleasantry that a brother should, he loved the Lady not at all. More so, she was distasteful to him, worthy of no respect.

And I saw that the Duke's eyes flicked from the Lady, posturing and smiling, to Miriel, who sat quietly at her side. He watched his niece carefully, as if he would see everything about her from the curve of her cheek, as if he could learn everything about her from the set of her shoulders. He looked at her as he looked at his stone walls and his guard towers: something in the making, something to be perfected.

And then he looked over at me, and I shrank back against the wall.

“What are you doing here?”

“Wine?” I offered, and I held out my pitcher.

He stared at me for a moment. “Are you sure about her?” he asked, and I realized that Temar must be standing out of sight in the hallway. I craned my head to look.

“Very,” Temar said, and he gave me a smile. “You should eat, milord.”

“Yes.” The Duke narrowed his eyes at me and strode away to the high table, and Temar shot me

wink before following. I smiled after him, and then went to refill the soldiers' cups, for they were shouting for more drink.

Later that night, as I shared the day's knowledge with Temar, I asked him, "Why am I to study with the Lady Miriel's tutors?"

"To see what you can learn," Temar said easily.

"But why?" I persisted. "No one tests the other servants. Why me?"

"That's a very good question," Temar said. "Keep thinking on it, little one."

"But *why*?" I asked. I felt my face warm when he smiled at me, when he called me by my nickname; but I had the sense that I did not want him to think of me as a child. He only laughed at my frustration, and I flushed.

"What if I were to lie to you?"

I was shocked. "You wouldn't."

He looked very serious, more serious than I had ever seen him before. "Wouldn't I?" His face softened. "You must learn to find things out without ever asking what you are after. I know you can do it, Catwin."

I was warmed by his praise, but still discontented. I looked down at my hands and nodded. Temar stood and stretched.

"Time for you to get some sleep. I will see you in three months' time."

"What?" I looked up, and Temar smiled his easy smile. "Don't worry. You will have much to learn while we are gone. Study well, make your tutors proud." Before I could move to hug him, he spoke to beg him not to go, he was gone.

That night, I dreamed that I walked through driving snow, surrounded by the eerie whistle of a winter storm, engulfed in white. I knew this wasn't real; I had been out in enough blizzards, securing the flocks and battening down the shutters of the castle, to know the merciless bite of the wind on my skin, the slow seep of water into my old boots. No, instead I walked as if the wind could not touch me. I could feel nothing.

I craned to look about me, and could see only hovels, unlovely little shacks, battered and leaning. The path curved away and up, and I looked ahead: the castle, my home, rose into the sky at the peak of the mountain. It was half-lost in the swirling snow. White-out, I thought—a term I had heard the guardsmen shout to each other. No wonder no one was about. They were hunkering down, wondering if their supplies were lost on the trail. As soon as the snow cleared, they would venture out to see if any caravans needed help, and they would demand the goods in return for aid.

A cry caught my ear, the wail of a baby. It was coming from the shack near me, and after a moment's hesitation, I pushed open the door and went in. I knew that I was not truly here, but had ran strong, and I closed the door carefully behind me, as Roine had taught me to do. In the little shack a weak fire burned in the hearth, and a woman lay on an old cot, a man at her side with a baby in his arms.

"Just hold her," the man pleaded.

"No, no." The woman was wild-eyed. She looked so gaunt and so feverish that I wanted to drag the man and the infant back from her; there was death in those eyes. "I don't want her!"

"It's over, now," he assured her. "It's over, and we'll get the healer. I promise, you'll be well soon. Just hold her."

"No!" She pushed him away with her feverish strength, and fell back onto the pillows. The baby

was screaming at the top of its lungs, wrapped awkwardly in a blanket. So small, I realized. Hardly any cause for the blood I saw on the blankets.

The woman was shaking her head; I could see her cracked lips still forming the words: *no, no, no* over and over. Her eyes were half-open, and I saw that they were the same grey as the storm clouds of winter, an omen of the blizzard.

“Take her away,” she said. “She’s...”

“What is it?” The man held the baby close to him and leaned over to hear his wife more clearly. She whispered something and I could see his brow furrow.

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” he said, but he looked worried. He looked down at the bundle in his arms, her little face still screwed up, yelling. “Please, rest. I’ll go to the castle now myself—“ he cast a glance outside at the blizzard, and I saw his lips move in a silent prayer. It was foolhardy at best, and more likely it would be the death of him. Then he looked back at his wife, and his face twisted. He could not let her die. “Rest. Daniel will take care of you. I’ll go now.”

“Take her with you,” the women rasped. “Take her, and leave her outside.”

“What are you saying?” He recoiled, but she reached over to grab his arm.

“She’ll be betrayed.” The woman’s voice had a sudden, awful clarity. “She was born to be betrayed.” She had lifted off the pillows, but now she sank back. She was shaking her head again. “Kinder to let her die now. See how she cries...” She was slipping back into the fever haze. “Take her,” she whispered.

With a start, I recognized the squalling little bundle as myself. Even knowing this for a dream, believing that this could not possibly be them, I took a step closer to look at my parents: my mother with honey-colored hair and grey eyes, on the edge of death, and my father, with the strenuous leanness of the poor, holding my tiny self awkwardly in his big, work-roughened hands.

Was it possible that these were truly my parents?

The man laid my tiny self carefully in a cradle, out of reach of my mother, and he grabbed his hat and his cap and hurried out into the storm, quite oblivious to my silent presence. But when he was gone, I saw the woman’s eyes focus on me.

“Are you an angel?” she asked, and after a moment, I shook my head. She was shivering, and even though much as I knew it to be a dream, I walked over to the bed and pulled the covers more snugly around her. Still, she shook with cold; she was far gone. Her head lolled towards me. “Please...” she whispered, and I leaned forward to her.

“What?”

“You need to take her away,” she pleaded with me. “My daughter. She’s cursed. She was born to be betrayed, and when it happens...” Her voice trailed off and I leaned closer still.

“What?” I asked urgently. “What will happen?”

“The balance...tips,” the woman whispered. “Endings.” She was fading away from me. “Promise me...” she whispered, and, with a start, I woke soaked in sweat, throwing the blankets from me and heaving for breath. Roine, already awake and at work, looked over at me curiously.

“Bad dream?”

“Strange dream.” I sank my head into my hands. “I saw the day I was born.” Roine put down his work and came over to me, kneeling beside my cot.

“What did you see?”

“It was only a dream,” I said, irritable in the wake of my fear, but she shook her head.

“You dreamed of the prophecy,” she guessed.

“I saw my mother. I thought.” I shook my head. “I mean—I know I didn’t.” She only watched me and I swallowed. “She said, I would be betrayed...and the balance would tip. It would end things.” Those words, so prophetic in my mother’s feverish rasp, half-obscured by the howl of the blizzard, were ridiculous now. I shook my head again, to clear it. “It’s nothing. It means nothing.”

“She said the balance would *tip*?” Roine clarified, as I got up and began to move about the room. I cast an annoyed look at her over my shoulder.

“In the dream, she did.”

“And end something...”

“Yes,” I said impatiently. “It was just a dream.” She did not respond, and I looked over at her. She was gazing at me, as sadly as I had ever seen her. Repentant, I ran over to give her a hug. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be rude.”

“I know,” she said, into my hair. “Go get some breakfast. You’ll need to go to your lessons, and you’re to go to court.”

“I thought you said we weren’t going,” I said, surprised. I felt a flush of joy at the thought of going after all, of seeing someplace new, of seeing Temar’s smile again.

“Things change,” Roine said simply. “Go now.”

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