

Chapter 3

Under Shadow

CYNTHIA ALSTON THREADED BETWEEN clansmen and horses until she found her husband in Sunfall's stables. Romen of the Wolf, war chief of the west and a man chiseled from stone, looked like a mountain bowed from the wind. He brushed his stallion absently, stroking the same patch of hair over and over. Wolf Runner snorted his displeasure at the lack of attention, but Romen ignored him. His eyes were clouded with worry.

Cynthia placed her hand over his until it came to rest.

"Aidan will be fine," she said to him in the Darinian tongue. He looked at her but said nothing.

"Are you certain you wish to leave?" she asked, taking the brush from his hands and running it along her mare's fine coat. Narra leaned into Cynthia's strokes, her tail swishing. The horse had been a wedding gift from Annalyn and Edmund and seemed to take as much pleasure in her appearance as Cynthia took in beautifying her.

"Nichel needs us," Romen said, cupping his wife's chin in one rough hand. "And you need to be with her."

"I do," Cynthia admitted. "But you're worried about our friends, as am I."

Romen's hand fell away. He was silent for several moments. "It was as if the sword slapped his hand away. I have never heard of an object able to do such a thing."

"The Gairdens are a mysterious people," she said. "Annalyn can consult her ancestors. Surely they can solve this matter." She hesitated. "Unless you think we should stay?"

Romen turned her words over. "No. What happened is a

family matter, and as you say, the Crown of the North will know what to do. And..." He gave her that small, almost sheepish smile he reserved only for her, as soft as the man who wore it was hard. "And I am worried about our daughter. It will do my heart good to see that she has recovered fully."

His smile faded as he looked up at the sky and glared at the clouds as if they were enemies boiling over his mountains. Cynthia followed his gaze and shivered, pulling her cloak tighter around her shoulders. The snowfall had stopped during Aidan's Rite of Heritage, but the Lady bled into the sky. Soon, this half of the world would belong to the Lord of Midnight. Torches lined the path leading out of the stables and down the mountain to the city. Shadows danced over the snow. The world seemed a different place under shadow.

"Are you sure we should leave tonight?" she asked, truly torn. As much as she wanted to see with her own eyes that Nichel was on her feet again, the thought of the Lord of Midnight's gaze on her as they traveled made her skin crawl.

He began to speak, caught her gaze, hesitated. "If you would rather..."

She forced herself to stand straighter and spared a quick glance around. The clansmen were preoccupied with their horses, preparing them for the journey home. That was good. Her husband's clan respected her, but she knew many of them saw her as soft. As the daughter of one of Leaston's wealthiest merchants— and one of the most influential members of the merchants' guild besides—she had grown up swaddled in the most expensive fabrics, not the rough, sand-scoured hides of animals stalked and killed across the sand-swept plateaus and fiery mountains of the west. Draping those fabrics over her body felt like wrapping herself in the softest clouds, a dalliance in decadence her husband encouraged. Unlike so many clan chiefs, he did not want his mate to give up who she was after taking his clan's sign. Still, she wanted to be worthy of him as he was worthy of her.

Besides, Kahltan's shadows held nothing her husband could

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not swat away. Romen would protect her, protect all of them. They would ride their horses south to the Avivian River and board a ship that would carry them into Darinia. She yearned to feel a deck bobbing under her feet and the sight of water around her, even if it didn't carry the scent of the sea.

More than anything, she yearned for her daughter.

She touched Romen's arm. "Let's go home."

He beamed at her, and the pride on his face warmed her like the Lady's noontime touch. He scooped her up and set her in her saddle. She giggled, unable to help herself. The first time Romen had scooped her into his arms had been immediately following their marriage ceremony. He had made a habit of settling her into her saddle every ride since. It was courteous of him, certainly, but it was also one of their little traditions, an excuse for them to touch during an otherwise innocuous action, and she loved it.

After handing her the reins, Romen climbed onto Wolf Runner, gave the word, and the clansmen set off down the mountain. They rode at a canter down the shallow trail into Calewind and through the city gates. Romen set an easy pace as the night grew darker, trotting over rolling hills and across open plains to avoid crippling the horses in the deep snow. Clansmen fanned out around the war chief and his wife, lanterns dangling from poles. Occasionally they passed cities and villages. The buildings within their walls seemed to huddle together, waiting for the Lady of Dawn to rise. All around her, trees stripped bare of leaves reached for the sky with twisted, frozen limbs.

Cynthia hitched her cloak tighter and resisted the urge to flick Narra's reins. The Leastonians had a saying: *the Lord of Midnight keeps secrets*. A realm filled with traders and seafarers knew all about secrets, but only the Lady of Dawn could reveal those hidden under shadow.

She shook her head, naming herself a fool. Her husband was near, and so she was safe. She guided Narra closer to his mount, and he gave her another smile, this one free of worry.

Snow returned a few hours later. It fell in a thick curtain, forming a hazy screen in the night. Romen slowed the horses to a walk. The wind picked up, throwing icy darts that stung their faces. The clansmen pulled thicker furs from their packs. Narra whickered, head bent against the wind and snow while Cynthia dug in her pack and withdrew a heavier cloak. She almost lost it; the wind snatched at it and howled when she successfully shrugged inside of it. The howls grew louder, drowning out the sound of Narra's hooves crunching through snow.

Cynthia bowed her head, tried to take a breath, gasped when the wind stole it from her. She lifted her cloak over her face, breathing deeply, whispering to herself that the storm would soon pass. And if it didn't, there were high walls all across Torel. Romen would call for them to take shelter. He would build a fire to throw back the shadows and hold her close until the snow died down. Or until the Lady awakened. That sounded even better.

She reached for him, wanting him to take her hand. When she didn't feel his calloused fingers lace through hers, she looked over at him.

He was gone.

Cynthia looked up, back, all around. They were all gone, her husband and the clansmen, swallowed up by the shadows. Panic welled up in her.

"Romen?" she called, but the night swallowed that up, too.

Panting, eyes darting around, she pulled Narra to a stop and twisted around in her saddle. What was she to do? Should she keep moving? Should she stay here? She couldn't stay still. The cold bit through her fur, piercing her like a careless inksmith's needle.

She choked back a sob—then gasped. Forms appeared out of the night, tall and powerfully built. The clansmen. They must be. *Had* to be.

Relief made her sag in her saddle. What a sight she must be to her husband, who faced wild boar and invaders along the

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spiny ridge of the Ihlkin range without fear. She was unworthy of him— but she didn't care. She was just glad he was back.

As the forms moved in closer, a thought struck her. Where were their horses? Romen would put himself in mortal danger before he let anything happen to Wolf Runner. Then the forms came close enough for her to make them out through the snow, and terror cold as ice enveloped her like the sea crashing over a fishing boat.

They were Wardsmen, or had been once, all snow-white armor that jingled with every step. The men—the things—stalking toward her did not have eyes but empty sockets where eyes had once been. Their heads were skulls, spotted with clumps of hair and rotten skin, teeth clicking and clacking with harsh, guttural laughter.

Cynthia screamed as they descended on her, and then the shadows swallowed her, too.