

SISTERS OF SHADOW AND LIGHT

SARA B. LARSON



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NEW YORK

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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PART 1

SISTER OF SHADOW

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THE BEGINNING

I have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night.

—GALILEO

The night my sister was born, the stars died and were reborn in her eyes.

Mother refused to talk about it—the one night she wished to forget, but never could. When she did say anything, she recalled how the heat had been unbearable, rising from the sun-baked earth, sweltering in the way only a midsummer's night could. Windows had been flung open in futile hopes of cooling off the citadel that was our home, but instead only admitted an achingly dry breeze, like the hot breath of a Scylla that inhaled smoke and exhaled fire. Mother's labor came fast—too fast. Lucky, or providence, that Mahsami made it in time.

They'd tried to shoo me away, but I was only three years old and tenacious and soon they were too absorbed in the impending birth to be concerned with me. Perhaps I would have been better to go.

My first memories were from that night.

One was of my mother, lying on that bed that had always dwarfed her, hair as dark as raven's wings limp against her head, face wan and lips the bloodless gray of a corpse, while Mahsami bent over her straining belly. Mahsami—or Sami as I called her—once told me that some women cried, wailed, even screamed in labor, but not my mother. She remained silent.

Mother never spoke of what came next, but Sami did. Once. After a particularly tense supper, when it was just me and her left

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in the kitchen to clean up the day's mess, I'd dared broach the subject and she'd been too tired or too upset to deflect my curiosity as she normally would.

Something was wrong from the start, she'd told me that night, firelight flickering across her lined face, her voice a soft hum over the clink of the dishes I continued to wash, fearing she would stop if I did. *It was as though your mother's body wished to be rid of the baby, but your sister had no wish to be born.*

Her birth was a battle that was swift and brutal and nearly took my mother's life, Mahsami had confessed. A strange bitterness had coated my tongue, as if I could taste her residual shame. She'd felt personally responsible for the near tragedy. But, through whatever skill she possessed, and by the blessing of the Great God, when the moon reached the pinnacle of its arc, spilling milky light over the citadel, Sami pulled my sister from my mother's womb.

That was my second memory. Sami, sweaty, blood-splattered, but triumphant, holding aloft a baby that was more ashen than alive with the same hair as me—as dark as damp earth—plastered to her skull, her skin wrinkled and wet. And completely, chillingly silent. As silent as my mother.

Mahsami told me how she'd placed the baby on Mother's belly and rubbed her back, patting and crooning, encouraging her to cry, and fill her lungs with life-sustaining air. When none of it seemed to work, the midwife lifted my sister up and slapped her across the rump. She cried at last, her eyes opening for the first time.

And *that's* when my mother screamed.

We were in the citadel, so we didn't see the night sky, didn't witness the pulse of darkness that obliterated all light—including the stars—at the moment my sister cried and turned her burning eyes on my mother for the first time.

But Sami heard about it later.

Sami had been in such a talkative mood, I'd summoned my courage once more to ask the question that had haunted me more than the others. *Where was he?*

No one knows and there's no use wondering. He's gone, Zubra, she'd replied biting, hard with old anger that wasn't necessarily aimed

at me, the gates to her memories slamming shut at my cursed inquisitiveness, *and that's all you need to know about him.*

That was my third and last memory from that night. My mother staring at the baby in Mahsami's arms—refusing to take her—and asking, *Where is he? Where's Adelic?*

That name had burned its way into my memory somehow, the way my sister's eyes had burned fear into my mother's heart. A name that was banished from our home, as it only engendered loathing and bitterness. I tried to be loyal to my mother, I tried to cling to her hate and make it my own. But there were times, on rare afternoons spent wandering the empty citadel when my mother was occupied and wouldn't catch me, when I stared up at the ancient statues and the molded hangings and carved ceilings of the Paladin—the beings who had once lived in our world, whose abandoned home we inhabited—and I couldn't help but wonder.

Wonder what had happened to him—why he'd left us at all, but especially *that* night. Wonder why the hedge that had been shorter than the iron fence surrounding our home suddenly grew taller than three men standing atop one another overnight, so that we awoke to a wall of green surrounding the citadel where we lived, blocking the iron gate, isolating us from everyone but each other.

And, of course, wonder how my mother had ever fallen in love with him in the first place and followed him here. For Adelic, the name I was forbidden to remember but couldn't forget, was a Paladin. Like the statues I stood beside and imagined were real, like the carvings in the ceiling above me that I tipped my head back to stare at with my plain hazel irises, trying to envision a father with eyes like jewels that glowed with power, riding his gryphon. I knew he was one of them, even though Mother never admitted it, never acknowledged what Inara's *uniqueness* could never let any of us forget.

Inara—Ray of Light. My sister who had the power of the Paladin in her veins—and her eyes. When it became obvious that my father wasn't coming back, my mother grudgingly named my sister—a hopeful name for a child that seemed to only ever bring shadows to my mother's face—and finally took her to her breast.

I was the only one who looked into Inara's face and smiled. Mother said it was because I had been too young to understand and that I grew up accustomed to her. But *Mother* was the one who didn't understand, who paled when Inara looked at her, whose gaze dropped when her daughter's burning eyes met hers. I knew Inara was different, I knew her eyes marked her.

But she was my sister, and I loved her.

And there was nothing I wouldn't do to protect her. No matter what.