

GRIFFIN'S SHADOW

BOOK TWO OF
THE GRIFFIN'S DAUGHTER TRILOGY



BY
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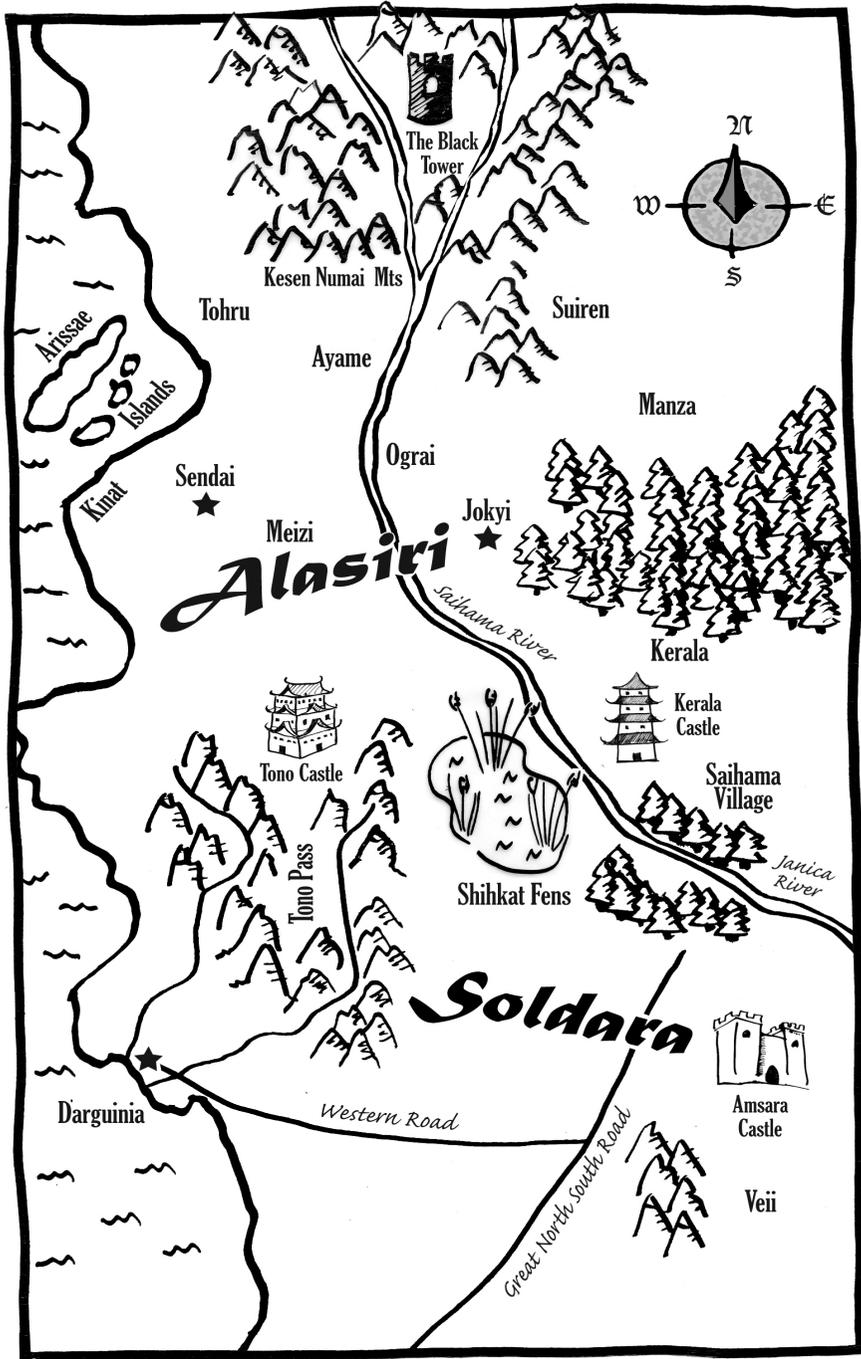
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Prologue

High above the broken spires of a ruined fortress, an eagle soared. His wings, black against the cerulean of a cloudless sky, cast a swift-moving shadow on the glittering snowfield below.

A snowshoe hare instinctively flattened itself to the frigid ground as the shadow glided across its path. A little fox, robed in her fur coat of winter-white, trotted along from bush to boulder, stalking the hare, keenly aware of her rival floating overhead. She paused in the shadow of an outcrop, nose twitching, and licked her lips.

The eagle had spotted the fox but had already dismissed her as inconsequential. Long before she got within striking distance of the hare, he would swoop down, snatch the prey with his razor-sharp talons and take to the skies again, leaving the fox with nothing but frustration and an empty belly.

As he prepared to strike, the eagle felt a cold tendril of energy tickle the edge of his mind. Before he could process the meaning of this strange sensation, the tendril lashed out and seized his consciousness.

With brutal efficiency, the tendril ripped away the eagle's awareness, and as the magnificent bird plummeted, lifeless, to the ground, an ancient entity flooded the vacated skull with its own rapacious mind.

Freshly re-animated by the will of the Nameless One, the eagle broke its fall, pulling out of its death dive to rise steeply into the air once again.

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The fox, sensing her rival had backed off, closed in on the prey, pounced, and with a snap of her jaws, broke the hare's neck. She lifted her head and yipped in triumph, then scooped up her prize and trotted off toward the safety and warmth of her den. She and her children would sleep with full bellies tonight.

With a flap of his wings, the eagle banked sharply and sped southwest. Three days later, his withered carcass dropped from the sky and a raven rose to take his place. Two days and nights of flying brought the raven to the walls of a great castle standing guard over a thriving city. It, too, died before reaching the goal, but many more ravens called the castle grounds home.

Another bird leapt into the air and circled the castle precincts, searching the ground with sharp eyes until it spotted the thing its master needed. The raven landed at the edge of a great expanse of gravel and scooped a small shiny black stone into its beak.

This should do, thought the Nameless One. He sent his small slave winging back to the rooftops to wait for the one it had been sent to find.

It did not have long to wait.

Chapter 1

DAUGHTER OF THE GRIFFIN

My father is Keizo Onjara, King of Alasiri!

MJelena Sakehera stared at Lord Sen, her new father-in-law, uncertain that she had heard him correctly.

Surely Father-in-law is mistaken! I can't possibly be the daughter of a king!

A tide of conflicting emotions surged through her—elation that she at last knew her sire's name, dismay that her existence could prove troublesome for him, fear that he would reject her outright, and hope, yes even hope, that he just might accept her, despite everything.

The Sakehera family had gathered together in their private sitting room, to share the evening meal and discuss the day's events. Tomorrow, the entire family would quit Kerala Castle, ancestral seat of the House of Sakehera, to journey west to Sendai, capital of Alasiri. War with the Soldaran Empire threatened the elven homeland, and the king needed his great lords and generals in the capital so planning for the defense of the country could begin. As Commanding General, Lord Sen's place on the King's Council was second in importance only to the king's brother, Prince Raidan.

The final days of the month of Kishan heralded the end of summer; even as fall approached, the daytime heat remained oppressive. Only after the sun had set did the air cool down to something close to tolerable. With the darkness came gentle breezes—full of the fragrances of honeysuckle and night-blooming jasmine—that ruffled wall hangings and caressed sweat-damp skin.

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Jelena and Lord Sen sat apart from the others, on padded stools near one of the open windows. Briefly, she looked away from her father-in-law to glance around the room at the rest of the family. Lady Amara, her mother-in-law, lounged on her favorite couch, reading aloud from a book of children's stories to her twin daughters Mariso and Jena. Lord Sen's Heir, Sadaiyo, and his wife Misune, huddled together on a bench at the far end of the room, completely absorbed with one another. Ashinji—Jelena's heart always skipped a beat whenever she looked at her husband—sat cross-legged on the floor mats, talking to his sister Lani.

Jelena sucked in a breath, struck once again by amazement at her turn of fortune. That she had been taken in by this family and accepted as a daughter, still felt too good to be true, and yet...

Here I am, a former kitchen drudge...whose father just might be the king of the elves!

"I don't know how my old friend's path crossed that of a human girl's, or how it all led to the making of you. The evidence is all circumstantial, and I could still be wrong," Lord Sen continued. Jelena refocused her attention back to her father-in-law. "But I don't think so. I know that ring. Only members of the Onjara family wear the White Griffin. *Onjara* means 'griffin' in ancient Siri-dar. Yours is actually a copy of the official Ring of State the king wears. All children of the sovereign are given non-magical copies to wear as signets. Keizo wore the ring you now possess before he ascended the throne. The fact that he gave it to your mother must mean that he had very strong feelings for her."

"The woman who raised me—Claudia—always said my mother and father loved each other, and that my father gave my mother his ring so, one day, I might use it to find him. I always took that story with a grain of salt," Jelena said.

"Grain of salt?" Sen repeated quizzically.

"An old Soldaran expression. It means to doubt a little. I'd always hoped to find him some day, but I kept telling myself to be prepared for him to reject me. I still cannot believe what you're telling me is true, though! Why would the king travel alone in the borderlands?"

"Keizo wasn't king yet back then. His eldest brother Okame ruled, so he had no expectations of ever sitting on the throne. Okame had a family, you see—three sons and two daughters.

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“Keizo was restless as a younger man and often traveled far from home. He even journeyed to the human lands east of our borders...not to the Empire, of course, but there are still human countries not yet under the yolk of the Soldarans and who don’t hate us. Ai, the stories he used to tell... I remember a time, ‘bout eighteen years ago, when my old friend Zin—all his close friends called him that back before he became our king—showed up at my gate dirty, thin, and hobbling on a poorly set broken leg.

“He wouldn’t tell me exactly what had happened to him, only that he’d had an accident, but that he’d received help from someone. This person kept him alive until he was strong enough to make it back home.”

“My mother,” Jelena whispered.

“Seems so. Keizo was tight as an oyster, though. Never said any more about it. He stayed near two weeks, then returned to Sendai. Shortly thereafter, word reached us that King Okame and his entire family had drowned in a sudden unseasonable storm off the coast of the Arrisae Islands. They’d been spending time at the royal retreat on the main island. The ship bringing them back to the mainland struck a reef during the gale and foundered. Everyone on board perished. When next I saw my childhood friend, he was my king and I was accepting the post as Commanding General of the Armies of Alasiri.”

Sen fell silent, as if he knew Jelena needed a few moments to digest the astounding revelation he had just laid upon her.

My father is the elf king! How am I ever going to take this all in?

Jelena had lived with the shame of her mixed blood all her life, and even when she thought she had escaped racial bigotry, she had encountered it again, albeit in a less virulent form, among her father’s people. Now, she had just learned the blood of elven royalty flowed in her veins.

Will this make any real difference? I am still hikni...a half-breed, she thought.

The twins squealed in delight as their mother finished reading.

“Please, Mother...,” Jena begged, and Mariso breathlessly completed the sentence, “Read us one more!”

“No, girls,” Amara replied as she closed the book. “It is time for you two to go to bed. We must get up very early.”

“Ooooooh!” the children cried.

“Girls! Do as your mother says,” Sen commanded, his voice stern, but

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affectionate. “You don’t want to get left behind tomorrow morning because no one can wake you, do you?” Mournfully, the two little blond heads shook in unison. “Very good. Now, come and kiss your old father good night.”

After Amara had taken the twins off to bed, Jelena resumed her conversation with Sen.

“What will all of this mean, Father?” Jelena asked. “If I’m truly the king’s daughter, does that mean I’m a...a *princess*? Even though I’m hikui? You said my existence will complicate my father’s life. How so?”

“Keizo has a younger brother, Prince Raidan, who is officially his Heir, at least until he marries and produces a child...an okui child,” Sen replied. “So far, the king has shown no inclination to marry, and his longtime companion has not born him any children as yet. The prince...well, let’s just say he won’t exactly welcome with open arms anyone who could become a potential rival to his claim.”

Jelena frowned. “So you think Prince Raidan—my uncle—would view me as a threat?”

“Yes,” Sen replied.

Jelena shook her head. “I’ve gone from bastard half-breed scullery maid to king’s daughter in the blink of an eye.... This is all so unreal.”

“What are you two talking about over here? You both look so serious.” Ashinji had come up behind her and he now slipped his arms around her waist. “You’ve been huddled with my wife for too long, Father. I miss her and want her back.” He planted a kiss on the side of her neck, then rested his chin on her shoulder.

Jelena’s breath caught in her throat, the way it always did when Ashinji kissed her there. “Your father had some important news for me, Ashi, about my own father,” Jelena explained. “I’ll tell you everything later, when we’re alone.”

Ashinji looked first at his father and then at Jelena. “I gather from the looks on your faces that the situation isn’t entirely good,” he commented.

Sen said nothing and Jelena turned her head to kiss Ashinji’s cheek. “Later, I promise,” she repeated.

“Well, then! I think we’d all best get to bed,” Sen said, loud enough to catch Lani, Sadaiyo, and Misune’s attentions. “We’ve got an early start tomorrow morning.”

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"I'll meet you in the stables at dawn, Father," Sadaiyo said as he and Misune exited the sitting room, arm in arm.

"G'night, Father," Lani murmured sleepily, planting a quick kiss on Sen's cheek as she followed her oldest brother out. "Night, Ashi, Jelena."

"I'm still surprised that Mother and the girls are coming to Sendai with us," Ashinji said after Lani had left.

Sen shrugged. "It's been years since your mother saw the capital. I think she's grown a bit restless out here in the country and wants to get a taste of the city for a change. I also know she's looking to show Lani off...Not much in the way of useful young men this far east, you know. What better place to snag a rich young heir than at court, eh?"

Jelena remembered Ashinji mentioning his sister had taken a fancy to Misune's older brother Ibeji.

Perhaps Father-in-law believes one match between the Sakehera and the Dai families is enough, she thought.

"Come, husband. Let's get to bed," she said.

Ashinji nodded in agreement and as the two of them headed for the door, Sen called out, "First light, children! Don't oversleep!"



Later, as they lay snuggled together beneath the coverlets, Jelena told Ashinji everything his father had told her about her sire.

"If this is true and you really are the king's daughter...it could change everything, Jelena," Ashinji responded, his voice soft and pensive. Jelena could hear the worry behind his quiet words. She grabbed his chin and pulled until he looked into her eyes.

"It changes nothing, Ashi. None of us knows how the king will greet the news that he has a hikui daughter. He may reject me outright. Or he may acknowledge my existence but refuse to have any direct contact with me."

"Or he might accept you with open arms and proclaim you his Heir."

"You know as well as I do that I can't be his Heir. It's the law. Even if, by some miracle of the gods, he does accept me, I will still be your wife and a Sakehera first. My future is with you, no matter what."

"I still can't help but worry about where this all could lead," Ashinji murmured.

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He slid downwards and rested his head between her breasts. Tenderly, Jelena ran her fingers through his hair. "You'll never lose me, Ashi, I promise," she whispered. He said nothing and instead replied with his body.

As they made love, his caresses were gentle as usual, but at the same time, a little desperate. Afterwards, he held her tight against him, as if he feared to let go; even as they both drifted off to sleep, his arms never loosened.