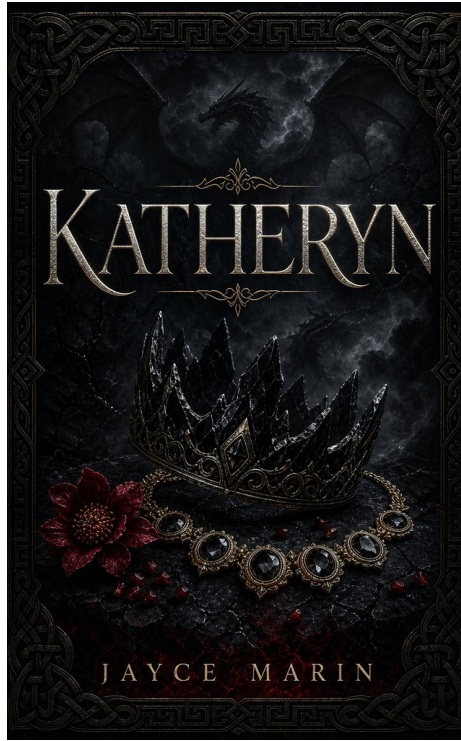




Katheryn

Jayce Marin

FREE SAMPLE · CHAPTER ONE

This novel is written for adult readers. It is a dark retelling, and it does not look away from what that means.

Chapter One: The Dark-Kissed

The Withering has taken her mother's face first.

I stand at the parapet, wind clawing my hair free, and I try again. This is ritual now. Reaching for her. I close my eyes the second the sun starts to bleed into the sea, because that was her hour, the hour she dragged a brush through my hair in the west solar. If she still lives anywhere in me, it's here, now, with the red light burning against my lids. I reach.

A shape. The impression of a woman bent over a small girl. The ghost of a scent—white flowers crushed, bitter oil ground into her wrists. A voice humming a song I can't claim anymore. But where her face should be, there's only blankness, raw and unfinished—a smear where features should be. A hand dragged through wet ink.

I press my brow against the cold stone of the merlon and open my eyes.

The sea is on fire. Not really; it is only the sun going down beyond the Boundaries, that shimmering wall of held breath that has kept our kingdom sealed for a thousand years. From up here the barrier is a faint distortion, a stripe of wrong air between our black coast and the paler blue that belongs to the world we are not permitted to know. Ships die against it. Birds turn back. In a thousand years no hull has crossed. The books in my father's library agree on this the way they agree on little else.

Which is why the sail is impossible.

I do not see it at first. My eyes are still adjusting from the closed-lid dark, and the sun is doing what it does at this hour,

laying a hammered-gold road across the water. It takes me a slow count of ten to understand that one of the specks on that road is moving against the current and against the wind, and that the shape above it is not a bird or a wave-cap but canvas. White canvas. Not the coarse grey of our fishermen's sails. Not the tar-blackened rag of our warships. White as bone. White as the inside of a lily. Bellied full of wind that should not be pushing it toward us.

My hand clamps at my throat before I know it. Under the glove, the spiral on my left palm throbs, hard and deep, the way it always does when something is about to happen that can't be taken back.

A ship.

Through the Boundaries.

I stand there while my brain refuses. It is only when I hear the tower bell begin to ring below me, one stroke, then two, then a shouted question and the third stroke of alarm, that I understand other eyes have seen what I have seen, and that the impossible has become a matter of protocol.

I am moving before I decide to. Down the spiral stair inside the tower, past the guards who do not stop me because there is not a guard in Myrkriki who will lay a hand on the Dark-Kissed even to save her from herself. My gloved fingers trail the cold obsidian wall for balance. Down and down. The tower's shadow swallows me and spits me out into the lower court, and I run.

I haven't run since I was fifteen. Running is for children and prey. I am neither. But there's a ship at the White Harbor, and something under my ribs is clawing, wild,

nameless. My body chooses for me.

The city terraces down to the harbor in five long steps of black stone, each step a district, each district a mist. I cut through the second terrace's market at a walk because a princess of Myrkriki does not sprint through her own subjects, and the vendors stop what they are doing to bow low and quick like grass in a passing wind. I do not meet their eyes. My father taught me not to. Weapons do not look at what they might be pointed at.

By the time I hit the harbor road, my heart is pounding like I ran the whole way. I slow down. I stab my hair back with two pins. Hood forward. I build my face into the mask I've worn since I was seven, since the winter my father decided a girl who could raise a rook could raise worse if he made her. Cold. Distant. Untouchable. A woman-shaped absence.

The White Harbor is a crescent of pale stone, one of the few white things in our black kingdom, named for the shells ground into its mortar in an earlier age, when we still traded with the world. It has stood empty for a thousand years except for our own fishing sloops. Tonight it is full of people, and the people are quiet in the specific way of crowds that do not yet know whether to cheer or run.

The ship is already at the long pier. Someone has thrown lines. Someone has caught them. Our harbormaster, an old man named Vell whom I have not spoken to in years, is standing on the boards with his hands empty at his sides, staring up at the deck, and I can see even from the road how his jaw is working.

The ship is beautiful. I let myself think it. Beautiful in a way nothing here is. Our ships are built to survive. Theirs is built to be seen. The prow curves like the underside of a wave, gilded so the last sun turns it into a slow ember. Letters run along the flank in a script I've only seen in one book. I read them without meaning to: Sólarríki something, something Golden, something bright. The rest dissolve. I never learned the tongue, just the alphabet, because my father made me learn every alphabet that might one day spell out an enemy's orders.

Sólarríki. The Sun Kingdom. The name we teach our children to spit.

I stop at the edge of the harbor road and do not move.

The gangplank drops with a wooden crack that makes the crowd flinch as one—a moment of nothing. Then figures at the top of the plank, silhouettes against sky, and my eyes pick out five, six, seven men, and then one man in front of them who does not look like a man so much as a decision the light has made.

He comes down the plank at an easy pace, as if the wood were his and the harbor were his, and my kingdom were his, and I understand before he reaches the boards that this is a prince. Not a captain. Not an envoy. A prince. It is in the way the men behind him have arranged themselves, and it is in the way he does not look at the arrangement. It is in the set of his shoulders, which are broad, and in the way he holds his head, which is high without arrogance, as if he had never in his life been told to lower it.

He is tall. He is fair. His hair is the color of the coin my father keeps in a locked box because it comes from a mine no living man remembers: soft gold, not the brittle yellow-gold of newer stock, but the deep buttered gold of the old ore. It is cut just past his jaw, and the sea wind has been in it. His skin is the color of honey held to a candle. He wears white and pale bronze; there is a sword at his hip in a scabbard chased with something that catches the dying sun and answers it.

I have never seen anyone from Sólarríki before. No one has. The engravings in the library are five hundred years out of date and depict everyone there as red-eyed and horned. I understand now that the engravings were made by people who had been taught to hate before they had been taught to look.

He steps off the plank onto the pier and Vell bows so low the old man's braid touches the boards. The prince says something quiet, a greeting in our tongue, badly pronounced but sincere. His voice carries. It carries like a struck bell. He offers Vell his hand to rise, which is not a thing our lords do for our servants, and Vell stares at the offered hand before he takes it.

Then the prince lifts his head, and his eyes travel the crowd, and his eyes find me.

I have been looked at my whole life. By my father, as a tool. By his council, as a threat. By the servants, as a source of dread. By the boys of the court, when I was younger, as a bet. By my brother, as the only person he had. I have been measured, weighed, calculated against, prayed over, warded against, walked around. I have been looked at.

This is not that.

His eyes are gold. Real gold, the way mine are real violet. Not brown, not hazel, but pure metal, marking his bloodline the way mine marks my curse. He fixes on me across thirty paces of stone and a crowd. For one breath, he looks. He doesn't measure. Doesn't calculate. Doesn't flinch. He looks at me like a man who passes a woman in the street and wants to see her again before she disappears.

The spiral on my palm gives another hard pulse.

I do not move. I know how I appear from where he is standing: hooded, small, alone at the edge of the road, a black shape against black stone. He cannot see the color of my eyes at this distance. He cannot know what I am. He is looking at me because I am the only figure in the crowd not bowed and not staring at him, and because I have not yet remembered to bow either, and because whatever the harbor thought of me a moment ago it is currently thinking of him.

But he holds the look. And in it there is a small, crooked adjustment, a tiny surprised softening at the corner of his mouth, as if he had expected a harbor of prostrate strangers and instead had found one upright woman and did not know whether to be alarmed or pleased.

I lift my chin. It is a stupid, small thing. He mirrors it. He does not smile, quite. Something in his face does the work a smile does.

Then the moment breaks because it must; his men are on the boards behind him, and Vell is stammering out the ritual welcome in our language, and I turn my face away because if I keep looking at him for one more heartbeat I will not know

what I have done. I walk. I walk back up the harbor road with my hood pulled forward and my gloved hands flat at my sides, and I do not permit myself to run again because the running is over, whatever it was.

Halfway up the second terrace I meet the runner.

He is one of my father's, a boy of about fourteen with the black-and-silver band of the palace on his sleeve and a stitch in his side from the climb. He drops to a knee when he sees me.

"Princess. His Majesty. At once."

"Rise," I say. "Walk with me."

The boy scrambles up and falls in beside me. He is trying not to gawk. His breath is loud.

"How did he word it?" I ask.

"Highness?"

"My father. The summons. His exact words."

The boy swallows. "Bring my daughter to me before the ship's boots dry."

I let out a small, empty sound. He already knows. Of course he does. The bells have been screaming since the sail showed, and there are more ravens than stairs in the Obsidian Palace. He isn't calling me to tell me. He's calling me to use me.

"Tell him I am on my way," I say. "Run ahead. Do not stop for anyone."

The boy runs. I walk.

I do not hurry, because if I hurry I will arrive with my color up, and my father reads color the way sailors read cloud. I walk the last two terraces at the pace of a woman who

has never once in her life had a reason to hurry. By the time I pass under the great arch of the palace gate, my breath is even, and my face is stone.

He is in the receiving hall, not the throne room, which suggests he wants this to look like a family gathering rather than a court gathering. He is standing at the tall east window with his hands clasped behind his back, and he does not turn when I enter. He never does. Turning would suggest that whoever has entered is worth the movement of his neck.

I stop at the correct distance. I make the correct bow. I wait.

“There is a ship,” my father says at last, without turning.

“Yes.”

“From Sólarríki.”

“Yes.”

“A prince of their line.”

“So it appears.”

“So it appears.” He rolls the words in his mouth as if tasting them for salt. He is a tall man, taller than me by two heads, and gaunt to the point of skeleton, and he wears the black and silver of our house with the small vanity of a man who knows he wears it well. His hair is the color of old iron. “And what does the Boundary mean by opening for him, Kathryn?”

“I do not know.”

“You are the Dark-Kissed.”

“I am.”

“The Boundaries were sealed with dark blood. Blood of your line.”

“Yes.”

“Then you should know.”

“I do not.”

He turns, finally. His eyes are the flint color the family used to have before the god who touched me turned mine violet. He studies me as he has always studied me, a jeweler with a stone he is considering cutting differently.

“He will want an audience,” my father says. “He will present himself tomorrow with gifts and half-truths and a story about why his ship crossed a wall that has killed everything that ever tried. He will lie. He will lie beautifully. And I do not have the patience to sit through a beautiful lie.”

“No, Father.”

“You will sit through it for me.”

I keep my face still. “In what capacity?”

“In whatever capacity gets him to open his mouth to you.” He lets that hang in the air a moment, then softens it, which is the more dangerous version of him. “You will attend him. You will smile. You will let him believe he has found the one soft thing in this cold house. And you will bring me back everything he says, and everything he does not say, and I will decide what to do with him accordingly.”

“You want me to seduce a Sun prince.”

“I want you to listen to a Sun prince,” my father says, with the small dry smile that means he wants exactly what I said. “The seducing is your discretion. You have the necessary parts.”

I do not react. I have not reacted to my father since I was twelve. Reacting is what he pays for.

“May I ask a question?” I say.

“Ask.”

“If he lies beautifully, and I bring you the lie, what will you do to him?”

My father tilts his head. “Whatever the lie earns. If he is here to trade, we will trade. If he is here to steal, he will hang in the Grove until the crows have his eyes. If he is here for you...” he pauses, considering, “... then I will have to think longer. A Sun prince who wants the Dark-Kissed is a piece I have not played with before.”

“I understand.”

“Do you?”

“Yes, Father.”

He watches me. I let him watch. This is the part where he decides whether I am lying, and I have been lying to him since I was seven years old with a dead rook in my palm, and he has not caught me yet, and he will not catch me now.

“Good,” he says. “Go. Dress for a feast tomorrow. Not black. Wear the deep red. And take that damned glove off at table; I want him to see what he is dealing with.”

“Yes, Father.”

I bow. I turn. I walk to the door with the correct measured stride of the correct measured daughter. My hand is on the door pull when he says my name.

“Katheryn.”

I turn my head, not my body. “Father.”

“Do not fall in love with him.”

I let a small silence be my answer. It is the only answer safe with him. Then I say, “No, Father,” and I open the door,

step through, and pull it shut behind me with my gloved hand, steady as stone.

The corridor beyond is one of the long ones, the eastern gallery that runs the length of the old wing, hung with portraits of dead queens and lit at this hour by only the guttering of two torches and whatever moon has come through the high slit windows. I walk it slowly. My footfalls are the only sound.

I'm already betraying him. I chose that on the harbor road, and I've been living in it since. My father doesn't know. He's never had to imagine me as someone who chooses. He told me to seduce a Sun prince and steal his secrets. I said yes because yes gets me close to the prince, and being close is what I want. I haven't wanted anything for myself since I was a child. I don't know how to want quietly. I only know how to want the way I do magic. All the way. Down to the bone.

I walk with my hand pressed lightly to the wall for balance, because the corridor is longer than I remembered, and the torches are further apart than I remembered, and something in my head has begun to feel loose.

I try to picture the ship again, the white sail catching the last of the sun. I get it.

I try to picture the prince at the bottom of the gangplank. I get it. Gold eyes. The small softening at the corner of his mouth. The way he did not look at me as if I were sharp.

I try, out of habit, out of the ritual, to picture my mother. I close my eyes as I walk. I reach for her.

There is nothing.

Not the paleness. Not the impression. Not the shape leaning over the small girl. Not the scent of crushed flowers. Not the humming. There is a place in me where those things used to be, and now there is only the corridor, and my hand on the wall, and my own breath in the dark.

I stop walking.

I stand there in the gallery of dead queens with my gloved palm against black stone. I understand that the Withering has taken her from me tonight, all of her, the last soft edges of the woman who bore me, and I understand also with the same clean cold movement of the mind that I do not know what she paid for. I do not know which act of magic tonight cost me, my mother. I have not raised a corpse. I have not stopped a heart. I have only stood on a tower and reached, and walked down a hill and looked at a man, and stood in a room and lied to my father, and none of those are supposed to cost.

Unless the wanting is.

Unless the choosing is.

Unless the Withering has always known, before I have known, what I am about to do.

I press my forehead to the wall. The obsidian is cold enough to sting. Down the gallery, a torch chooses that moment to go out, and the shadow of it stretches toward me along the floor and does not quite reach.

I straighten. I fix my hair with two efficient pin stabs. I compose my face.

Tomorrow there will be a feast. Tomorrow I will wear the deep red, take off the glove, and let a Sun prince see the spiral

on my palm and my violet eyes across a candlelit table. I will smile at him the way my father has told me to smile, and I will listen the way my father has told me to listen, and I will keep every word he speaks for myself.

I walk the rest of the corridor to my chamber. I do not reach for her again. There is no point. Whatever she looked like, she is gone, and something in me has already begun the slow work of forgetting that she was ever there to lose.

At the door of my chamber I pause with my hand on the latch, and I say her name aloud, under my breath, into the dark of the gallery behind me, because I still remember her name, and I want to hear it in my own voice while I can.

The gallery does not answer.

I go inside and shut the door.

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