

SHADOW'S  
SON



JON SPRUNK  
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This novel is dedicated to my wife, Jenny,  
Without whom none of this would have been possible,  
And to our son, Logan,  
Who is the twinkle in our eyes.



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# CHAPTER ONE

**A** killer stalked in the shadows.

Hidden within the gloom shrouding the hall's lofty ceiling, he crept across the rafters to the flicker of the torch fires below. As unseen as the wind, silent as Death itself.

Festive music rose from the chamber beneath him. The flower of northern Nimea, two hundred lords and ladies, filled the great hall of Ostergoth Keep. The sharp crack of a whip cut through the din. The centerpiece of the evening was an aged hillman, stripped to the waist and bound to a wooden frame. Livid welts oozing blood crisscrossed his shoulders and back. While Duke Reinard's guests gorged on fine victuals, his torturer performed for their entertainment.

The bullwhip cracked again and the old man shuddered. The duke laughed so hard he spilled wine down his ermine-lined robes and spoiled the yellow dress of the pale, shuddering girl on his lap. She quivered as he blotted at her bodice with a stained napkin and then squeaked at an indiscretion committed under the table. She tried to squirm away, but the duke held her fast and laughed all the harder.

Caim's gloved hands curled into fists. It was time to go to work.

He dropped down to an empty balcony outthrust from the stone wall. Crouched behind the railing, he unslung a satchel from his shoulder and took out its contents. With sure movements he assembled a powerful bow made from two curved shafts of laminated horn. He opened a lacquered case and took out three arrows. Each projectile ended in brilliant indigo fletching, the design favored by the hill tribes of eastern Ostergoth, as requested by the client.

Caim fit an arrow to the string and lifted the bow. He took a deep

breath as he sighted along the shaft. An uneasy sensation rumbled in the pit of his stomach. *Nerves.*

He adjusted his aim to allow for distance and declination. The girl managed to escape the Duke's lewd embrace, at least for the moment.

*Don't worry, honey.* Caim pulled the bowstring to full tension. *He won't ever bother you again.*

Just as he was about to shoot, his target leaned over to chortle into the ear of a lovely noblewoman beside him. The duke's ringed fingers fondled the strands of pearls looped across the lady's plunging décolletage. Caim held his breath and counted by the slow, measured rhythm of his pulse.

*Three . . . four . . .*

Any moment now, the Duke would sit up and present the perfect target.

*Seven . . . eight . . .*

His aim was dead-on, his hands were steady.

*Eleven . . . twelve . . .*

A feathery tickle caressed his shoulders. Not taking his eyes off the Duke, Caim caught a glimpse of silver.

"Hello, lover," her voice whispered in his ear.

Ghostly fingers tickled Caim's waist, but his gaze never left the target. "Hello, Kit."

"Putting another notch in your belt, I see."

He winced at the volume of her voice as it carried over the revel. It didn't matter that no one else could hear her. She was throwing off his cadence.

"I'm busy. Go find a nest of bunnies to play with until I'm done here."

Kit pressed her face against his cheek to peer down the arrow shaft. Although he couldn't exactly feel her, tiny itches radiated everywhere she touched his skin. A strand of her silver hair fell across his left eye. Caim resisted the urge to blow it away, knowing it wouldn't do any good if he tried, and strained the bowstring another inch.

"Bunnies live in holes, not nests," she said. "And you're aiming too low."

"Leave me alone. I've got the shot."

"You're going to miss his neck by half a foot."

Caim ground his teeth as the duke turned away from the noblewoman to slap the back of Liram Kornfelsh of the Kornfelsh merchant syndicate.

The syndicate was backing Duke Reinard to the hilt, hoping to ride his rise to power all the way to the inner sanctums of the capital.

“I’m aiming for his heart. Now leave me alone for a minute.”

Kit hopped up on the banister, as light as a butterfly in flight. Short for a human woman, she possessed a figure out of any man’s fantasies. Tiny-waisted yet buxom, she had creamy skin with a faint olive sheen. The dress she wore, tight-clinging with an absurdly short skirt, barely left anything to the imagination. Caim supposed it made no difference, since no one could see her but him.

Balancing on her bare toes, she clucked her tongue. “What if he’s wearing a coat of mail under that atrocious shirt?”

“The head is piled for penetration.” Caim thrust his chin at the arrow’s reinforced point. “Anyway, he doesn’t wear armor. Detests the weight of it. That’s why he surrounds himself with so many soldiers.”

He rechecked his aim anyway. The duke was still manhandling his guests. Caim wished he would sit up straight. His fingers were getting numb.

Kit spun around and sat on the narrow railing. “For all the good they’ll do him. Are you going to finish this anytime soon? It’s loud in here. I can hardly hear myself think.”

“Just a moment.”

The duke leaned back in his chair, his shoulders framed by the wide oaken back. Caim released the bowstring. In that moment, the target glanced upward. Wine ran down Reinard’s blubbery chins as their gazes met.

The arrow sped across the hall like a diving falcon. It was a perfect shot, a sure kill. But just before it struck, the torchlight flickered. Cups tipped over. Plates crashed to the floor. Caim’s neck hairs tingled at the sight of Liram Kornfelsh, sprawled in front of the Duke. The arrow’s blue feathers quivered above the emerald brooch nestled in the hollow of his throat.

Screams echoed off the hall’s high walls as guests bolted from their seats, all except for Kornfelsh, who they left lying across the high table like an overstuffed ham. The duke grasped his hands together as his soldiers rushed to surround him.

Caim grabbed the other arrows and fired in rapid succession. The first caught a bodyguard through the left eye. The second penetrated the boss of a soldier’s shield and through the forearm holding it, but the duke

remained unscathed. Caim tossed the bow aside and raced down the balcony.

Kit skipped along the railing beside him. "I told you the shot was off. You have a contingency plan, right?"

He clenched his jaws tight together. The only thing worse than making a grand mess of a job was doing it in front of Kit. Now he had to get down and dirty. He reached behind his back and drew a pair of *suete* knives. Eighteen inches of singled-edged steel gleamed in the torchlight.

A sentry appeared at the end of the catwalk. Caim flowed past him, close enough to smell the wine on the man's breath, and the sentry stumbled against the wall, his life spilling through his fingers from a bloody gash across his throat.

On the floor below, the duke was ushered by his bodyguards through a door at the back of the hall. Caim vaulted over the railing, jumping right through Kit. For a moment as their bodies merged, he was covered from head to foot by tingling goose bumps. A thrown spear flashed just inches in front of his face as he landed on the central trestle. Flagons and dinnerware went flying as he dashed down the polished length of the table.

"He's getting away." Kit floated above his head.

Caim bit back a rude response. "Then how about you go follow him?"

She sped off with a huff.

Caim kicked open the door. The duke would be heading to his quarters on the top floor of the donjon where he could hole up until reinforcements arrived. If that happened, Caim was well and truly fucked. But he had never failed to complete an assignment before; he didn't plan to start now.

The corridor beyond was unlit. He started inside, but a nagging sense of caution made him pause. That hesitation saved his life as a sword blade swept through the empty space where his neck would have been. Caim ducked and jabbed with both knives. His left-hand *suete* cut through a colorful surcoat and got caught in links of mail underneath, but the right-hand blade found a gap in the armor. A gurgle issued from the shadows as the hidden guardsman slumped forward. Caim jerked his knives free and swept down the hallway.

A single staircase led to the higher levels. The steps spiraled clockwise around a thick stone newel post. Caim sprang up the stairs two at a time. As he came around the first landing, the twang of a crossbow string

reached his ear a split second before a quarrel zipped past. Caim threw himself against the wall. From somewhere above echoed the staccato clack of a hand crank.

Caim pushed off from the wall and darted up the steps as fast as his legs would propel him. If there was a second archer lying in wait for him, he would be dead before he knew it. He rounded another turn. A lone crossbowman stood on the landing above, furiously turning the iron crank to reload his weapon. The soldier dropped the crossbow and grabbed for his sword, but Caim cut him down before he freed the weapon.

Caim crept up the last flight of stairs to the keep's highest level. The upper landing was empty. Candles dripping wax from brass sconces on the wall illuminated a juncture of two hallways. He put his back to the cool stone and peered around the corner into the corridor that led to the master suite. So far, the duke had shown an exceptional affinity for sacrificing his men to preserve his own hide. Two bodyguards were down. Two more to go. Decent odds. Caim sidled down the hallway. The door to Reinard's suite was reinforced with thick iron bands. It would be barred from the inside. Nothing short of an axe would get through the door, but he had another idea.

Caim was moving toward a shuttered window on the side of the hallway when Kit's head and one shapely shoulder poked through the door.

"You better hurry," she said. "He's packing up to run."

A cool breeze ruffled Caim's hood as he swung open the shutters. A sixty-foot drop yawned on the other side.

"He doesn't have anywhere to go."

"Not quite. There's a hidden passage that leads outside the grounds."

"Damn it! Why didn't you mention that earlier?"

"How was I supposed to know it was there? It's pretty well hidden, behind a wardrobe case."

Caim swung a leg over the sill. Time was running out. If the duke got outside the compound, he would be near impossible to catch.

"Keep watch on that secret tunnel, Kit. Follow Reinard if he makes it outside. I'll catch up."

"Will do."

She vanished back inside the chamber. Caim leaned out the window.

He still didn't know what had gone wrong in the great hall. The shot had been set up perfectly. Nothing he could do about it now except to correct his mistake and get out fast.

As he climbed out onto the sill, he spotted the outline of another window on the same level thirty paces away. Pale light flickered from within. Exit scenarios played through Caim's mind as he ran his fingers over the outer wall. Once the job was finished, he could drop down to the keep's courtyard to make his escape, or he could use the duke's secret tunnel. Either plan held its own set of risks. He'd hoped to be gone by now. Every passing minute reduced his chances for success.

The broad ashlar blocks of the keep's outer shell provided strong protection against siege weapons, but their wide seams made good purchase for climbing. He found a crevice in the wall and grabbed hold without stopping to consider the prudence of his actions. He hated rushing a job, but he was running out of options at this point. He focused on his holds.

A prickling itched down his spine as he reached a point halfway between the windows. He froze, clinging to the sheer stone face. Something drew his gaze toward the heavens. A thick blanket of clouds veiled the night sky. The light of torches from the courtyard below flickered upon the keep's crenellations. He saw nothing at first. Then, something moved among the battlements. Caim held his breath as a silhouette passed above him, a sinuous shape gliding through the dark. For one terrible moment he thought it had seen him, but then it was gone.

Caim waited several heartbeats before he dared to breathe again. What was going on? He didn't have time to waste. Trying to put the specter out of his mind, he lunged for his next hold.

Seconds later, he was at the window. The clear glass casement opened with a slight rattle, but no one inside noticed. The window led into the master bedchamber. Beyond it Caim could see entrances to other rooms and the stout door leading to the hallway he had vacated minutes before. Both bodyguards stood at the barred door, swords out, watching the portal as if expecting Caim to burst through at any moment.

The duke hunched over a heavy trunk. "Ulfan, leave off that damned door and help me!"

One of the bodyguards turned around as Caim crawled through the window. He opened his mouth to shout a warning, but never got the

chance. Caim hurled a knife with a whip of his hand. The bodyguard jerked back, a runnel of blood streaming down his collar as he fell to his knees with the *suede's* smooth handle protruding from his throat.

Reinard dropped a heavy sack that clinked as it hit the floor. "What—?"

Caim drew his other knife and crossed the room just as the second bodyguard turned. As the man raised his sword arm to strike, Caim lunged in close and drove his weapon full length into the joint under the man's armpit. The bodyguard gasped and slid off the knife.

"Caim!" Kit shouted from behind him.

He turned, knees bent with his knife at the ready. From this vantage he could see the wardrobe Kit had mentioned. It was pulled aside, and a black tunnel mouth yawned in the wall beyond. A young man in the duke's livery with fair hair and a short goatee emerged with a bared arming sword in his hand. Caim pivoted out of the path of the falling sword and thrust his knife into his opponent's side. The point struck a rib. Caim twisted the blade and punched it through the connective tissue between the bones.

The young man's last breath wheezed from the wound as he crumpled to the floor.

The duke cringed beside a massive, four-post bed. "Please." His jowls trembled as he held out his hands before him. An angry welt marred one of his palms. "I'll give you anything you want."

"Yes." Caim crossed the floor. "You will."

The duke died with considerably less effort than his bodyguards. Caim left the body stretched out on the bed with a bloody hole carved into the chest. He hadn't been able to take out Reinard in front of his dinner guests. His clients would have to be satisfied with butchery. The message was sent.

Caim retrieved his other knife and scanned the chamber. If he hurried he could be over the walls and outside the keep before the duke's men organized any meaningful pursuit. He didn't expect them to trail him for long. With their liege dead, they would be more concerned with finding and protecting Reinard's heir. By all accounts young Lord Robert was a decent boy, a far cry from his monstrous father. The duchy would be a better place.

Caim's gaze fell on the young man sprawled at the tunnel entrance.

He had never set eyes on Lord Robert, but he had a reliable description. Twenty-two years old, light brown hair with a wisp of a beard and blue eyes. The youth on the floor matched the description too closely to be a coincidence. Caim cursed under his breath. So much for leaving these lands in the care of a kinder, more tolerant liege.

Kit walked through the door to the hallway. "You're going to get some company very soon."

Caim considered the open window. "How many?"

"More than you can handle. Believe me."

"I do. What about outside?"

"All those pretty ladies and gentlemen have stirred up quite a commotion in the yard. Every exit is sealed and extra men have been put on the walls. Search parties are scouring the grounds."

"And the tunnel?"

Kit gave him a sassy grin. "Lots of stairs and the rest of the duke's bodyguards wait at the other end. They might not be happy to see you come out before their boss."

Caim wiped his knives clean on Lord Robert's tabard. Nothing was going his way tonight. He was going to have to use his last option. By the amused expression on her face, Kit knew it, too. He hated admitting she was right, but he'd probably hate dying even more.

He went around the room snuffing candles and lamp wicks to plunge the chamber into darkness except for a single lantern resting beside the tunnel mouth. He passed the Duke's traveling trunk and the sacks spilled on the floor without a glance. Just one of those purses would set him up for a year, but he was an assassin, not a thief.

Fists banged on the door.

"You'd better hurry," Kit said.

Caim tried to ignore her as he pressed his back against a wall in the darkest part of the room. There amid the shadows, he closed his eyes and shut out the outside world. He focused on the sliver of fear quivering at the center of his core. Fear was the key. It was always there, hidden beneath layers of denial and repression. Caim hated this. He had to tap into that feeling, allow it to possess him. At first, he didn't think he could. There were too many distractions. The pain was too far removed. But then a memory seized hold of him. It was an old memory, full of pain.

*Raging flames painted the night sky in hues of orange and gold, and threw shadows across the yard of the villa where the tall bodies sprawled. There was blood everywhere, pooled in the gravel, splattered across the face of the man kneeling in the center of the yard, running down his chest in a great black river.*

*Father . . .*

Caim opened his eyes as the dark came alive.

It gathered around him like a cloak. By the time the guards battered down the door, he was hidden within its inky folds. Just another shadow. The soldiers flitted about like bees from a jostled hive. Some dashed into the tunnel with lit firebrands. Others stood over the corpses of the duke and his son. None of them detected the shade that glided out the door and down the stairs.

Once outside, Caim scaled the keep's curtain wall and disappeared into the countryside. Dappled moonlight splashed over him like a gossamer rainstorm. A quarter mile away from the stronghold, he released the cloying darkness. He grabbed the trunk of a sapling to hold himself upright as a wave of disorientation overloaded his senses. The darkness swam before his eyes in a thousand shades of gray and black. Something lurked in the distance, just beyond the limit of his vision. He didn't know how he summoned the shadows. The power had resided within him for as long as he could remember, lurking within him, threatening to erupt whenever he was frightened or angry. He had learned to control those feelings over the years, but he never got used to it.

After a minute, the weakness passed and the normality of the night returned, and Caim resumed his trek through the fog-strewn moor. Kit danced ahead of him in the distance like a will-o'-the-wisp. The faint tune of a tavern song reached his ears. Same old Kit. Nothing fazed her. Yet he couldn't share in her frivolity. Not even the prospect of the sizable bounty he would soon collect lifted his spirits. Apprehension welled up inside him, rising up like the deep arm of the sea, dragging him into unknown depths. His steps slowed in the fog.

Overhead, a lone star pierced the cloud cover. Like a man grasping a lifeline, he stumbled toward it, following its shimmer through the gloom.