

The Mother of Shadows  
By R. Walt Bailey

Leryn awoke very suddenly. Sitting up from the blanket she shared, she looked all around. The sky was still intensely blue, but the sun's position indicated she had slept for more than an hour. The crystal mountain lake rippled slightly from the steady breeze in front. Their horses still wore their hobbles and fed quietly in the small meadow behind them. Absentmindedly she ran her hands through her long red hair and noticed that it had dried during their mid day nap. Beside them, her clothes were stacked and folded neatly. As always, Giland's clothes were piled haphazardly beside hers.

Looking over at the First Sword of Bre'land, her best friend and lover, she brushed the thick lock of brown hair that had fallen over his eyes back into place. He still slept soundly, his breathing soft and rhythmic. His long taunt body was like his face and eyes, absolutely beautiful. They had been good, inseparable friends her whole lifetime of twenty years, minus the six turns she was away at Tiburn Academy.

Rising to her feet, she grabbed the practice sword lying beside her clothes. Instantly she flowed into a smooth series of two-handed forms as she moved towards the edge of the lake. When her ten-minute routine was finished, beads of sweat covered her chest and forearms. She stopped with her arms outstretched before her, palms and saber up. The small heron tattoos were more noticeable on her wrists because of the moisture. At the sound of steps behind her, she wheeled on the balls of her feet, her blade stopping just an inch from Giland's nose. "Your form is absolutely perfect," her handsome friend admitted.

"You are only saying that because I'm still naked. I see you took the time to get dressed again." She noticed he was holding an envelope in his hands instead of his practice sword.

“Leryn, your mother entrusted me with the responsibility of giving this to you on the one-year anniversary of her death. I gave her my solemn oath that I would discharge that responsibility.”

She took the envelope from him but did not open it. Instead, she walked back to her clothes and began getting dressed. After buttoning her tan blouse and tucking her shirt tails into her olive riding pants, she brushed her auburn hair and wove it into a tight warrior’s pleat that hung to the middle of her back. Only when finished did she take her belt knife and break the wax seal on the small package. Inside she found a short note and a coin sized silver medallion hanging by a leather thong.

*My Dear Leryn,*

*As you read this letter, I will have been dead for a year. By now, the vultures are circling the castle, deciding how they are going to split up the pie. It was important for you to have this time on your own, so you could better recognize your enemies. The enclosed medallion is ancient and has been handed down in our family for thousands of years. It helped me in my times of need, and it will do the same for you. Use it both cautiously and judiciously.*

*You were born with skills and abilities that I never possessed; but you will need the medallion to manage your enemies. In your extensive library, find a ponderous tome by Erikson, and read the chapter on Shadows. It will help you understand the uses and strength of the medallion.*

*Give the pendant to your first-born child on your deathbed. You and the First Sword will have beautiful children together. I may be an old woman as I write this, but I’m not as blind as you would think.*

*All my love,*

*Margarey the 1<sup>st</sup>, Queen of Bre’land*

Leryn held the medallion in her hand. It was engraved in a deep Castilian design around the edges plus a rune on one side and one line in large letters centered on the opposite face. On one side was engraved a seven-sided star. On the other, “Mother of Shadows.”

“Are you all right, Your Grace?”

It always amused her that Giland would never address her by her first name if she was dressed. They had just spent two hours naked in each other’s arms, enjoying the pleasant day together, where she was Leryn. Now dressed, she was once again the Queen. “Captain, escort me back to Drakehall. I have some reading to do.”

Her castle sat strategically in the middle of the city of Drake. A short stone wall defined the castle boundaries skirted by a lush green meadow leading up to the forty-foot castle gates. It was not uncommon for her barons and other parishioners to set up camp on the meadow. Several were in place now well in advance of tomorrow’s scheduled meeting. Her mother had encouraged this practice since it “Kept the bastards out of my house,” as she was fond of saying.

Drakehall itself was large, ancient, with four towers and one great hall. It had more than enough room to house the visiting barons, but Leryn thought her mother had the right idea. The guards saluted as she and Giland rode through the main sally port with the huge iron portcullis suspended above. Grooms met them when they reached the stables and took their horses. Leryn threw one leg across the saddle and dropped lightly to the ground. Her feet had no more touched the yard when her steward began jabbering away. Holding up her hand to silence the man, Leryn said, “Let me guess, Baron DeValma is unhappy about something, what a surprise.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” the old steward replied. “And, he demands an audience with you immediately.”

“Another surprise,” the Queen said. “I’ll receive the Baron in my sitting room... Captain Giland, with me please.”

As they walked together towards the Queen’s tower, Giland whispered. “DeValma has a hired army much larger than the Queens Guard, Your Grace.”

“All the barons have private armies larger than the Queen’s Guard. DeValma’s just happens to be the largest. Regardless of what they say, what he wants is to take his barony, combine it with the five others, and form a new country. In short he wants secession from Bre’land.” They walked together up several flights of stairs before speaking again. “DeValma is the most dangerous man in the realm. In the past year, he has galvanized a covey of the barons into a revolutionary group, one step away from civil war.”

“What do you plan to do?”

“I have no idea,” the Queen said as they passed through two guards who were standing at rigid attention and into the sitting room for her expansive quarters. They were met by her hand maidens who instantly provided a selection of dresses for her to wear for her meeting with the baron. “I’ll see DeValma dressed as I am. I’m not about to primp for that traitor.” A raptor like stare from her quickly silenced any objections. “Alert me when he is here. Until then I will be in the library and I don’t wish to be disturbed.”

It took Leryn almost until the baron’s arrival to find the book her mother had alluded to in the letter. She turned to the chapter on shadows, just as a steward announced, “The Baron DeValma and his oldest son Joffery, Your Grace.” Leryn watched the two fat men enter followed by Captain Giland. The two men stopped several steps from her desk and bowed while the First Sword remained in the back of the room. Leryn rose and approached the two men. She extended her hand to each and welcomed them to her private study.

Leryn motioned to two large chairs by the fireplace and took a third for herself. Each respectfully waited for her to be seated before taking their seats. “Baron DeValma, the baron’s meeting is not until tomorrow. To what do I owe this unexpected visit? Perhaps you have come early to pay the one and a half million marks you owe the crown and thereby clear both your conscience and your tax debt to the realm at the same time.”

“Our tax debts will be the discussion for tomorrow’s meeting, Your Grace, and best held at that time. On my honor as a Knight of Bre’land, our expenses far exceed our ability to pay the taxes levied upon us.”

“If you dismissed the private army you are accumulating, perhaps you would find a surprise in your treasury that could be sent to Drakehall and put to better use... If this discussion is better held tomorrow; why did you demand an audience, Baron?”

“I know your Grace is a fine figure of a woman in the prime of her years and I wanted you to meet my oldest son, Joffrey. A marriage between our houses would only strengthen Bre’land... Otherwise, I see only division.”

Leryn looked at Joffrey for really the first time. A younger, fatter, possibly even more obnoxious version of the father; it was all she could do to keep from reaching for her sword and killing them both. Looking back from father to son and back again, she collected her thoughts. “As the young, unmarried Queen of Bre’land, you can appreciate that I receive many marriage opportunities. I have decided to weigh all my options and announce my decision on my next name day, two days from now. I pledge to give your son, Joffrey, ample consideration along with the other qualified prospects... Now, Baron DeValma, I am fatigued from my days outing and I need to prepare for tomorrow’s meeting with the Barons... Captain Giland will show you out, until tomorrow.” Courteously, she shook hands with each of the men and watched them depart.

“What do you make of that?” Giland asked when he had seen the baron and his son out.

“The message DeValma delivered loud and clear was that if I don’t spread my legs for Ser Piggy, his son, there will be civil war. I would sooner sleep with your horse. I’m sure Rust even smells better than those two.”

“Rust doesn’t smell bad.”

“Exactly, Giland, give me a few hours to look over this old book mother mentioned in her letter, then come and get me and let’s eat supper with the Queen’s Guard tonight.”

As Leryn settled once again behind her desk, she removed the medallion from her pocket and hung it from an unused candelabrum by her desk. Then she started through the old text, even making notes as she went. She did not look up again until Giland knocked lightly on her door. “Hungry?” he asked with that beautiful smile across his face.

“After what I have been reading and our brief meeting with Baron DeValma, I have lost my appetite. But I need to walk through while the Queen’s Guard is having their evening meal. It always cheers me up, and right now, I could use some cheering up.”

“Is it that bad?”

“No, it is just scary. Let’s go down and see the men.”

The huge barracks hall would feed almost four hundred soldiers at one time. As she entered the huge wooden building with the high rafters, the senior officer present called the mess to attention. It always brought tears to her eyes to see this highly trained battalion in their fine uniforms standing at attention for her. “I am yours to command, Your Grace,” the ranking officer, a Commander said.

“Then Commander, I order you to have your men resume their meal. I would very much like to shake their hands, meet each one of them, and thank them for their service.” The commander led her to

each company commander and in turn to each platoon of her soldiers. Leryn made it a point to meet every single soldier present, shake his hand, and thank them personally for protecting her and the realm.

“Why did you do that?” Giland asked as they walked back to her tower and library.

“If I cannot figure something out tonight, I may have to ask these men to die for me. The very least their Queen could do is shake their hands.”

“You know they love you, almost as much as I do.”

“Did DeValma finish erecting that enormous pavilion of his?”

“Yes, he did. He must have twenty guards stationed around it.”

“Have the guards lower the portcullis tonight. I don’t want anyone entering or leaving the castle until an hour after dawn.”

“Until tomorrow, Your Grace.”

They had both agreed to never show any affection for each other inside the castle. She seriously doubted if their affair was a secret among the loyal staff members, but you never knew who was watching or listening and so they agreed to never add any fuel to the fire. Leryn easily found her place in the old tome and once again began reading. Judging by the watch bells on the outer wall, it was well after midnight when she finished. The fire had burned down to just embers when she reached her bed. She knew what had to be done, but still she hesitated while sitting on the edge. Slowly the Queen placed the medallion over her head and said very clearly and out loud, “Baron DeValma needs a shadow tonight.” She lay down and pulled up the covers. Tired as she was, sleep did not come immediately but eventually she drifted off.

Sometime during the late evening, early morning hours Leryn rose from her bed, still sound asleep. She moved closer to the fireplace so that her shadow was cast on the opposite wall. She took the medallion in her right hand and said “Baron DeValma.” When she returned to her bed, the shadow

created by the fire and candles on the mantle remained against the wall. Silently the shadow started towards her door. Both the guards outside her quarters were awake but one was looking the wrong way. When the other guard saw the movement, he looked again, but the shadow was gone. He even walked down to investigate, but nothing was there. At the bottom of the Queens Tower, the shadow slipped through the main door and past the twin guards on station. Staying next to the wall, it ventured across the open courtyard and quickly disappeared through the portcullis and into the open meadow beyond the castle wall. It headed directly towards the Baron's pavilion.

Normally an early riser, Leryn did not stir from her bed until she was awakened well after daylight by one of her hand maidens. "Pardon me, Your Grace, but the First Sword insisted that I wake you."

"That is alright, Gissel. I am going to need a bath this morning before I greet anyone." Her right hand went to the silver medallion hanging around her neck and pulled it over her head. Before heading towards her bathing chamber, she placed the medallion in a drawer in her desk.

When she was presentable, she joined Giland in her private dining area. "I have some things to tell you," she said looking into his deep brown eyes. "But, from the look on your face, so do you. You go first."

"Baron DeValma is dead. Someone cut his throat last night. Got through twelve guards around his pavilion; and no one saw a thing. It seems impossible that a killer could have come and gone through all those sentries without being noticed. Joffrey wants to put this at our feet, but he knows the castle was locked by your orders until an hour after first light."

"I think I can beat that. I gave birth to something last night, but not in the traditional way you are thinking." Leryn stopped and took a long drink from her tea. Giland's eyes were as large as her cup. "From what I learned reading yesterday, the medallion mother gave me gives me the ability to produce a



shadow, a wraith, an all but invisible killer who leaves my body and goes forth to destroy my enemies. When its mission is done, it dissolves into nothing.”

“What an incredible but dangerous weapon... How do you control it?”

“It only works when I wear the pendant, so that is the safety. I concentrate on the person I want to target, put the medallion over my head, and go to sleep. It all happens while I dream. I vaguely remember seeing through the shadows eyes as it left my quarters and slipped silently through the castle, but like all dreams it fades away quickly.”

“Joffrey has his people breaking camp as we speak, but he is waiting to address you before he goes home to bury his father. The other barons will no doubt begin arriving by mid day for this afternoon’s meeting.”

Leryn rose, and followed by Giland, walked to her sitting room to greet the new baron. When she greeted Joffrey, she took his hand in both of hers. “Your father and I had our differences, but please accept my condolences for your loss.” The young man did not speak but simply nodded to her in acceptance. Leryn saw her opening. “Baron Joffrey, after you put your father to rest, you will rule the barony. I hope you rule much wiser than your predecessor. I expect you to disband your private army and pay half of your back revenues owed the crown within thirty days. If you cannot, then I will be forced to strip you of your rank and titles and bestow them on someone who can meet their obligations.”

All the steam was gone from the young man. “It will be as you command, My Queen.”

When Joffrey departed, Giland turned to face his lady. “That was smoothly done, Your Grace. Would that this afternoon’s meeting with the other five would go half as well,” he said. They both knew that was not likely to be the case.

Leryn dressed in her finest gown to greet the barons. She knew the meeting would be anything but cordial, but she wanted to look her best. Late in the afternoon, escorted by the First Sword, she

entered the large meeting hall. Not counting stewards and the High Septon, about twenty men were present; the five barons and their five champions, plus other lesser barons and retainers. Leryn knew immediately these men intended to challenge her openly for the crown of Bre'land. "It appears they are here to fight instead of talk," Giland whispered to her. "No doubt word of DeValma's death has reached them all."

The men all bowed to her respectfully, but Leryn did not return the formal courtesy. "You come into my presence with hired sell swords. Is it your intention to challenge me for the crown?"

Baron Selmy, the oldest but most aggressive of the five stepped forward. A tall thin man, he had wavy silver hair as well as a trimmed silver beard. "Queen Leryn, it is our right per the laws of Bre'land to challenge for the crown." He turned and looked at the High Septon for backup.

The spiritual and religious leader of Bre'land was in his eighties with a bald pate and bushy gray eyebrows. Her mother had despised the old man, but never considered him a threat. Leryn's feelings were exactly the same. "By the laws of Bre'land, it is their right, Your Grace," the High Septon said, a slight smirk briefly crossing his face.

"Who exactly challenges for the crown?" Leryn said.

"All five of us," Baron Selmy stated loudly, "in order of seniority. Our champions are here and prepared to meet the Queen's champion, Giland."

"So be it. Stewards, move the tables and rearrange the meeting hall for combat. It shall take place on the next hour's bell." While the tables and chairs were being moved to allow for a large opening in the center of the room, Leryn turned to face Giland. "Can you beat all five of these men? It seems as if my crown rests on the outcome."

Giland answered honestly. "Selmy's man, Korth, I know. I can take him. The others I have never seen before, but my sense of it is yes, I can take them all. That is why I am the First Sword of Bre'land, to serve as your champion and to dissuade these types of challenges."

"I suspect some type of treachery," Leryn said. "Would it be that I could put this off until tomorrow. The medallion could solve all these problems for me tonight as we sleep."

"That is not meant to be, My Queen," Giland whispered.

At the tolling of the hourly bell, the High Septon brought the two combatants together in the center of the room. The walls were lined with other nobles as well as members of the Queen's guard, as word of the challenge spread through the castle and the surrounding town. The old man began in a moderate monotone, the same way he preached Leryn thought. "All assembled bear witness; Baron Selmy and four others have challenged Queen Leryn, the first of her name, for the crown of Bre'land. Under our laws, it is their right and their champions are present. Captain Giland is the Queens champion and he is present. All challenges are to the death." The old man walked with the use of a staff. When he had removed himself from the center of the room, he banged his staff on the wooden floor twice. "Gentlemen, you may begin."

Giland cautiously approached the sell sword before him. He knew this man and had even sparred with him a few times. The man was good; there was no doubt of that. But he lacked the patience required to be great with a blade. The hired champion fought as if he knew that he did not have a chance. He blocked Giland's first few strikes and offered few of his own. His intention seemed to be more inclined to maneuver Giland into one particular corner of the room. The First Sword did not see the treachery until it was almost too late. Out of the crowd a man dressed in all black attacked. Giland's sword took the man in the throat, but not before the damage was done. Giland looked down at the

dagger protruding from his left thigh just before his leg gave way and he crashed to the floor. Before the baron's hired man could close for the kill, Giland was covered by two members of the Queen's Guard.

The High Septon banged his staff twice on the floor and in his most commanding voice yelled, "Stop." Leryn rushed to the side of her lover. Somewhere behind her she heard the High Septon issue orders for the Castle Maester to be summoned to attend to Giland. "The Queen has one bell to present her next champion," the High Septon announced in a clear voice over the den of noise.

"The dirk missed the large artery, Your Grace," the Maester said when Leryn joined him in his offices. "Captain Giland will recover, but it will be six weeks before he can resume his duties as your champion, I'm afraid."

Leryn thanked the man of about forty and told him to do his best. Escorted by two members of the Queens Guard, she returned to her suite of rooms to change clothes. At the age of twelve, Leryn had been sent to the country of Valdaria and there to enter the Military Academy at Tiburn. At the age of eighteen she graduated with honors as well as another distinction. She was not eligible to serve in the Valdarian Legion because of her nationality but because of her status as the Crown Princess of the friendly nation of Bre'land, she carried the honorary rank of Knight Commander. Her brown leather uniform was one of her most prized possessions and one she had not donned since her return home two years before.

She loved the smell of the leather that fit skintight over her legs. A tunic fit over a tight leather vest and her matching brown boots came to just above her knees. She carried her Heron Blade in a back scabbard, Valdarian style. With the aid of one of her hand maidens, she braded her long hair into a tight warrior's pleat. When her escort saw her, their first reaction was to reach for their blades until they recognized her beautiful face. Upon her command, the two Queens Guards escorted her down to the Maester's office to check on her champion.

Four of the Queens Guards stood around Giland, her arrival had obviously interrupted an argument. Giland's left thigh was heavily bandaged, but he was alert when she made eye contact with him. All the men standing jumped to attention. Leryn glanced at the Maester standing against the wall. "The bleeding has stopped, Your Grace. The Captain will recover."

Leryn nodded to the healer. "Thank you, Maester; the crown is in your debt." Looking around the room at the four standing men, she noticed two were sergeants and two were officers. All were young, and each stood tall and proud in the presence of their Queen. "What is the argument about?"

When no one spoke up, Giland cleared his throat. "These four are arguing about who should be your champion, Your Grace. There were two dozen others, but these four out ranked them."

Leryn could not fight back the tears in her eyes. She walked over to each of the men and shook their hands. She was as tall as each of them and before moving on to the next man, she thanked them individually and kissed each man on the cheek. After she had greeted all four men, she approached Giland's bed side. With no reservation, she kissed Giland on the lips and whispered "Thank you. I got you injured, and it is up to me to set this right." Looking up to the four soldiers standing adjacent to the bed, she said, "Thank you again to each of you. Today I will defend myself. I want two of you to stay with the Captain, and two of you to escort me back to the main hall."

Leryn was followed by the two young officers and the noisy hall became abruptly silent when they entered. It was hard for her to control her anger when she glanced at the five barons huddled together in conversation. "High Septon," she commanded in a loud clear voice.

"Your Grace," the old man said emerging from his seat in one corner of the room.

"I will serve as my own champion today. The officers behind me will be my seconds. I am ready to begin upon your command." As if on cue, the bell rang from the walls outside the hall.

Her instructors at Tibur had always told her a Blademaster could judge their opponent by seeing one stroke. She had fairly judged this man in his brief encounter with Giland. He rushed her with a wild swing without her ever drawing her sword. She avoided his meager effort with contemptible ease. With a smoothness and grace that only came from years of practice, she drew her blade from its back scabbard and turned the blade sideways, so her opponent could see the ornate engraving next to the guard. The look in his eyes said that he knew what the Heron meant. He also knew that he was a dead man. His one and only strike she easily turned aside. Her lightning fast riposte split him from collar bone to sternum.

As she walked to her seconds, she heard the man's body slump to the floor. Leryn handed one second her blade, his eyes seemed riveted on the engraving of the wading bird. She quickly removed her scabbard and tunic and handed them to the other young officer. His eyes seemed fixed on the Heron tattoos clearly visible on each of her wrists. "Your Grace is a Blademaster," the Lieutenant let slip and not in a whisper. Leryn did not respond, instead as she retrieved her sword, she winked at the two young men.

The word Blademaster seemed to circle the room like wildfire. Everyone knew there were only twelve such warriors in the world of Rythmar at any one time. These were the deadliest fighters on earth, the very stuff of legends, and the songs of poets and bards. "High Septon, two challengers this time, for I have much to do today as well as an important announcement to make."

The two hired blades that walked to the center of the hall didn't seem as confident as they were before. Her training had taught her, that unless multiple fighters were trained in fighting as pairs, more times than not they got in each other's way. This pair had not trained together and in less than ten seconds they were dead on the floor. Leryn brandished her blade in the direction of the five barons,

covering each of them in a spray of blood. A brief commotion disturbed the room as the remaining hired swords made a hasty exit from the hall.

All five of the rogue barons dropped to a knee before her. In short order, each withdrew their challenge to the throne and pledged their fealty to the realm. “I’ll give you gentlemen my decision in the morning. I want to sleep on it tonight before making up my mind.” Leryn looked around at the hundred plus people now crowded into the great hall, she left the barons on their knees. “I have an announcement to make... Captain Giland has asked for my hand in marriage and I have accepted. We plan on the ceremony occurring on the next full moon.” The hall erupted in cheers.

Back in the Maester’s office she found Giland sitting up and laughing with half a dozen of his mates that obviously had already received the news. “So, you killed three and the others fled. I heard you left the barons on their knees.”

“I am afraid there is a shadow hanging over a few of the barons. That problem will correct itself tonight. But that is not important. The big news is you are going to make an honest woman out of me.” All Giland’s soldier friends laughed and Leryn joined right in with them.

As she leaned down to kiss him, he whispered, “I’ll always make you happy, Leryn. I am a fast study and almost your equal with a blade, but I want to sleep at night and I never want a shadow hanging over me.”