



DARK
BREAKS
THE DAWN

———— BOOK ONE ————

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Scholastic Press
New York

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Larson, Sara B., author.

Title: Dark breaks the dawn / Sara B. Larson.

Description: First edition. | New York : Scholastic Press, 2017. | Series: Dark breaks the dawn ; book 1 | Summary: It is her eighteenth birthday, and Princess Evelayn of Éadrolan, the Light Kingdom has finally come into her full magical powers, which include shapeshifting, but she still has to be trained, and with her mother, the queen, away fighting the war with the Dark Kingdom of Dorjhalon, she must rely on two dark Draíolons, Lord Tanvir and Kelwyn, to prepare her—and with the corrupt King Bain plotting an attack she will need her powers much sooner than anyone foresaw.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016031955 | ISBN 9781338068696

Subjects: LCSH: Magic—Juvenile fiction. | Shapeshifting—Juvenile fiction. | Princesses—Juvenile fiction. | Nobility—Juvenile fiction. | Light and darkness—Juvenile fiction. | CYAC: Magic—Fiction. | Shapeshifting—Fiction. | Princesses—Fiction. | Nobility—Fiction. | Light and darkness—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.L323953 Dar 2017 | DDC 813.6 [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016031955>

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 17 18 19 20 21

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, June 2017

Book design by Abby Denning



ONE

THE JEWELLED FOREST BLURRED INTO A TAPESTRY OF color as Evelayn sprinted away from the castle. She whipped past the trees and bushes as though she was made from the wind that pushed at her back. The sentries unlucky enough to have been assigned to guard her—or, more accurately, to trail her—on these early morning runs were already falling behind, their harsh breathing cutting across the gray-tinged stillness of dawn.

Good, she couldn't help but think, as she kicked up her heels and pushed herself even harder. What she really wanted right now was to be *alone*, something nearly impossible to achieve. Inside the castle, on the grounds, even with just her sentries, she knew her duty. She knew the part she had to play. The queen had taught her well.

But she'd jerked awake this morning after yet another nightmare, only to realize that nothing had changed. Evelayn had found it harder than ever to don the mask that she was usually so adept at summoning. *The queen must always appear calm, unruffled. Your subjects will look to you; your actions will determine theirs.* Her mother's words, and Evelayn

had lived by them her whole life. After all, she would be the queen one day. Hopefully in the *very* distant future.

But what kind of queen would she be without her full power?

Evelayn's lungs burned hot for a moment, her throat went raw with suppressed emotion. Her sentries were no longer visible—or audible—but still she struggled for control. It was all she knew; it was her only defense against the rising panic.

Because it was her eighteenth birthday and *nothing had changed*.

She hadn't planned on running today, but after pacing in her room for a few minutes, Evelayn couldn't stand the silence or the tightness in her belly any longer. She'd pulled her lavender-streaked hair into a ponytail, yanked on her soft, supple running boots, and splashed water on her pale face. Evelayn had tried not to scowl at the dark circles beneath her violet eyes when she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Too many sleepless nights, worrying about the war. Worrying about her mother.

Queen Ilaria had promised she'd return from the warfront for Evelayn's birthday and the ceremony that was to take place that night. Evelayn could only hope her mother was going to keep that promise. She didn't want to see another Draíolon, didn't want to talk to anyone, except her mother.

Without even realizing it, she'd run north of the castle, skirting the city of Solas, heading for the high ground that would enable her to watch for her mother's arrival. It was a longer run than normal, and Tyne, her lady-in-waiting, would certainly be concerned, upset even, if she came to Evelayn's room and found it empty . . . but certainly she was at least allowed *this*, wasn't she? A brief escape as she tried to come

to grips with the fact that her full power hadn't manifested—that something was wrong with her. The future queen of Éadrolan.

The morning had grown lighter above her when Evelayn glanced up; in fact, she realized that if she squinted, the first rays of the sunrise were beginning to streak across the sky to the east, above the treetops. And then, in the infinitesimal break between one heartbeat and the next, something slammed into her. It felt as though her body had turned to flame, scorching her from within.

For the first time in her entire life her conduit stone burned in her breastbone.

Evelayn instinctively skidded to a halt, throwing out her hands to protect herself, expecting only the small burst of light she'd been capable of creating since she was a youngling. But instead, a ball of flame erupted from her right hand and a jet of light from the left. The light tore through the lush earth, leaving behind a black gash, and the fireball exploded against a nearby tree with an earth-shattering *boom*.

Evelayn slapped her hands over her ears with a howl of pain and blinked her eyes rapidly to clear the sudden tears from the onslaught of light and color and scent and *everything*. Until that moment she had existed in a world trapped by the pale, watery shades of dawn and had suddenly been thrust into the light of noon-day sun at Summer Solstice. Slowly the initial heat and shock of it all ebbed away, but the changes remained.

The blanket she'd always known was there, subduing her senses, had been pulled away. But no matter how many times she'd been taught about the block placed on all younglings' magic, no matter how often she'd been told what to expect on her eighteenth birthday,

nothing could have prepared her for this. *This* was what Éadrolan truly looked like? Smelled like? Sounded like? She'd known it would be different, but *this* . . .

Evelayn slowly turned in a circle, letting her hands drop to her sides, allowing the sounds—there were *so many sounds*—to wash over her, to fill her. She inhaled deeply, trying to identify the myriad scents she'd never noticed before. Beneath the acrid smell of the tree she'd burnt, the perfume of the flowers surrounding her was so much headier than she'd ever realized; the musk of the earth beneath her feet was so much denser, more complex . . . And the colors. *Oh, the colors.* Details she hadn't known were physically possible to see until that moment blurred as tears filled her eyes. This time, Evelayn didn't fight them. She'd never been so overwhelmed in her whole life, except perhaps when her mother had returned from that first battle nearly a decade ago without her father. But that had been a stunned, bone-deep grief. *This* was . . . disbelief mingled with indescribable awe.

An unfamiliar scent—something citrusy and spicy all at once—caught her attention moments before she realized the soft thumping sounds she could hear were a Draíolon running through the forest. Evelayn spun in dismay just as a male burst through the trees to the north of her, his amber eyes flickering to the still-smoking tree and the black gash in the ground before returning to hers.

“Where are they? Who did this? Are you hurt?” His rapid succession of questions made her flinch and the concern on his face grew even more pronounced. “I can help you—I've just come from the war-front and I know quite a bit about tending to wounds. Where are you injured?”

Evelayn's dismay churned into an even darker emotion—mortification. “No,” she managed to get out. She stumbled back when he moved toward her. With her heightened senses she noticed things about him she never would have seen so quickly before. The traces of gold in his amber eyes that matched the hint of gold in his skin, the richness of his bark-brown hair. And the sudden tang on the air that she was fairly certain was coming from him, as it mingled with the citrusy scent she'd already perceived.

“No? You're not hurt? Or no, you don't want my help?” He paused with his arm slightly outstretched.

Evelayn fought to keep her hands still at her sides, refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing her wipe her still-damp cheeks. Her blood ran hot with humiliation. He obviously didn't realize who she was, based on how he'd addressed her—or rather, the lack of propriety in his address. Perhaps she could escape before he discovered her identity and realized this disoriented wreck of a girl was—

“I must insist on lending my assistance. I've seen this many times—you're in shock. If you will allow me—”

“I'm not hurt,” Evelayn cut him off, drawing upon every ounce of training to don her most imperious voice and regal expression . . . despite the mess she certainly must have appeared to be. “Thank you for your offer, but I will bid you a good morning and let you continue on your way.”

The Draíolon male's eyes narrowed and she had the suspicion he didn't believe her for one second. Before he could protest yet again, Evelayn whirled, prepared to dash away, just as she noticed her sentries finally heading toward her, their eyes wide as they took in, first,

the destruction and then the strange male. They must have been truly lost to have only found her now, but it couldn't have been worse timing.

“Your Highness, *what* ha—”

“Let's head back, shall we?” Evelayn called out loudly the moment her sentry spoke, hoping to drown out his words. But her newly acute hearing didn't miss the sharp intake of breath behind her.

Evelayn waited no longer. With a silent prayer that the Draíolon who had errantly attempted to come to her aid would never tell another soul how he'd witnessed the crown princess of Éadrolan lose all control in the forest that morning, she kicked up her heels and sprinted past her sentries yet again.

It wasn't until she'd made it back to the castle that she realized she'd never reached the lookout point to see if her mother had kept her promise or not.