

"An incredible adventure that is more than a mere quest."

—JOHN HENDRIX, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Mythmakers*

# LIGHTSEEKERS

BOOK 1

## A KINGDOM OF SHADOWS



EMILY BAIN MURPHY



Praise for  
A KINGDOM OF SHADOWS

"*A Kingdom of Shadows* is a book-shaped lantern that illuminates themes of friendship and wonder amid high-stakes adventure, magical prose, and characters you'll be glad to follow. A brilliant beginning to a shining new series!"

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"From its hauntingly beautiful first chapter, this fantasy-adventure novel seized my imagination. Each page illuminates the wondrous news that the light has come into our world and the darkness cannot put it out. Rather than remaining an abstract idea, this gospel reality is embodied through the adventures of Emily Bain Murphy's youthful characters in down-to-earth ways that delight and move the heart. As a grandfather, I cannot wait to read this story to my grandchildren as they enter middle grade. What an attractive way to receive the invitation to become children of light in a dark and dangerous world. I commend *A Kingdom of Shadows* with much joy and confidence."

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“Reading *A Kingdom of Shadows* is like hearing a ‘secret song in the dark,’ a melody that pulls you into a world of magic and light. With world-building at its finest, Emily Bain Murphy constructs an incredible adventure that is more than a mere quest—with characters so richly drawn, readers will feel deeply invested from page one.”

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“*A Kingdom of Shadows* offers a page-turning, pulse-raising, heart-warming, breath-stealing, grin-inducing tale of danger, adventure, and friendship. I was hooked from the first chapter, and I will be impatiently waiting for the next book in the Lightseekers series so that I can find out what happens in the quests (both outward and inward) of these unforgettable characters.”

—CAROLYN ARENDS, recording artist, author,  
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*Book design by Diane Hobbing*

For James, Cecilia, and Liv,  
who always bring me so much light.







LYDIA'S MAP OF  
THE  
KINGDOM  
OF  
WILDFEL

The  
DEPOT

The  
Capital  
☆

Terreldell

The  
Rim

JSD



## CHAPTER ONE

THEY CALLED FINN'S TOWN THE BELLS BECAUSE the bells were what saved you from drowning.

Finn had grown up in the Bells, a town where water ran between houses instead of roads. There was little light, even in the day—and Finn knew all too well that once the sun went down, the darkened walkways along the canals turned from merely gloomy to dangerous. One night when he was seven, Finn had taken a wrong turn and fallen in. When the ink-black water rushed over him, he lost track of which way was up. There was no light to guide him, and the panic threatened to drown him before the water did. Instead, he listened for the bells that were strung in lines above every waterway. He followed their ringing to the surface and pulled himself out—sopping wet and terrified but alive.

Now that Finn was older, he'd stopped falling into the canals. But the bells still helped orient him in other ways. Bells with deep, warm tones filled the

safe areas of town, with their open-air markets selling spiced fish and grilled bread, where the rich people lived. The bells turned higher pitched in the areas where pickpockets were known to work. They rang shrill over the doorways and shops, like a warning.

In the part of town where Finn lived, the bells were the shrillest of all.

Finn leaned against the corner mart. He sharpened the blade of his knife while watching his best friend, Adrion, hone his gambling skills. The very air felt thick with nerves and anticipation. Before nightfall most days, the people of the Bells tried to hang on to every hint of the dying light. But once a year, everyone counted down the minutes to sunset.

And that night was tonight.

“Shall we make a wager?” Adrion asked. He flicked a coin into the air and, quick as a flash, caught it using a string with a fishing barb tied to its end. The coin disappeared into his pocket.

“What did you have in mind?” Finn asked. He examined the edge of his knife and nodded, content with its razor point.

Adrion flipped his coin again. “Biggest catch of the night.”

Finn eyed the people crowding around the canal bridges in their long skirts and cloaks, their faces already turned expectantly toward the sky.

“All right,” Finn agreed. “Here’s a twelve saying I get the queen.” He pulled a coin patterned with a dozen small holes from his pocket.



"A *twelve*." Adrion gave a low whistle, his eyes lit with excitement. "Someone's feeling confident."

"Have to," Finn said. He hid the nervous buzz that was singing through him. "I'm betting big tonight in every way."

Finn flipped his coin, and Adrion shot out his string. It was gone in an instant. Adrion had spent years perfecting the skill that he now put to use in an illegal game called Wicking. Wicking was a gamble: Whatever you could catch with the barbed string was yours to keep. Whatever dropped, you had to pay double.

Adrion was a master at Wicking.

And Finn was a master thief.

That's why they made a good team.

Finn eyed the gathering crowd again, but for once he wasn't thinking of picking their pockets to buy his dinner. Tonight was the only night of the year the Bells wouldn't be cloaked in complete darkness. The weak light during the daytime was scarce enough—at night, the kingdom descended into darkness that was black as pitch. Candles were usually hoarded. People locked up their lanterns, their matches and logs, guarding them as fiercely as precious jewels. But tonight people would bring them out. Because the auerflies were coming, drawn to any light they could find as they flew across the Kingdom of Wildfel.

Finn remembered the first time he'd seen one. A dazzling insect with wings like stained-glass win-

dows, veined with pure gold. When their wings caught the light, they shimmered like prisms. Some people tracked the auerflies around the kingdom, crossing all of Wildfel in the wake of their flight—which meant that clueless, unsuspecting visitors always flooded into town for the Night of the Auerflies.

Those easy marks for pickpocketing, along with the gold found in the auerflies' wings, were Finn's best chance to finally get enough money to escape the Bells.

And most importantly, to get his little sister, Lydia, out too.

Adrion abruptly stopped flicking his wrist. "What do we have here?" he muttered, nodding across the canal. "Think we found a new target."

In the growing gloom, Finn could make out a boy, perhaps five years older than them, navigating through the crowd. He had large brown eyes and rich brown skin that was darker than the golden shade of Finn's and Adrion's. He was dressed in a cloak the color of long-steeped tea, and the bag on his back looked enticingly full. He stopped to examine a bird in a cage at the market.

Finn watched the way the boy moved without hurry. As if he were utterly at ease, without a care in the world.

He clearly wasn't from the Bells.

"Don't get hasty," Finn said to Adrion. "Let's wait until tonight. Maybe that one will catch a few auerflies, and then he's got even more to take."

Finn had been daydreaming about baked rolls dripping with honey and pomegranate syrup in a new city. A place where the guards didn't know him and might not watch him as carefully or demand to be paid off for looking the other way. Where the gangs weren't threatening to take what little he had left. He had to build a better life somewhere else—him, Adrion, and Lydia—and he wanted to do it before the light was completely gone from Wildfel.

Before there was nothing left but shadows.

Adrion nodded and grinned. "Better pick a pocket to pay your debts tonight," he said. "Because I'm getting the queen."

Finn shoved him for good measure. But something pricked deep within him, and Finn felt oddly uneasy as he watched the strange boy continue to make his way through the crowd.

Perhaps it was because the boy was the only one who never once looked up at the sky.



"LYDIA." FINN STOOD OVER HIS SISTER, GENTLY SHAKING her awake. She'd fallen asleep in the small room they rented above the fish shop, bent over a table where she was mending their auerfly nets. For a moment, he'd watched the rise and fall of her breathing, the sunlight falling in a faint shaft across her face with its freckles shaped like stars.

"Got something for you," he said as Lydia sat up.

Smiling sheepishly, she rubbed her eyes, and he held out one last piece of special twine he'd swiped from a shop.

She eagerly took it from him. "This was just what we needed." Lydia examined it, then looked up at him with suspicion. "You bought this, right?"

"Course," he lied. "What do you think I am—some common thief?"

She gave him a wry look. "Not common, at least," she said, her fingers working the twine into the auer-fly net. "Nothing about you is common."

Lydia was ten years old and much too good for the Bells. Too good for him, probably. For as long as he could remember, Finn had sensed a forest deep inside himself that seemed dried out and empty. What he sensed inside her was something full and green, bursting with flowers and probably even small hopping woodland creatures out for a spring picnic. Which was why he needed to get her out of the Bells for good. He'd managed to stay out of the Bellsian gangs, giving them enough of a fight with his knife that they didn't bother him much anymore.

But he didn't like the way they'd started looking at her.

"We finally found a guide to help us out of the Bells. He might even take us as far as the Rim," Finn said, grinning.

"Adrion agreed?" Lydia asked.

Finn nodded. Adrion hadn't wanted to spend their limited money on a guide. He thought they



could make it alone. But Finn insisted. He wasn't sure what was out there. He'd never been outside the Bells before, but he'd heard stories from travelers in the tavern after the walnut ale loosened their tongues. There were witches out there and wolves. Roaming soldiers and violent robbers.

He had to protect Lydia. And it frightened him to not know whether he could.

"Adrion went through a lot of trouble to find someone," he said. "We are doing whatever it takes to get out of here with that guide tonight."

"Not whatever," she corrected. "Not if it hurts someone."

He shrugged, and she paled.

"Especially you," she insisted.

She bent over her net, pulling the final strand. It was meant to hold the auerflies without injuring them.

"Are you packed?" he asked to change the subject. She gestured toward a small leather satchel with all her worldly belongings stuffed inside: A few changes of clothes. A bag of clove oranges. Her little rabbit made out of clay, which their mother had left. It was the only thing she'd given them, other than a song she'd taught Finn. To his chagrin, he remembered just the beginning, but he'd held it close, like a secret. He sang it to Lydia some nights, pulling it around them like an invisible quilt. And he would have given his left ear to remember the rest of it.

"Our secret," their mother had said to him, the

last time he'd seen her. He'd been four years old. "Our secret song."

"Do you think she's still out there?" Lydia asked, as if she could read his mind. "Alive somewhere?"

He had no idea what had happened to their mother. He didn't have anything about her to hold on to, not even a name. Only a tattered piece of a song and a clay rabbit.

He'd waited so long for her to come back. But just like the light, that dream was fading.

"Maybe she's out there somewhere," Finn said now to Lydia. "We won't know until we get away from here."

He packed up his own things, making sure his knife was handy. He glanced at the orange-and-black-checked flag that hung over their door. It would be the last thing they packed.

"For the General," he said.

They pledged their loyalty by kissing their fingers and touching it as they always did. Finn did it twice this time, for bravery. As he gathered up his lantern and his net, Lydia hummed their secret song, just barely, under her breath.

"Don't get hurt," she said in a whisper and walked out the door.

He picked up his auerfly net and followed her, but he wouldn't make any promises he couldn't keep. He knew it always hurt a little when a whole life was about to change.



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