

# KATARINA

THE DRAGONSLAYER  
AND THE FOEBREAKER'S  
CURSE

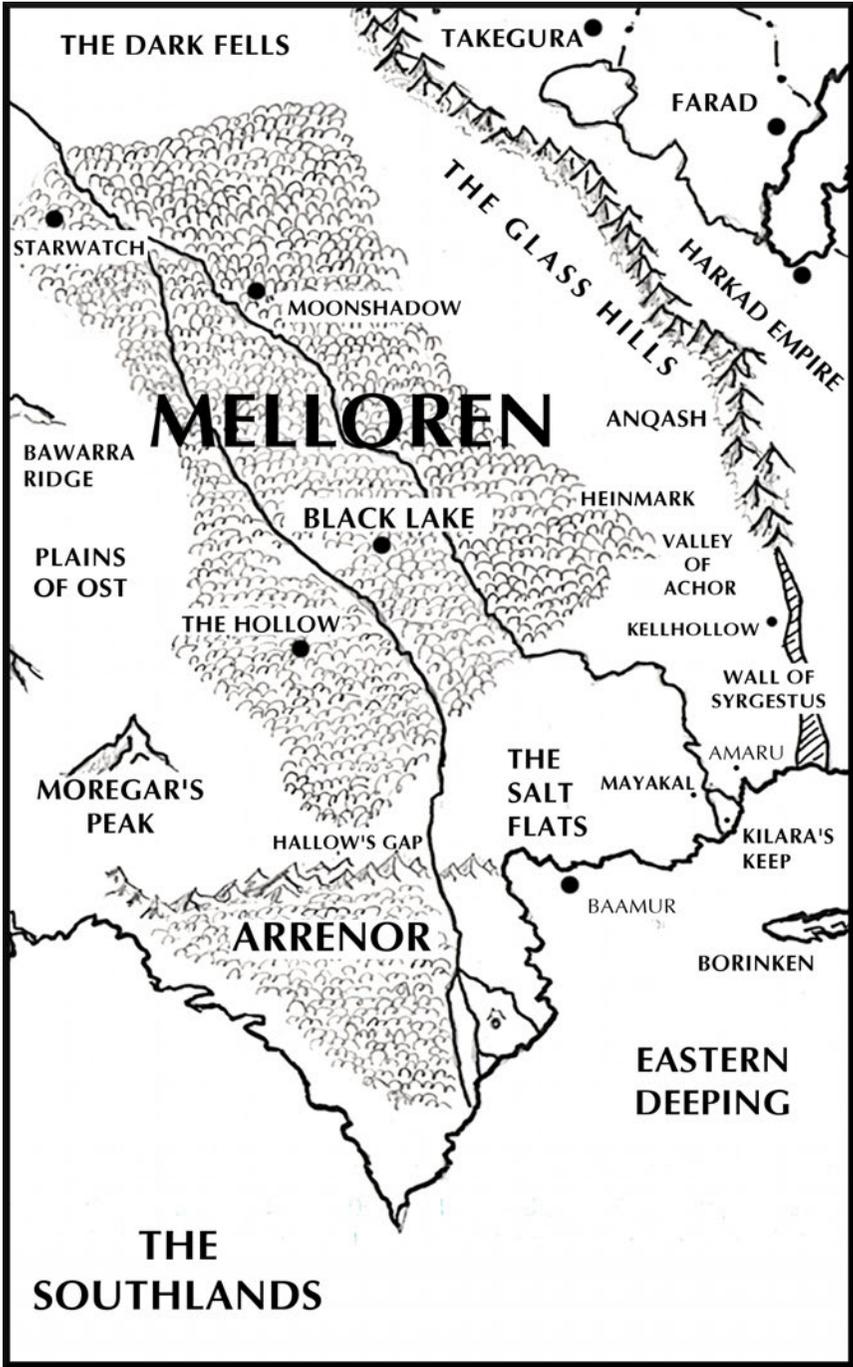


SAMUEL MEDINA

Katarina the  
Dragonslayer  
and the  
Foebreaker's Curse

Book One of The Fetters of Wizardry

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## KATARINA

In an untidy village in the Border Kingdom of Heinmark there lived a worm farmer. Now, he was not the sort who dug up earthworms for the ends of fish hooks or who raised grubs for the keepers of pigeons. Nor did he raise poisonous *angarra* for sale to apothecaries and murderers. He was, in fact, a cultivator of giant silk worms, but not a very good one. Hendrik was his name, but only his wife ever called him that, and although his surname was Keltsen, he was most often called Sulk, but never to his face.

Hendrik, or Sulk, if you will, was a moody man of average height and outstanding girth, with a surly disposition. Some attributed his ways to his notable lack of success as a worm farmer, and others to chronic indigestion,

but in either case, Sulk was pleasant enough to be around if he was in a good mood. Such moods were rare indeed, and it was during one of these bouts of uncharacteristic good-naturedness that Sulk went down to the local slave market to acquire some help for the farm.

The slave market was really not much more than a moldy wooden platform of questionable workmanship where men of poor manners and poorer hygiene bought and sold those unfortunate enough to have been sold for debts, who had been captured in raids, or who were born into bondage. On this day, like most market days, the small square was crowded and noisy, thick with the scent of unwashed bodies, tobacco, and horses.

Sulk pushed his way past some old men playing at dice and took a seat on one of the raised benches facing the platform. The gallery was what the local men called it, though it was hardly worth the name. He grinned at a serving maid from the nearby tavern. She smiled brightly but deep dislike simmered in her eyes as she minced her way back to fetch another tray of ale.

A good number of slaves were bought and sold as the day drew on. The men nodded to one another as a particularly promising one was brought out. "A fine bargain at twelve gold marks, I tell you," the old auctioneer cried out. "Only ten years old, this one, and look how big he is already!" The boy, however, had seen his tenth birthday come and go some five years earlier.

The bidding ended at fourteen gold, and the boy was taken home by a kindly old farmer who'd never had a son. The next slave to be sold did not fare as well, being sold to the keeper of a small coal mine. He spat at his new master, and was swiftly put down with the sort of spiteful vigor for which the Men of the Borderlands were well-known.

"Now, there's some action at last, wouldn't you say, Keltsen?" A skinny old man with more warts than teeth took a seat next to Sulk with a laugh.

"I was hoping it'd last longer, Jeppe. Hasn't been a good fight here in months." Sulk laughed and pointed to the cages, where some of the younger slaves jostled one another. "There's bound to be some more sport today, I'll warrant!"

"I reckon you're right, there, sonny," Jeppe said. "It ain't much, but in a little town like this, a slave market's the best entertainment a man can have without spending money."

By mid-afternoon Sulk's good mood had eroded a bit. "They've had a few good ones, but these slavers want too much money."

"But you still got it fixed in your head to get yourself a slave, I take it?" Jeppe grinned, and took a swig from a small bottle.

"Yessir, I'm determined. A man's got too much to do in life to be bothered with drudgery, I say." Sulk gulped down the last of a watery ale, and looked to see if the tavern maid was near.

"How much are ye looking to spend?" Jeppe asked.

"Not a copper above six marks," Sulk replied.

"You're not going to get a boy, not for that much, I'll take my oath on it," Jeppe said. "But this one might suit you." He pointed as the auctioneer began again.

"Only five gold marks for this fine little specimen of a *rechaizo*! Young and ready for work," the auctioneer said. "Taken in a raid, she was. Sweet as a summer apple." *The little rat bit me six times before I got her in the wagon*, he thought. *Shouldn't have picked her up when old Norrich sold her down the river*. In the Borderlands, the slave trade moved along the rivers. Traders would often sell difficult slaves to other merchants as they went along. This practice had become common in recent years, and to this day when someone puts you into an unfavorable situation, it is said that they sold you down the river. *Ain't gonna turn much of a profit*, the auctioneer thought, *but best to be rid of her before she*

*starts making trouble again. I'm getting too old for this.*

There were no takers at five gold, and it seemed obvious to everyone why. She was a small, wiry girl with dark, unkempt hair, large violet eyes, and long, pointed ears. "She's *rechaizo*, all right," Jeppe quipped. "Unwanted, the Elves call them. They got no place among whats left of the Elves, and for the most part a cruel place in the world at large. You should buy her, it'd be good for you and the missus. Civilize her, and turn a nice profit, too."

"Five marks ain't cheap, even for a girl," Sulk replied.

"Maybe, but the wiry ones are always the best suited to hard work. Think about it, Keltsen! She's small enough that it won't cost you much to keep her. Can't be more than nine or ten years old, though with these half-breeds it's kind of hard to know for sure. She could tend your worms and maybe even raise a decent garden. By the time she's a woman grown, she'd have earned your money back, and you could sell her for three times as much."

Sulk fingered his purse. "You're talking sense, now, old man!" He waved to the auctioneer. "You there! Don't put that one away just yet." *Just a few years, and I'll get twenty gold for her, for sure*, Sulk told himself as he counted out the coins to the auctioneer. Some of the townsfolk later said that he seemed almost fond of the child. This may have been true of Sulk in his better moods, but such a mood had little chance of lasting once he returned to the reek of worms and a wife who would rather he had bought a young mule.

"You'll work, you will, little one, and hard, too, if you're to earn your keep," Sulk said to the child. "I'm a kind man, but I don't take to lazybones and freeloaders, no sir." The child nodded, but scowled as soon as the man looked away. They walked on in silence, the man leading his purchase by a thin leather rope.

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"Does this child even have a name?" Mayrah Keltsen

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frowned. "Winter's just two months away, and there's too much to do without having to tend to a child, and a girl at that!"

"Call me Katarina." The girl's eyes never left the stone floor of the farmhouse.

"I'll call you a sass-monkey and give you a good wallop, if you speak out of turn again!" Sulk, it seemed, was himself again.

A shadow passed over the girl's face. *You will be free of these people one day soon. You'll escape, or buy your freedom. They won't have you for long.*

"Now, see here, Hendrik. She might be one of those *rechaizo* heathens, but there's no need to threaten her just for saying her name. Come here, and let's have a good look at you, girl." Mayrah took the girl's chin in her plump hand and studied her face. "You're a pretty child, despite them long, pointy ears." Mayrah put her hands on her hips and stepped back. "Now, listen to me, Kat—that's what I'll be calling you. We'll not be cruel to you, but you'll have to know your place. Just you stand there and keep those pointy ears shut and your nose out of grown folks' business."

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"Now, Kat, don't you forget to water the garden," Mayrah said as she waddled by. "I'm heading to town, now. You know your master always comes back from hunting empty handed, so I'll expect my table set and supper on it when I get back." Mayrah had discovered the considerable pleasures of delegating much of her own work to the help, and now spent little time at the farm if the weather was good.

The girl nodded but said nothing. *If I'm still here, she thought. Katarina sighed, and dragged another sack of dengo seed to the feeding trough. She looked toward the rain barrel just outside the barn door and thought of the little bag of coins she'd tucked under it. Who am I kidding? I can't escape*

*just yet. Even if get my hands on a good map, Sulk's hounds would find me quick as crickets unless I find a way to cover my scent. I'd have to get a chance to make it to the southern road, but that's not likely. I'll be selling old scraps of metal from the forest to the blacksmith for years before I have enough to buy my freedom.*

"Ow!" One of the brood mothers had bitten the girl. They were docile most of the time, but they did not like to be moved. *That's going to hurt for a few days*, she thought as she looked at the welts forming on her wrist. *I'd better get the rest of these worms moved.*

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"They're gone, Camby," Katarina said to the mule from her perch on the cottage roof. She scrambled down and picked up a hornbeam stick she'd cut for herself. *If old Sulk saw me, he'd work me harder for sure*, Kat thought as she skittered up onto the paddock fence. She ran along the top rail and then sprang into the small corn field with a flourish. *Back in Moonshadow they called me Monkey for a reason*, she said to herself with a grin. Katarina, however, did not know that the nickname had been intended as an insult. She'd been thought of as somewhat of an oddity among the half-elven, who were unaccustomed to seeing the agility of the Elves in those of mixed blood. Her mother had died of a fever when she was three, and the elders took her in because no one else had wanted her. They did, however, have the decency not to tell her this.

"You are a murderer, and a coward!" she said as she crept up behind the scarecrow. "Vengeance has come for you. How do you answer?" The scarecrow was silent, clearly oblivious to matters pertaining to the formal Challenge made by the heroes of old. Katarina stalked closer, and then attacked, ramming the end of her stick into the scarecrow's back. Straw flew everywhere. *Just like the Grey Ghost! Maybe one day when I'm free I'll become a mighty hero like him.* The elders in Moonshadow had told her many stories of the Elvish assassin who'd become something of a legend in the last twenty years, and often she imagined herself to be very

much like him. She swung her stick through the air in a series of attacks, striking the defeated scarecrow on the legs and chest. "Where the Grey Ghost walks, kings hide," Katarina said with a smile.

There was a commotion at the barn, and Katarina gasped. *I left the barn open again!* She ran back to find feathers scattered in the yard, and footprints leading inside. *A wolf!* Panic took hold of her for a moment, and then she clenched her stomach against it. *Fear cannot defeat me,* she said to herself. *That's what the old legends say the Pelethite champions once shouted when going to battle. Death itself must stand aside if my cause is just!* She inched closer to the doorway. *I wish I had my slingshot.*

She peeked inside. A small, mangy wolf barely larger than a dog snarled at one of Sulk's younger goats. *Just had to be the day Sulk took the hounds out on a hunt. Maybe I can get to my slingshot and scare him off.* She tiptoed into the barn, and a breeze blew in from the south. *Katarina, you ninny, the barn is upwind!*

The wolf turned to face her and snarled. Kat climbed up the slats of a stall door. "Get out of here," she said, clinging to a post and brandishing her stick. The wolf circled in, barking. It leaped for her and Katarina swung her stick, striking the wolf on the snout. It yelped and retreated, but then circled back with a growl.

The wolf bared its teeth and snarled. Kat swung again when it snapped at her, and the predator's jaws closed on her stick. The wolf tugged hard, and the girl went flying. She twisted in midair, and landed on the feed bin, surprised. *I didn't know I could do that.* Lupine eyes glared at her from a few feet away. *Fear cannot defeat me,* she thought as she scrambled to her feet and picked up a steel grain scoop. *It's not much of a weapon, but what else can I do?* "Get out of here!" she screamed again at the wolf. It leaped for her in a storm of fangs and fur.

The wolf gagged as it knocked her off the bin, bearing her

down to the barn floor. The scoop was stuck deep in its mouth. The wolf staggered, coughing and shaking its head to dislodge it. Katarina rolled and jumped to her feet. She took a pitchfork and thrust it at the wolf's haunches. It yelped and ran out of the barn and into the woods beyond. Katarina stood panting. She was dirty and bruised, but a grin slowly spread on her small face. *Let's see what else I can do.*

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The rest of the summer was uneventful. Sulk had been spending too much time in the village, leaving Katarina with much more work to do. She took to it all without complaint. By summer's end, Sulk's absence became a relief. Kat grew used to the work and learned to order her days so that there was time for daydreams of freedom and forays into the woods in search of herbs and adventure.

"Kat! Don't you dare go traipsing about the forest when there's work to be done," Mayrah scolded. "Think you're a real smart monkey, don't you? Well, I've got my eye on you! Now get out of my kitchen! You can eat when your work's done." Katarina trudged out of the cottage carrying a bucket and a trowel. Mayrah sat at the table and began to eat the girl's breakfast. "No sense letting hot food get cold."

*Good thing I picked some mushrooms and berries earlier,* Katarina thought as she looked over her shoulder. She spent the rest of the morning picking carrots and sweeping out the root cellar. She smiled brightly and waved when Mayrah's heavy form went by on the wagon. As the farmer's wife faded into the distance, Katarina stuck out her tongue.

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"What are you doing with my property, Alley Kat?"

*He's back early.* Kat stacked the boards neatly, and picked up a hammer. "These boards were half-buried behind the barn. Most of them were no good, anyway." Katarina said.

"They're still mine, you pilfering little weasel," Sulk replied. "Ought to tan your hide, teach you not to go thieving."

"I'm building something for the farm." Katarina looked him in the eye, and Sulk looked away.

"Is that so? Out with it, then," he said. "What's the smart monkey wasting an afternoon on this time?" Katarina's last idea had been to plant small plots of vegetables at the base of the fruit trees behind the cottage. The little gardens flourished, but Sulk had refused to let her use any chicken wire to fence them in. "Going to feed the rabbits again?"

Katarina clenched her teeth and fought an urge to throw the hammer at Sulk's forehead. "I'm using them as molds to build an earth stove, for the winter, to keep the animals warm. Mayrah said you lost half the worms last year."

"Now, we can't go wasting firewood." Sulk didn't know what else to say.

Katarina shot a glance at the forest and sighed. "It won't use much, and I can make the chimney fit the hole in the barn roof," Katarina offered.

Sulk scratched his head. *Well, I wouldn't have to fix the roof, at least.* "All right, then, get to it, but it better not cut into your chore time. And be thankful I'm such a good and kindly master." Without another word, he stomped back toward the house.

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"It'll be hours before the fire goes out," Katarina said to one of the goats. "You'll be okay until I come back." Katarina sat in a small nest she had fashioned for herself on top of the earthen stove she'd built. Small steps spiraled around it to a height of about ten feet, where a platform built of cast-off boards held a warm and tidy, if humble place for a young girl to sleep. From there, the column narrowed, rising up through the barn roof. Kat looked up. *No more leaks.* "I don't

think even Sulk will mind if I step out for a bit," she said. The goat bleated softly. "I know, I know," Katarina replied, as though the goat was speaking to her. *He only let me build it because it's keeping the worms alive but at least now he leaves me alone when I have an idea for the farm.*

Sulk's good moods had come the oftener over the last few months, as his new help was a better keeper of worms than he, but he was still a difficult master to please. These days, however, he left the worms to Katarina's care. Now that winter had come, Kat's chores kept her mostly confined to the barn. She'd finished early today, and sat on a reed mattress she'd woven for herself.

Katarina sang quietly, as her mother had taught her, in the old tongues of the Elves. She did not understand the song, but it gave her comfort with the memory of her mother, a slender half-elven woman with a voice like crystal chimes.

*Watch, children, watch.*

*The Balance will come*

*like doom creeping on the hills,*

*like the dew upon the fields.*

*Watch, children, watch,*

*and let justice guide your ways,*

*for your redeemer is coming,*

*with his unshakable purpose*

*to break the world.*

Her hands moved silently, swiftly, putting the final knots in the edge of a hempen vest. She slipped it on and smiled. Kat picked up the new walking stick she cut for herself earlier and ran down the earthen steps. She leaped into the air, brandishing the hornbeam stick as if it were a sword. The old mule in its stall eyed her with interest.