

Of Silver and Shadow

Jennifer Gruenke

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In Jennifer Gruenke's fantasy novel, people "do terrible things to stay alive," hoping they can be forgiven.

Eighteen-year-old Ren is a gutter rat, gambler, and pit fighter who survived immolation nine years ago. She now wields her forbidden magic to her own mercenary ends. Betrayed by her underground fame, Ren is captured by Darek, the leader of a rebellion that hopes to overthrow a century of the Lyandor family's despotic rule. As the rebellion's plans unfold, natural enemies become allies and lovers; those dying to escape Lyandor's cruelty live both within the castle walls and in the lowest gutters.

This compelling narrative is driven by moral absolutes. Life in Erdis is brutal: the king has total control, and the price of perceived disobedience is final. Still, everyone has done something they're not proud of. The seriousness of transgressions, and questions of whether or not they can be redeemed, are a matter of scale, perspective, and the scope of an individual's empathy.

The collective trauma endured by Erdis's citizenry leads to odd bedfellows, and the narrative explores attraction in nuanced ways. Not only are a variety of relationships depicted, from friendships to romances, but often these relationships shed light on how trauma heightens and manufactures bonds to the benefit and detriment of those involved. Whether they are endured because of the forbidden love between elite soldiers who are trained from childhood to serve a sociopathic king, or thanks to the harsh rules of Ren's orphanage, injuries shape characters' personal interactions.

In a city used to tyranny, people on all sides do their jobs per force, but the choices made when there seems to be no choice at all put *Of Silver and Shadow* a cut above the rest.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (January / February 2021)

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