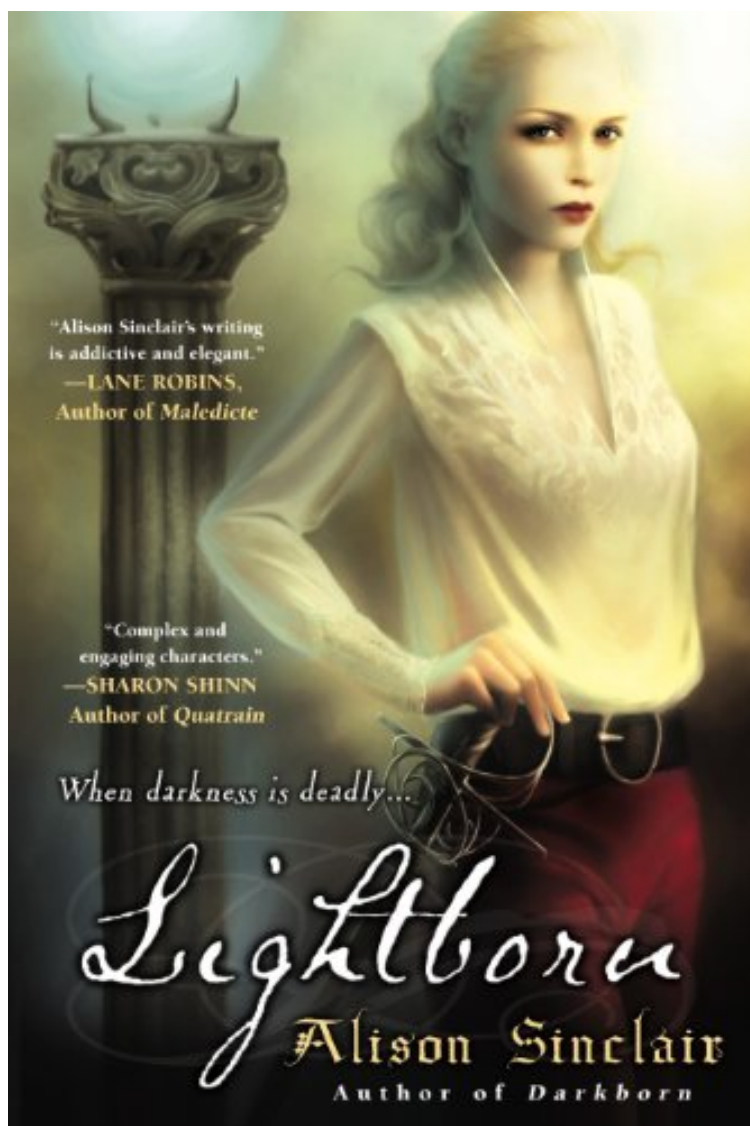


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Lightborn



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Description :

Présentation de l'auteur
Minhorne is a city divided. An ancient curse makes darkness anathema to the Lightborn, while a touch of sunlight kills the Darkborn. Thus its people share a home but live forever separate. Until a prince's death turns Darkborn against Lightborn, earthborn against mage, as conspiracies and betrayals are revealed in both worlds...Extrait
TelmaineShe had never, thought Telmaine Hearne, been so glad to have a train journey over. Not because the bells were tolling sunset, and the end of the killing sunlight. Not because they had come to the end of their journey without any sign of threat. Not even because, a scant twelve hours before, she and her dear husband had run for the coast-bound train with no certainty that both or either of them would return. No, it was the company she kept, and the explanations that would be awaiting her at the end of this journey. Small consolation if her fellow passenger shared her feeling.

Lord Vladimer Plantageter, her noble cousin and half brother to the archduke, had all the prejudices of his sex and class, enhanced by a temperament both reclusive and distrustful. Only the urging of a man he respected and who had just saved his life would have made him accept the company of a woman on this journey, much less a woman who was also a mage. And as for Vladimer accepting her protection . . . Nor would she have done it, except at the behest of the two men who had asked her. She sighed, but silently.

Who was it who wrote, I can mind my enemies, but the Sole God protect me from my friends? Had her husband been with her, she would have asked him, but even at this moment Balthasar might be boarding a train bound south to the Borders and a threatened invasion. That, too, she could set against Lord Vladimer's account. She heard the door to the stateroom open. Her son resolved a man in the blazer and cap of the railway who leaned into Lord Vladimer's private cubicle to apologize that they could not draw up to their regular platform as two specials were preparing to depart the hour after sunset being the busiest hour of the night and would have to use one of the public platforms. Have it cleared, Vladimer said without hesitation. And have a coach waiting. And for the lady . . . ? the conductor said. The lady comes with me. He might at least try to avoid giving the impression that he was taking her in for interrogation, if only for the sake of her reputation. Which he could ruin with a very few words, should he choose.

Amongst Darkborn, mages belonged on the fringes of society, not in its finer families and upper social circles. She had stepped out of her class to marry Balthasar Hearne, whose fine old blood was attenuated through generations of daughters and younger sons, but was still acceptable. To be revealed as a mage would be not a stepping out but an irredeemable plunge. To her husband, a physician and one insatiably curious about mind and society, the Darkborn aversion to magic and mages was less because of history than because of present society. Eight hundred years ago, magic had divided Darkborn from Lightborn, condemning the Darkborn to perpetual darkness, the Lightborn to perpetual light. In daylight, the Darkborn burned to ash; in darkness, the Lightborn melted excruciatingly away. But eight hundred years ago was a time long past, particularly for the forward-gazing Darkborn; Balthasar thought the aversion was less due to what mages had done than what they could do, even though the knowledge that had underlain the Curse was lost. Even the weakest mage could read thoughts with a touch, and most had strength enough to heal. A stronger mage, such as she seemed to be, could cast her thoughts into another's mind, influence others with her will, force sleep upon the unwilling, walk she swallowed at the memory unharmed through a burning building. Such powers were an affront to propriety, disruptive to the order of society, and a threat to earthly and divine authorities. She understood that; she believed and agreed with that; yet these were the powers she had, and had been forced to use. She could hear the sudden change in the reverberation of the engine as the train entered the enclosed space of the station. It shuffled and jolted, switching points, and she swayed gently in place, hand on the writing case tucked beneath her skirts. The case contained the letters Balthasar had written in case he did not come back, bidding farewell to their daughters, his sister, and the Lightborn woman Floria White Hand, Telmaine's rival on the other side of sunrise, Balthasar's first, impossible love, and lifelong friend. That last letter, she wished she dared burn. Polite Darkborn did not speak of Lightborn any more than they must, given that they shared the city and the land with them. Lightborn mores were shocking, their politics violent, and rumor held that the Lightborn court was ruled by mages. But the journey was over. She would deliver Vladimer safely to his brother's palace, and let him initiate the schemes that he had surely been planning all these silent hours. He was the spymaster who, while still a teenager, had put organized crime in the city docks in such disarray that it might not recover in his lifetime, and had gone on to guard his brother back against the schemes of his own dukes and lords. Ruthless and brilliant even in the opinion of his enemies but also profoundly vulnerable, alas, to magic. All she need do, she told herself yet again, was sense and warn, and thwart any use of magic against him. She lacked training, yes, but Ishmael di Studier was convinced she had power in abundance. And as she, and Balthasar, and Ishmael, had just demonstrated, even a mage was not immune to bullets. Ishmael, she thought. After a week's acquaintance, she should hardly be so free with her thoughts of a man neither husband nor brother, never mind one with his reputation. But propriety hardly allowed for Ishmael. The man who had saved her husband's life, her daughter's life, and not least her own. The man who had recognized her as a mage, because he was one himself, and shaken her magic loose from its lifelong restraint. The man whom she had begun to love, though she loved her husband not a single portion less. She and Balthasar could have no better ally in these strange and dangerous times, and Lord Vladimer and the archduke could have no better servant. Ishmael was born to inherit one of the great Borders baronies, where the civilized lands abutted the regions around the ancient mages' last stronghold. He had spent his adult life hunting marauding beasts from the Shadowlands, though it had been Vladimer, not

Ishmael, who had imagined the prospect of men and women emerging from those poisoned lands to raise chaos with their intelligent schemes. Which made Vladimer the Shadowborns enemy, too, and unlike Ishmael, he could not sense their magic. She, Balthasar, and Ishmael had saved Vladimers life as he lay unconscious and fading under ensorcellment. The train stopped with a final, settling lurch. Gladly, she picked up the writing case and tucked it under her arm as she stood, shaking out skirts creased with travel. A bath would be the utmost luxury, even with the slightly antiquated plumbing in the archducal palace. A bath and breakfast with her daughters; what better reward and fortification? The steward returned to tell them that the platform had been cleared. In the doorway to his cubicle, Lord Vladimer steadied himself on his cane and gestured her impatiently to precede him. She paused in the doorway, taking a careful sweep of the platform with her mage sense, and finding only Darkborn. Their enemies magic carried with it a distinctive, repulsive taint. The air was familiar, acrid with smoke from the pulsing trains all around her. Bolingbroke Station, the main interchange of Minhorne, its vast sealed canopy and night-and-day bustle making it a hub of Darkborn business and middle-class society. Telmaine extended a hand to the steward to allow him to steady her on the long step down, and alighted with poise. As the steward turned to assist Lord Vladimer, she cast sonn around herself with the gentility expected of a lady, a muted cast that visualized no more than a dozen yards around her. She could not but recollect that the first words she had spoken to Ishmael were a rebuke for his too-forceful sonn, cultivated in dangerous places but quite inappropriate for polite society. Thinking of that, and what he would expect of her, she cast again, defying her inhibitions. Thus she caught the two men filing toward them along the side of the engine, guiding themselves with their outstretched fingers along its flank. They were Darkborn, with no taint of magic or Shadowborn on them. To her mage sense, they belonged. They wore the uniform of railway engineers. But she knew them. Though she and they had come face-to-face for but a moment, and the burns on their faces were quite healed, she would never forget the men who had burst from her husbands house, leaving him dying behind them, and snatched up her elder daughter as a token of blackmail. Their forward creep halted at the touch of her sonn. They had been as prepared for discovery as she was unprepared. She had no word of warning readied. No, and Lord Vladimer, and You tried to come together; all she achieved was a choked cry. She sonned the unmistakable gesture of a man swinging up a gun; sonn surged from fore and aft; she could not have said who fired first. She shrieked at the re-evoked horror of their fight with Lord Vladimers first Shadowborn assailant, and threw herself down in a huddle as the guns fired again. Something clattered down the side of the train behind her. She smelled a mans sweat, sonned, and found him only steps from her. He disregarded her in her shrinking helplessness, speaking past her. Move aside, you fool. Its him I want. She had heard that voice before. It had said, Tell Hearne that when we get Tercelle Amberleys bastards, he gets his daughter back. She had got their daughter back. She had walked through an inferno to do so. Push the fire back, Ishmael di Studier had said, and she had pushed the fire back. And now, as she had then, she pushed with all her magical strength at the assassins outstretched arm. The gun swung wide; his head turned after it, shock in his face. From behind her there came a snap, and she felt something hiss past her head. The man grunted and her next cast showed a stubby dart jutting out beneath his ribs. His hand groped, gripped, pulled, pulled it free. Then his mouth opened; his face twisted in disbelief and rage that he had come to this. With shocking finality he pitched backward. His legs thrashed briefly, like a neck-snapped rabbits, and he collapsed into a mortal laxness. She smelled blood and ordure, as his bowels and bladder released. Ear and sonn found the other man, sprawled where she had first sonned them, choking on the blood from his shattered lung, and no threat to anyone. She should have been distressed. She should have felt some little pity for them. But she remembered her first touch of Balthasars shock-chilled skin, her first sense, through her magic, of his terrible injuries, inflicted by these men. She remembered Florilindes screams as those men carried her away, and again when the warehouse blazed around her. And she understood the impulse that compelled decent men to spit on fallen enemies. Then she heard the steward shout again for help, and twisted where she knelt, too swiftly to dread what she might find. But Lord Vladimer was sitting yes, sitting in the door of the carriage, his head turning, alert to sound and sonn. Her first, absurdly relieved thought was that he looked like a marionette abandoned in a nursery corner, with that length of leg so carelessly deployed. His right arm hung by his side. His left hand gripped the hilt of his cane, which rested across his lap, pointing in her direction. Two against one, Telmaine thought, and that one taken in ambush. Ishmael would not have been particularly surprised at the result. She scrambled to her feet, uncertain of what to say: a ladys training in etiquette, comprehensive as it was, did not address this particular situation. Vladimers sonn pinged her, hard, and he shifted the cane slightly. He still did not move, and Telmaine, tentatively extending her magic to sense his vitality, abruptly

understood that though he had survived, he was not unhurt. His stillness was that of a man who knew the next movement would be excruciating. She took an uncertain step toward him. Then men came scurrying across the platform, encircling Vladimir and the dying assassin, shouting orders to one another but heeding none. A woman's voice beside her shocked her into a pulse of sharp enough to make the speaker flinch. The attendant was one of the ladies' stewards, a controversial innovation that acknowledged the increasing number of venturesome ladies traveling together or even alone. The woman had to repeat her questions before Telmaine whose hearing was still baffled by close gunfire both heard and understood. Would the lady like to rest in the ladies' waiting room? Did the lady need a doctor? Was the lady being met? She moved a gloved hand vaguely toward Vladimir's voice by way of explaining why she could not leave. He was saying snappishly, . . . just my arm, so stop measuring me for a bier and secure the area. Send a runner to the nearest station of public agents; get someone down here. He would have been more convincing if his voice had not had the irregular pulse of a shudder running through it. She could quite understand; she was ready to shudder herself with the deathly cold of Oh, sweet Imogene. They're here. With a puff of warm air that was as gentle as the opening of a door into a hearth-warmed room, fire bloomed from the undercarriage of the engine and stowage car. The first screams were as tentative and muted as the fire. Then the doors on the engine and stowage cars slammed open and men hurled themselves and one another from doors onto the platform, the rearmost shoving the others ahead of them, to land on running or sprawling, the first man to rise dragging the others clear, injured or otherwise. Briefly, as though a wind had shifted, the sense of Shadowborn magic ebbed. But it was no more than a gathering of breath for effort and she heard the breath drawn. She turned toward it, her sharp catching at its limit an indistinct figure. She thought it might be young, and it was dressed as a male, standing apart, exuding chill, pollution, and triumph. His arm swept toward them in a grand gesture worthy of an actor or orator. A man screamed, Get away from the train! in the raw Rivermarch accents of the apothecary who had been assisting Ishmael. Who had, like Ishmael, survived the inferno that had destroyed nine blocks of the Rivermarch, a fire that was surely Shadowborn-set. No, Telmaine thought, you shall not. In the blazing warehouse she had pushed the flame aside; now she reached out with the full force of her magic and tore the fire from its root in the burning engine and whipped it around the Shadowborn. She risked no exchange of words or thoughts; she had tried that with his kin back at Vladimir's bedside and had all but lost her mind to him. As the vortex of flame enfolded him, the Shadowborn screamed in the half-broken voice of an adolescent boy. Sharp caught his frantic flurry in the midst of the shimmy of flame, and the fire rippled and bellied around him as he paddled it away, stronger than she would have imagined. She felt a blast of heat and oily vapor, and terror of immolation lent her strength to tighten the vortex; she knew no other response. Then chill and foulness slapped at her, and the fires were instantly snuffed by his magic. The Shadowborn reeled in place for several heartbeats, and then, as people started to gather warily around him, he screeched a vulgarity in her direction and stumbled away. The train and coach burned on with a sullen natural flame, its smoke thickening the enclosed station. Telmaine's legs abruptly surrendered beneath her. With the ladies' steward pulling uselessly on her arm, she sank down amongst her pillowed skirts, gasping for breath. Two men caught her up, emergency overriding propriety, and bore her past the onrushing fire crews with their buckets and hoses. Telmaine What, said Vladimir, exactly happened back there? The last word came hoarsely as the carriage jolted over rough pavings. Vladimir had directed it on a tortuous approach to the archducal palace, a precaution he might be regretting as it wound through side streets. Those two men were the ones who beat Balthasar and kidnapped Florilinde, she said, almost whispering. She would rather not have been answering these questions now, and certainly not in a coach with guards riding overhead. They were also with the group who shot Guillaume di Maurier and left him for dead. When I when he was telling me where Florilinde was, he was remembering. And she was holding di Maurier's hand, easing his agony with her magic. To be a mage, to be any level of mage, even a first-ranker like Ishmael di Studier, was to be a touch-reader. Which was why her timid offer to heal Vladimir's wound, once they were alone, had been harshly rebuffed. He had allowed the apothecary to apply a bandage, ignoring the man's warning that it needed proper attention, and hurried them to the coach. They had nothing to do with the fire, he said curtly. They were dead before it started. There was a Shadowborn, she said, and swallowed against threatened nausea from the jolting of the coach and the recollection of the magic. I said there were two. Two? The one Ishmael killed, and this one. Ah, so that is your accounting. His humorless smile needed the barest twist to become a grimace of pain. Curse it, I'll have words with someone about these roads, he muttered. So the fire was Shadowborn-set. You sensed it. I sensed it. He withheld any reproach as to why she had not sensed the Shadowborn's presence sooner. Why start with the engine and stowage if they

wanted me dead? Then he answered his own question. The corpse of the one di Studier shot at my bedside.

His lips tightened in irony. The strongest evidence I could offer my brother and his counselors to support this wild story of ours. The fire will have done for it. He was about to burn our coach, Telmaine said. And you turned his fire back on him. You seem, he said coolly, to be making great gains with this neglected power of yours. She knew exactly what he was implying, his doubt that she was as unpracticed with her magic as she claimed to be, as she was. All I did was distract him, she lied desperately. It was his own magic turned on him. There was a silence, which did not tell her whether he had believed her. A great shame it did not burn him worse. Another bend in the road brought them onto the smoother roads of a quality neighborhood. She had quite lost her bearings, but knew they could not be far from the archducal palace. Lord Vladimer, she ventured, trying to keep her voice from going soft and high in appeal which he would revile as feminine wiles. Lord Vladimer, must you tell the archduke about me? It will ruin me in society. She knew little of the archdukes attitude toward magic, but the little she did know suggested that he was no more sympathetic than any other aristocrat, and possibly even less. I do not have the impression that your husband would repudiate you, Vladimer noted. He could have had no sense of the new complexities of her marriage, now that Balthasar knew the secret she had kept from him all those years. If ever a man was set for lifelong bachelorhood, Vladimer was the man. But he was right that Balthasar would not repudiate her for being a mage, would not add to her stigma that of divorce. And she would not plead being thrown back on Balthasars inferior social status after all these years of cultivating loving indifference to it. I know, she said, humbly. My husband honors his vows, and he loves me more than I realized. But we have daughters, Lord Vladimer. Children she and Balthasar had left behind in their dash to save Vladimers life, she thought resentfully. Their happiness, their marriage prospects, their place in society all would be ruined if it were known that I am a mage. Her voice wavered with desperation and fatigue. There was a silence. While he weighed her plea, and she tried not to amplify it. Presentation de l'diteur Minhorne is a city divided. An ancient curse makes darkness anathema to the Lightborn, while a touch of sunlight kills the Darkborn. Thus its people share a home but live forever separate. Until a prince's death turns Darkborn against Lightborn, earthborn against mage, as conspiracies and betrayals are revealed in both worlds...