

Shadow Wars Saga - Book One

Shadow Rising

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Chapter One

Concealed by the shadows of the forest canopy, I raised my bow and drew my arrow.

Stay right where you are, you furry little shit.

My gaze locked on the squirrel with pinpoint precision. Standing poised and silent, my super-heightened Elkie senses performed a dozen, split-second calculations—angle, attitude, articulation.

Time to meet the pointy end of my arrow.

I let the string go.

My arrow whistled through the air and pierced the squirrel straight through the heart, propelling it backward into the tree, where it struck the bark with a comical *twang*.

A smile tugged at the side of my lips. My Elkie instinct was satiated. For now.

Suddenly, the sound of slow clapping came from behind.

I swirled, grabbing a fresh arrow from my quiver, and adopted a shooting stance, aiming into the undergrowth.

Gus, my best friend, emerged from the shadows, twigs sticking from his strawberry-blond hair. “Follow the trail of carcasses and they’ll lead you to Theia Foxglove,” he said, wryly, as he flicked leaf crud off his shoulders.

My adrenaline faded. I lowered my bow. “I have a lot of rage to get out.”

Gus sauntered over to the tree and yanked the arrow out, making the squirrel swing back and forth like a pendulum. “No shit,” he said, holding it out at arm’s length with a disgusted look on his face.

Gus wasn’t your typical Elkie. He never carried his bow and arrow, he was all thumbs and two left feet, and he possessed zero instinct to take his anger out on furry critters. He was a tub-of-ice-cream kind of guy and had the paunch to show for it.

“What’s your plan here, Theia?” he drawled.

I shrugged. “No plan. Just kill things.”

He rolled his eyes. They were the brightest, most unique hazel color, so much prettier than my typical Elkie mud-brown ones.

“It’s your last hour in Bear Mountain—”

“I don’t need reminding.”

“—and you’re going to waste it symbolically shooting your stepfather-to-be?”

I tensed. “Don’t call him that.”

Two days ago, Mom dropped on me the bombshell to end all bombshells: she was engaged. To an old college boyfriend from New York. Who just so happened to be William Geiser, the mayor-in-waiting. And that in forty-eight hours we’d be moving to the city to live with him. One sleep before the first day of senior high.

You don’t need to be Elkie to want to kill stuff after hearing that...

Gus gave me one of his looks. “Theia. William Geiser is about to become your stepfather whether you like it or not.”

I took the arrow from him and yanked the carcass off. “Actually, by the time of the actual wedding, I’ll be eighteen,” I said, testily. “A legal adult. An independent. So as far as I’m concerned, William Geiser won’t be a step-anything to me. He’ll basically be nothing.”

Gus smirked with approval. “Savage.”

“Besides, if Mom actually cared about whether I accepted him or not,” I continued, on my soapbox now, “she would’ve told me he existed *before* accepting his proposal!”

I finished my tirade by flinging the squirrel carcass into the undergrowth. Leaves rustled as the corpse flew through them. A flock of magpies took to the air, flapping huffily at the intrusion of a dead creature into their otherwise peaceful existence. I squinted to see if Mom’s familiar, a woodpecker, was hiding among them, but they appeared to be normal, non-magical magpies.

Silence fell.

“Are you done?” Gus asked.

I could feel the heat of fury burning my cheeks. I took a breath. It was ragged with anger. “For now.”

Gus rolled his eyes. He took me by the shoulders and peered into my eyes with a stern expression. “No one’s saying what’s happening to you is fair,” he implored. “Or that Vivian will win a *‘Most Thoughtful Mother of the Year’* award any time soon. Or even make the shortlist, come to think of it.”

I narrowed my eyes. His words rang hollow. Gus loved my mother’s whole melancholic, faded-beauty, old-money routine, because it was the polar opposite of his own cloying, nervy, kiss-bestowing mother. I’d personally prefer a mom who didn’t treat me like Satan’s spawn. Or, you know, just one who cared enough not to uproot me and switch my school the day before senior year...

“What we’re saying, T,” Gus continued, “is that this whole angry, squirrel-killer thing you’ve been doing all weekend? It’s not fun for anyone.”

“Well, I’m sorry to have ruined the vibe,” I muttered, sarcastically.

Gus sighed, wearily. He let go and leaned back against a tree, leg crooked. I knew he was losing patience with me and the tantrum I’d been throwing all weekend, but I just couldn’t help myself. The mountains were my home. In the city, I’d stick out like a sore thumb. A pointy-eared, sore thumb.

“Tell me what’s *really* on your mind,” Gus said.

He was changing tactics. It was the radical-acceptance technique our school counselor was so fond of. Accept reality. Your feelings are to be felt. Etcetera, etcetera...

My hands clenched into fists. “I don’t want to move. I don’t want to start a new school. I want to finish senior year at Sunny’s.”

“Because it’s more comfortable?” he challenged.

“Because... because I’m not the only person with pointed ears, for starters. I’m not a forest freak, here. I’m not some weird, uncultured country bumpkin who just stumbled out of the bushes.”

Gus nodded, knowingly. “You don’t want to stand out.”

“I don’t want to spend my final year of high school constantly checking over my shoulder, in case I get jumped on by a Shapeshifter or Werebeast or something!”

Gus shot me a disapproving look, like he expected better of me than to resort to such tired old stereotypes.

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

He accepted my apology with a small nod, then waved me on to continue. He really was seeing himself as something of a Freud now.

I began cleaning the blood from my arrow so that I had an excuse to avoid eye contact. “I don’t want to wear a uniform like someone from a Catholic schoolgirl fetish fantasy. And I don’t want to hang out with Mom’s new fiancé.”

“Because...” Gus prompted.

My chest sank. Gus’s counselor routine was actually working.

“Because... because I’m mad Mom replaced Dad so quickly,” I said, with a big exhalation. “It’s not even been a year since he died.”

Gus nodded, knowingly, like I’d finally gotten the right answer on a test. And I had, in a way. That’s what this whole squirrel-killing spree was about: Mom moving on from Dad so insultingly quickly.

Gus came over and hugged me. He was super squishy. It was one of the best things about him. No one hugged quite like Gus.

“I understand, T,” he said. “I miss your dad too.”

I let my pent-up anger flow out of me. “It’s not like I’m stupid,” I murmured into his chest. “I know Mom stopped loving him years ago. But remarrying her college sweetheart? So soon? It disrespects his memory.”

Gus’s bear hug tightened. “Look at it this way. Your mom will be so distracted with this new guy that she won’t have time to nitpick your every move anymore. You’ll get to live in a big house. Make new friends. Maybe fall in love. I always pictured you with a big dumb Neanderthal on your arm.”

I moved out of his embrace and smacked him playfully.

He flashed me a cheeky grin. “I mean it! There are moon-class boys in New York, Theia! Moon-class BOYS! Hairy weres. Skinny Vanpari.”

“Not everyone is as horny as you,” I replied.

“Horny...” he echoed, dreamily, looking off into the distance. “Big, beefy, horned Daimons...”

It was true. My dating pool, as well as my horizons, were about to expand significantly. I’d spent seventeen years in the predominantly Elkie community of Bear Mountain, doing all those traditional Elkie things that other people thought made us “backward”—horse-riding, farming, fishing, and hunting with sacred arrows. I’d grown up in the same forest as my ancestors. I’d roamed the same hillsides. My experience of the world had been limited to the boundaries of my safe, small community, where Elkie were the majority, and the only other species were the Fae. But there are a lot of different types of people in this world, and I don’t know any of them.

Some have powers, some do not. Some belong to the sun-class, like Gus and me, the rest the moon-class. Some are nocturnal, some diurnal. Most groups keep to their own type, most types to their own class, but now I was being given the unique opportunity to mix everything up.

“How will I cope at Sunny’s without you?” he lamented. “We had so many big plans for senior year. Hanging out under the bleachers. Avoiding all organized sporting events.”

“Blowing off senior prom,” I added.

“Exactly. I bet you’ll go to prom at your new school.”

“At Zenith?” I scoffed. “Ew. No. I won’t.”

Gus laughed. “Zenith? Sounds like a brand of condoms.”

“Exactly.”

“A school with a name that extra will have an equally OTT prom. There’ll be a ballroom. A fountain, probably. Ice sculptures. You won’t be able to resist.”

“I will. Because I’ll be outta there the second I pass my eighteenth birthday.”

Gus raised an eyebrow. “Sure... Because living in a mansion in a buzzing city will be *such a bore*. Going to all those bars, clubs, and coffee shops during twilight. Sounds terrible.”

He was being sarcastic.

A few centuries back, suns and moons adopted this rule: “Those from the moon walk the earth at night, while those from the sun find their peace in the light.” Cute, huh? Put legally,

it means suns are diurnal and moons are nocturnal and it's meant to stop us pointlessly slaughtering the crap out of each other. But since there's such a thing as twilight, which is halfway between each, happens twice a day, and is by definition neither day nor night, the aforementioned slaughter continued. Eventually, the guys who wrote the laws got so annoyed, they said if we couldn't share, no one could play, and introduced the Twilight Curfew. Here in the mountains, in my sun community, all five stores shut well before the sun begins to fade, anyway. But in big cities like New York that are shared by both classes, things are a little more complicated. The sun stores that are meant to close before the moon-class awake push back their closing hours, the moon stores that are meant to open after the sun-class have gone home open earlier and earlier, and basically the law turns a blind eye because... money. Beyond a whole lot of shopping getting done during twilight, I guess a lot of making out does too. Most government buildings are shared (money, again), so you end up with one bunch of high schoolers finishing for the day while another bunch begin, and passing one another in the middle. And making out.

"You think I'm being a big baby," I said to Gus. "You really mean to say you wouldn't be pissed if it happened to you? At all?"

"I would be thrilled if it happened to me!" he exclaimed. "You have no idea how much it sucks to be the only gay in the forest."

He was right. As great as our forest community was, it could be a tad regressive on certain matters.

"Are you still coming out to your folks tomorrow?" I asked him.

As loving as Gus's parents are, they still expect him to join the military after high school, just like every other Redfern male before him. Gus, on the other hand, was planning on flouncing off to fashion school.

"They'll hear it from someone else otherwise," he explained. "Better to do it on my terms."

I felt for him. The one upside of having a cold, aloof mother and a dead dad was that there was no one I cared about disappointing.

Just then, my cell phone *tinged*. I returned the blood-free arrow to the quiver on my back, and tugged my cell from my pocket. I'd received a message from Mom. That wasn't like her. She usually sent her woodpecker familiar to pester me.

Where are you? it read. *The moving van is here. Am I supposed to load your boxes by myself?*

My stomach dropped to my toes. The van was early. There can't have been much traffic for it to get here from New York so quickly.

I darted my head up from my phone.

"Gus, I have to go," I said, hurriedly.

"*Now?*" Gus repeated, looking immediately crestfallen.

"Yes, like now, now. The van got here early."

"But—" he began.

But he didn't get to finish his statement, because a sudden rustling from the undergrowth triggered our Elkie senses, and we both froze in perfect synchronicity.

The back of my neck prickled. My pupils dilated, my peripheral vision sharpening as I scanned left, right, up, down. There was something in the bushes. Watching.

No, not something. *Someone*.

A little gasp escaped my throat. I was staring into the unmistakable slate-gray eyes of a Vanpari.

"You seeing what I'm seeing?" Gus said, quietly, out the side of his mouth.

"Uh-huh," I whispered in return.

Vanpari belong to the moon-class. They're urban dwellers. The closest Vanpari settlement is in New York City, fifty miles away. Seeing a Vanpari in the mountains in the middle of the day is a bit like seeing a nun at a nightclub.

Suddenly, the hedges rustled. The Vanpari had sprung from his hiding place and bolted through the thickets, disappearing in a blur.

"Hey!" I cried after him.

But Elkie speed is nothing compared to Vanpari speed. The boy was already little more than a smudge in my vision.

Gus turned to me, his mouth hanging open with astonishment. "What the actual heck?" All I could do was shake my head. The Vanpari boy had looked about our age, but with round, terrified eyes. Intrigue swirled in my mind.

Just then, something glittering on the floor distracted me. Lying by the tree trunk was a silver chain.

"He dropped something," I murmured, pacing over to the spot he'd been hiding. It was some kind of medallion: a silver crescent moon on a chain. "Looks like a moon-class talisman."

Just then, my phone pinged again. It was my mother. Again.

If you're not here in five minutes, I'm throwing your boxes in the trash.

I took one last, curious glance at the spot where I'd seen the Vanpari boy, then pocketed the medallion, and hurried home for the last time.

Chapter Two

A moving van was idling outside the small stone cottage I'd called home for seventeen years, spewing exhaust fumes into the rose bushes. The four boxes that contained all my worldly possessions were stacked haphazardly on the porch step.

I heard a tapping noise and turned to see Mom's woodpecker familiar knocking its beak against the inside van window to get my attention.

All Mages have bird familiars. They're meant to reflect their personality. Mom's is a downy woodpecker. I think that says it all.

I spotted Mom sitting in the driver's seat looking very bored. The sound of the radio murmured through the closed windows.

"Isn't she even going to say goodbye to anyone?" I said to Gus. I knew she disliked Dad's side of the family but that was pretty extreme, even for her.

He slow-clapped. "Bravo, Vivian, you aloof witch."

Just then, Mom caught sight of me. Through the window, she tapped her watch. I held my hands up in the universally recognized gesture of a half-assed apology, then headed toward my aunt and uncle's cottage next door to say my goodbyes. Mom could be as passively-aggressively impatient as she wanted. I was still going to say goodbye to the people I loved the most in the world.

I knocked on Uncle Salix and Aunt Shanaya's door. Salix was Dad's older brother, and Shanaya was the exceptionally beautiful Indian Elkie none of us could believe he'd convinced to marry him.

The door opened, and there they stood. The both of them, as if they'd been expecting me. They flashed me matching sorrowful smiles.

"Theia," Aunt Shanaya said, taking me in her arms. Her flowery perfume wafted into my nostrils. "Are you leaving already?"

I could feel tears forming, so pressed my lips together and managed a strangled, "Uh-huh."

“We’ll miss you,” Uncle Salix said, patting my shoulder.

“Ungh,” I added, grief tightening my throat and making me even more unintelligible.

My cousins Juniper and Birch appeared behind them. Having inherited Shanaya’s warm brown skin and dimples, and Salix’s crystal-blue eyes and impish features, they were a strikingly attractive pair of siblings.

They held up a handmade sign that read, “We’ll Miss You Theia!” Then they wrapped me in a bear hug.

I was seconds from losing it. My cousins were my best friends, along with Gus. Tomorrow, they’d be walking into Sunny High without me—Juniper as a senior, Birch as a sophomore—while I walked into Zenith as a stranger. A newbie. A forest freak. I’d be walking into unfamiliar classrooms filled with unfamiliar faces and the thought made me cold with dread.

“Grandma’s waiting,” Juniper said, releasing me.

Oh man. This was the big one. Grandma Amaryllis is literally my favorite person in the entire world. My role model. Foul-mouthed. Open-minded. A talented hunter. The sort of woman who can drink anyone under the table.

From behind, I could hear Mom’s woodpecker *peck-peck-pecking* on the van window. Any harder and it would smash the glass. I turned back and flashed a “five minutes” sign with my hand, then hurried up the creaky stairs to Grandma’s room.

Grandma was in her rocking chair by the window, with a clear view of the idling van below. A checkered blanket was draped over her knees.

“I’m going,” I announced from the door.

She looked over at me. The melancholy in her eyes was unmistakable. It sent a shard of pain straight through my heart.

Then she extended her arms and I went to her, kneeling beside her, resting my head on her lap just like I’d done as a child. She stroked my vibrant red hair.

I couldn’t hold it in anymore. Tears streamed from my eyes.

“Your mom deserves this,” I heard her say. “I know you don’t see it that way, but she never liked living here. She misses her home. She misses being with her own kind.”

If her own kind were so important to her, then why did she move to Bear Mountain for an Elkie? She'd been disowned by her parents and sacrificed untold wealth to be with Dad, only to spend the whole sixteen years of their marriage loudly regretting it. She and Grandma hated each other, so it was a testament to Grandma's good nature that she could be so empathetic toward the daughter-in-law who'd always treated her like dirt. Either that or she was secretly glad to see the back of Vivian Delacour and knew how to present it diplomatically. Knowing Grandma, it was probably the latter.

I raised my head and looked at her through teary eyes. "I don't want to leave you."

Grandma nodded her understanding. "I know. But as long as an Elkie has their bow, their family is always with them."

She patted her own bow and quiver, which rested against the wall beside her. Even though she was too old to use it now, it was still so precious to her.

Elkie take great pride in our weapons. They're family heirlooms, whittled from the wood of our birth forest, and passed down through the generations. According to Elkie lore, after we pass, a bit of our soul enters our bow. I don't know if I believe that or not, but it's a comforting thought. My bow was Dad's before he died.

From outside, the van horn began to blare. I couldn't put this off any longer.

I sighed and stood up, then planted a kiss on each of Grandma's papery cheeks. She held both my hands in hers for a moment, then let me go.

I hurried away before any more tears came.

When I reached the van, Gus came over for one final goodbye hug.

"Promise to call me every day," he said.

"I will," I replied. "And you promise to tell me all the gossip from Sunny's. I want to know who's dating who. Who's accidentally gotten pregnant. Which teacher's got a drinking habit. Everything. Okay?"

"I promise." He squeezed my hand. "And remember. Hot Vanpari boys."

I smirked, then pulled open the passenger door and leaped up into the van.

Mom looked over from the driver's seat with an expression so cold it could freeze over hell. Her downy woodpecker mirrored her movement with creepy synchronicity.

"You took your time," she said.

I sighed. "Yes, Mother. When you have people you love and care about in life, it's nice to say goodbye to them." I didn't even bother hiding the disdain in my tone.

I was just about to shut the door, when something on the radio caught my attention. I paused.

"Breaking news... One of the Vanpari Five is on the lam..."

My eyes widened, and my brows shot up.

"Shut the door, Theia," Mom snapped.

But I held a hand up to shush her, craning closer to the radio to get a better listen.

"This news just in," the reporter continued. "It has been confirmed that one of the accused Vanpari in the upcoming murder trial that's gripped the nation has indeed escaped from prison. A manhunt is now underway. The suspect is considered dangerous."

I thought of the terrified Vanpari I'd stumbled across in Bear Mountain. Could *he* be the escaped Vanpari in the news report? He hadn't looked dangerous. He also hadn't looked capable of slaughtering a Celestial woman with four of his buddies...

I flashed terrified eyes at Gus, who was hovering on the other side of my passenger door with the rest of my family. He frowned, looking perplexed.

"The Vanpari," I mouthed, exaggerating my mouth so he could read my lips. "In the forest."

"What about him?" he mouthed back.

"He's a murderer!" I mouthed, pointing at the radio.

Suddenly, Mom reached over me, grabbed the door handle, and slammed the car door shut.

"For Belenus's sake," she muttered. "You really are hamming this up, aren't you?"

She put the van in drive and hit the accelerator. She obviously couldn't wait to get out of the forest.

As we lurched forward, I peered through the window at Gus as he turned to Juniper and Birch to relay the news. There was just enough time for the three of them to stare at me with terrified expressions before they were out of sight.

I sat back in my seat, stunned. I'd been expecting to leave Bear Mountain feeling sad. Instead, I was leaving with a disquieting sense of dread, fearing that my forest was harboring a murderer.

Chapter Three

Driving through New York City was a bit like entering a parallel universe. The sidewalks were crammed with people, all bustling about looking stressed and busy.

I gaped at my first sighting of Celestials, their huge feathered wings jutting out from beneath long capes.

There were Fae dressed nothing like the multicolored hippies I was used to sharing Bear Mountain with, instead wearing chic outfits in gray and maroon. There even seemed to be a trend among the Mages to carry their bird familiars in designer, oversized cages.

The Statue of Liberty loomed into view, and I pressed my nose to the window of the van to get a better look.

It was truly awesome in real life. Its torch burned with a yellow flame, indicating the sun-class had control of the city. Once night fell, the flame would turn black and the moon-class would dominate. Growing up where I had, my experience of the moon-class was basically nonexistent. I wondered if they behaved the same as the sun-class, hurrying around with cell phones glued to their ears.

“Theia, close your mouth, you look like a fish,” Mom snapped.

“I can’t help it,” I murmured with astonishment. “It’s all so strange. I mean, look!” I pointed at a woman in high heels tottering along the sidewalk with a demon-hog on a leash. It had a crystal-encrusted collar. “That’s a wild animal, not a pet!”

“Demon-beasts are often domesticated,” Mom replied in a tired voice, like I was some kind of backwater hillbilly. “In fact, in this day and age, it’s very common. It takes a certain type to choose to hunt them.”

By *certain type* she meant Elkie. Elkie like me.

My chest sank. I wished she could at least try to rein in her contempt a little. It’s not like I chose to be Elkie. That decision was made for me when Vivian Delacour got the hots for Heath Foxglove!

The traffic grew heavier and Mom slowed the van. Wanting to avoid any more uncomfortable conversation, I turned on the radio. It tuned automatically to a local New York City station, cutting in partway through a news report spoken by a nasally voiced woman.

"... heavy traffic due to ongoing citywide protests. Tensions are rising among residents regarding an increase in Vanpari violence and crime. I spoke earlier to one of the protesting residents, who told me Mayor Benson and Mayor Storm are not doing enough, especially considering one of the so-called Vanpari Five is now on the run. People here say the Twilight Curfew needs proper policing, an issue that will likely determine the outcome of the upcoming sun-class elections between Henrietta Sugar Plum and William Geiser."

"Oh, they mentioned William!" Mom gushed.

I tried to shush her so I could hear what else the news reader was saying, but it was too late. The report had ended.

I reached into my pocket and touched the medallion the Vanpari in the forest had dropped.

Just then, we passed a subway station. Its entrance had been barricaded and a sign read: *Private property. Moon-class only.* A group of protestors stood beside it with placards covered in slogans such as, "Sun-class take subways too!"

I felt disconcerted. This was not what I'd been expecting.

But Mom seemed oblivious to the ruckus outside the window. She even had a small smile on her lips.

"I'm so glad you're going to get a proper education at last. Finally, we'll be able to nurture the Mage inside of you."

I may feel all Elkie, but technically I'm half Mage. There's never been an opportunity for me to discover my inner Mage, since my forest community is ninety percent Elkie, ten percent Fae. But the idea of starting now seemed pretty daunting.

"How much Mage will I really be able to unlock in one year?" I asked.

"Oh Theia!" Mom exclaimed. "This is *magic*. Control over the elements, potions, spells!" She sounded enthusiastic. "Once you try it, you'll get a taste for it. I promise. And passion is half

the battle. Besides, there's an after-school program we can enroll you in to fast-track your skills."

I grimaced. What could be worse than senior year at a new high school? How about extra-curricular programs!

"Do I have to?" I asked.

Mom's smile faltered. I appeared to have vanquished her enthusiasm. She became aloof again.

"You'll have to dye your hair back to its natural color," she said. "Zenith doesn't allow colored hair. Or nail polish."

I protectively touched my bright-red hair. I'd been dyeing it various colors since the age of thirteen. Colorful hair was part of my identity. Telling me I had to be a chocolate-brown brunette was like telling me I had to wear an alien suit.

"Why?" I asked, looking longingly at my bright-green polished nails. "Is Zenith run by nuns or something?"

Mom turned to face me, her features unreadable. "Yes."

I let a thin jet of breath out through my teeth and slowly shut my eyes.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

*

The heavy steel gates of William Geiser's mansion opened with an electronic buzz. Mom drove the moving van through them, then began up the long driveway.

I peered out the window, my brain struggling to comprehend what I was seeing. Fountains. Topiary. A huge wraparound porch. It was the sort of wealth you'd expect from a hedge-fund manager. Or a drug kingpin. Or the Mafia!

The van halted. Mom had barely turned off the engine before she threw open the door and leaped out. I watched her run like a giddy schoolgirl into the arms of a gray-haired man standing on the porch.

William Life-Wrecker Geiser.

It was my first glimpse of him in the flesh, rather than from the frantic internet searches I'd made after Mom told me her secret. He was tall, over six foot, and despite his gray hair he

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