

The Shadow of Tarensa
Sample (First Chapter)

Chapter 1: Fate

The dice clattered across the table, carrying Norra's fate with them. It was the day she had waited for her whole life; the moment that hadn't allowed her to sleep the night before.

"Seven, three, and one!" Papa's booming voice shook the air like thunder. "Let's see where it is!"

Dozens of guests, most of whom Norra had never met, gathered in a corner of the tiny cottage. For once, she was thankful to be abnormally tall. If her head dipped below the mass of people for even a second, it would feel like drowning. She clutched the purple fabric of her ceremonial gown, ignoring its itchy, gold-trimmed collar.

As Papa cracked open the cover of the ancient book, she prayed for a good destination — hopefully somewhere far away and exciting. Maybe somewhere within those fragile pages was the name of where she had come from. She smiled at the thought of finding people out there who looked like her; of not feeling like a misfit anymore.

Papa looked ten years younger in his finest set of robes, the blue satin glistening under the candlelight. His pale fur was neatly combed, lacking

the usual grime and grit he often donned after a long day in his glass shop, and he had even put in an earring — one that Norra had made him many years ago from a scallop shell. It dangled on his left ear, causing it to droop slightly. Yadrii ears, unlike her own, were large and sat at the tops of their heads. They always reminded her of dinner plates.

“Hurry up now,” Mama called out from behind a sea of shining eyes. “She’s waited eighteen years already, no need to add another.”

Papa’s nose scrunched up, and his whiskers twitched. “If I go any faster, love, there won’t be any pages left to turn.”

Mama crossed her arms and tapped her foot. An abalone necklace draped from her neck, and a green dress complimented her velvety, dark brown fur. That was something that Norra had in common with one of her family members, at least. Her skin was that same lovely color.

Papa was past the middle now, flipping pages painfully slow. Norra pressed a hand over her heart to try and calm its anxious pounding, but the harsh thumping against her palm only made her more aware of it. Would her destination be a lazy village in the badlands? A bustling city on the plains? There were thousands of possibilities, recorded over centuries by merchants of the past, but the idea of spending a month away from home was equally terrifying either way. Sweat gathered in the creases of her palm.

“Alright, here we are,” Papa said as he stopped near the back of the book. “Section seven, column three, line one.” He dragged a webbed finger across the page, then squinted down at the text. “It’s...Aigaan!”

Norra smiled at first, thinking it was a joke. When she checked the numbers on the dice, however, her heart sank faster than a brick. He wasn't lying. Mumbles filled the room.

Mama shouldered her way through the crowd, stepping carefully over a maze of wiry tails, and placed a garland on Norra's head. "How about that?" she said. "You'll only be one town over, and we'll be right here if you need us!"

"Yeah," Norra said, fighting to keep the corners of her mouth stretched into a believable grin, "what luck..."

Papa raised his hands toward the guests. "Alright everyone, wish her the best!"

Norra bowed politely as the mumbles turned to applause, and the ill-fitting garland slid down on her forehead. When she pushed it back up, it slid to the side, tangling her hair even more. She had spent half an hour brushing it before the ceremony.

Unlike Yadrii who had short, thick fur all over their bodies, most of Norra's fur grew from the top of her head like an erupting volcano; an unruly tuft of dark curls that trailed down past her shoulders and often caused her a great deal of annoyance. A few short hairs also grew on her arms and legs, but they were so sparse and so fine that they didn't serve much of a purpose. From a distance, they were practically invisible.

A line of people formed to give hugs and congratulations, but being squeezed over and over again only added to the sensation of drowning. Still, Norra kept calm through the worst of it. Then, after enough

pleasantries had been exchanged, she slinked away down the hall in search of a quiet place to collect her thoughts.

She passed several rooms that were filled to the brim with chatty guests, and one where an elder was telling stories to a group of children. Thankful that the pups were too invested in the story to pay her any mind, she snuck into her bedroom across the hall. When they weren't distracted, they often asked her things like, "Why is your face so small and flat?" and "Why are your fingers so long?" They meant no harm of course, but the questions always left her feeling incredibly isolated. Not to mention, she never knew how to respond.

She sat down at her work bench and fidgeted with the remnants of her last project. Broken brass links lay scattered across the surface, and golden dust from where she had polished a piece of amber coated the middle. She drew swirls in the dust for a while, then organized a few of her tools to keep her mind busy.

Then, exhausted, she scooted down on her work bench and laid against the wall. It was cold and rougher than concrete, but she didn't care. Millions of bleach-white shell fragments made up her walls, ceiling, and floor, and she often enjoyed picking at the loose pieces. Sure, coquina was the sturdiest building material to protect against hurricanes, but it didn't make for a good backrest.

Muffled voices hummed through the walls, broken up by occasional laughter. Did they even notice she was gone?

On the bright side, she might be able to wait out the rest of the party; avoid any more handshakes or back pats. If she had gotten a nice destination, it might have been easier to accept the praise. But she knew that every hug was out of pity. She could see it in their eyes. Aigaan? No one in their right mind could be happy about that. She picked at a loose conch spiral by her shoulder.

The thought of being in a new town for an entire month was still scary, even if that town was so close that it was visible on the horizon. She breathed in deeply to calm her nerves, and crossed her arms for added comfort. Everything would be alright. She would sell every last bit of her inventory, and come back with plenty of money. She could finally earn a display table in the family shop, assuming anyone would want to buy her jewelry. Maybe, for once, people would focus on her work, and not on her differences.

Norra listened to the voices for a long time, trying to make sense of the syllables. Minutes turned to hours, and she distracted herself from the negative thoughts by first untangling her hair, then working on a pair of sea glass earrings. Eventually, around midnight, the door creaked open.

“Hey,” her older brother said as he poked his head around the doorframe, “what are you doing back here? The party’s almost over.”

Bori was pale like Papa, albeit a lot more heavy set, and had blue eyes instead of green. He hadn’t bothered to change into any formal clothes for the event, and there were flour smudges all across his apron. Norra

wasn't offended, though. She was just glad that he had come out of the kitchen long enough to be there for the dice roll.

"I, um...needed some space," she replied, resuming her work.

"You and your space," he sighed, tucking his hands into his apron pocket. "You really need to get over that, you know? Today's the day that you're supposed to throw all that shy stuff out the window. You can't be a merchant if you're scared of crowds."

Unfortunately, he was right.

"Sorry," she said. "Did you need me for something?"

Bori jerked his head toward the hallway. "Yeah. We need your help sorting gifts."

Norra set her pliers down, and turned to face him. "How, uh...strict are the rules about re-rolling the dice?"

Bori's ears rose, as if the mere mention of such a thing offended him. "Now why would you want to go and do a fool thing like that?"

Norra brushed a hand through her curls in thought, discovering yet another tangle that she had somehow missed, and said, "Isn't the whole purpose of the journey to get out of your comfort zone? How can I learn anything without facing any challenges?" She left off the part about finding others of her kind, afraid that it might offend him. After all, the Yadrui had been incredibly generous to take her in and raise her as their own.

Bori fidgeted with one of his apron strings, wrapping it around his finger right above where the webbing on his hands started. Then he

cleared his throat. “Don’t you remember what the elders taught us when we were kids? Fate gives us everything we need, and nothing we can’t handle.”

Norra raised an eyebrow. “So you think that Aigaan is all I can handle?”

He leaned against the doorframe, his fur nearly blending into the white walls, and rubbed the bridge of his snout. “Look, the roll is sacred. You can’t change it. The only time you’re allowed to re-roll is if something goes wrong with the first attempt.”

“Such as what?”

“Such as...” he waved a hand in the air as he formed a thought, “interference, for example. If someone bumps into dice as they’re falling, that sort of thing. But other than that, you’ve got to stick with your destination.”

Norra picked at the conch spiral again. “Don’t you think it’s unfair that you got one of the hardest cities in the world, and I got the easiest?”

“I struggled, sure, but I made it in the end. Like I said: Fate will never give us more than we can handle. If we fail, that’s on us.”

Norra stood, even more discouraged than before, and followed him to the living room. There, a mountainous gift pile sat by the door. It was hard to believe that all of those beautiful things were hers — not hers to keep of course, but she would still be reaping the benefits of selling them. Most of the people who had given them to her had already left, and she was sad that she had never been able to thank them.

“Have a seat,” Mama said. “We’re sorting by category first.”

Norra sat beside her older sister, Kaya, whose coat was sort of reddish. Kaya had arranged several small piles of glassware, books, instruments, and other things, and invited her to take over the garment pile.

As Norra combed through the gift mound in search of things to add to her pile, the remaining guests filed out the door. The pups, no longer distracted by the elders' stories, craned their necks to stare at her as they passed through the living room. Luckily, their parents shooed them out onto the streets before they had time to ask their dreaded questions. One of them managed to get in a "Norra, why do you—" before being promptly dragged away. Then, all was quiet.

"You know, Norra," Bori said as he examined a set of cutlery, "you missed out on some great stories earlier. The elders were telling one of your favorites."

"I have a lot of favorites," Norra replied as she rolled up a yellow silk blouse. "Which one do you mean?"

"You know, the one about the sky sailors."

"I thought you didn't believe in humans," Kaya called out from across the room. She had gone over to create more piles to organize, and was fiddling with a fabric roll. Her light pink dress flowed out as she knelt down, half-covering her tail.

Bori dug a toothpick out of his apron pocket and popped it into his mouth, opting to chew on it rather than use it for its intended purpose. "I never said I didn't believe in them, just that the stories are probably exaggerated. The flying ships, for example. That's a well-known optical

illusion. When a ship sails far out on the horizon, it can appear to float in certain conditions.”

Kaya shook her head, refusing to be swayed. “Uncle Gavro said one flew right over his field, clear as day. According to him, it sailed without sails, and was smooth as a pebble!”

“Yeah? Well he also said the humans had skin like liquid silver, and came from another world out in the stars. Let’s see...what else? They had six eyes that moved constantly around on their heads, magic beads that could play symphonies without instruments, and glowing rectangles that could capture your image better than a professional painting. That doesn’t sound at all like fantasy to you?”

“Sure it does,” Kaya admitted, “but I won’t say it’s not possible.”

“I’m not saying it’s not possible, just that it’s exaggerated. They probably came from an uncharted island somewhere, and that somehow got misunderstood as an island in the sky.” Bori pointed a finger at Norra. “Well, what do you think?”

Norra rolled up another garment and set it to the side. How could she phrase it without upsetting anyone? The main reason she loved the stories was because she wanted to find out where the humans came from. If there really was an uncharted island out there somewhere, maybe it was her home too. It would explain why she had never seen another one of her kind.

“I don’t know what I believe,” she finally said. “Sorry.”

Bori threw his hands up and puffed out a breath of air. “Way to play it safe, as always.”

“Bori,” Mama said, “why don’t you go ahead and get the shop ready for tomorrow. We can’t afford to lose another day’s profit.”

Bori waved a dismissive hand at both of his younger siblings, then started to rearrange the furniture. As he moved tables, chairs, and shelves, the living room slowly transitioned back into the storefront that Norra was so familiar with: Mama’s herb racks by the entrance, Kaya’s fine garments against the back wall, Papa’s intricate glassware lining the shelves, Bori’s baked goods next to the checkout counter...and maybe someday, Norra’s jewelry displayed in its very own corner.

The last thing that Bori moved was the ceremonial dice-rolling table, with the dice still scattered across its surface. Norra watched as they fell to the ground, and wondered if that was the first time in history that the dice had rolled themselves.

“Hey, where’ve you been?” Bori asked as Papa slipped in through the front entrance. “We’re already sorting the gifts!”

Papa removed his dusty sandals and placed them on a rack by the door. “Sorry, something came up. I see you’ve got the shop back in order though. Nice work.”

Bori took a deep bow, then hopped up to sit on the counter. “Papa, what’s your opinion on humans?”

Papa’s ears rose as he sat in a wicker chair by the front window. “Humans? What’s got you, uh...talking about them?”

By that time, the nocturnal races were up and about. Most of them had antennae and shiny, iridescent shells, and they reflected light from within the small home as they passed by. Papa's silhouette was cast across them, warped by the roundness of their wings.

Bori held his chin up high, and said, "Kaya believes all of the crazy stories about them, but I think it's all just a misunderstanding." He played with his apron string again, swinging it back and forth between his knees. "You used to travel a lot back in the old days, didn't you? So, did you ever meet one?"

Papa scratched at a shell that was poking out of the wall near the windowsill. A long crease formed along the top of his nose as his brow bent downward, causing a few of his whiskers to rise higher than the others. He looked like someone had accidentally stepped on his tail, and he was trying to be polite by acting like it didn't hurt.

Bori smirked at Kaya, who was still organizing fabric rolls. "See? I told you it was all rubbish. If he'd seen a human, he wouldn't hesitate to brag about it. Right Papa?"

Papa ignored the question. Whether that was because there was more to the story, or because Bori had accidentally crinkled the pages of the shop ledger with his tail, Norra didn't know. An awkward silence lingered as he stared out the window, and he tapped his claws on the arm of the chair.

"It's best to forget them," he said, a certain sadness lacing his words. "The R'caesa wiped them out as quickly as they arrived. Even the

children..." He gripped the armrest of his chair. A strange way to act for someone who had never met one.

"All of them are dead?" Kaya asked, tilting her head. "I thought Uncle Gavro said that a few of them were left alive."

"If by 'a few' he means 'one,' then yes."

Whoever that last human was, Norra felt sorry for them. How horrible it must be, to be the last of your kind. At least she had the hope of finding her people some day.

"Where's the last human now, Papa?" she asked. "Would it be possible to meet them?"

Papa sighed and pushed his glasses further up on his snout. "He's a shadow now. You wouldn't want to meet him."

Mama dropped the pair of sandals she had been holding, and the fur around her neck stood up. "Please, love. We promised not to talk about such things."

Norra picked at a snag on her fingernail. She wanted to ask what a "shadow" was but, based on Mama's reaction to the word, she was afraid to bring it up.

Then, all of a sudden, Kaya came up and set a small box in front of her. Norra had forgotten about the one present she was allowed to keep: the immediate family gift. Everyone gathered around to watch her open it.

"We hope you like them," Bori said. "We commissioned them from your old mentor."

Kaya scowled at him. "Don't ruin the surprise! Now she knows what they are!"

"It's alright," Norra said as she peeled back the paper, "I don't know what kind of jewelry they are, at least."

When she lifted the lid of the box, two freshly-polished brass wrist cuffs gleamed up at her. With a gasp, she lifted them up to get a better look. They were carved with delicate swirling patterns, and floral adornments were spaced out around their centers.

"I don't know what to say..." Norra said as she tried them on. "These are mine to keep? I don't have to sell them?"

"That's right," Mama replied with a smile. "They're all yours."

"Be careful when you leave tomorrow," Kaya laughed. "The vendors might try to sing their awful jingles for you."

Norra turned her wrists to see how the wide bracelets shined in the light. They complimented her warm skin tone very well, and fit perfectly. Her sister was right. She could pass for a wealthy noble.

"Thank you all, so much," she said. "They're beautiful."

As she scanned the faces of her family members, everyone was smiling except for Papa. Norra wondered what was up with him. When the others joined him, he turned to Norra and held up a ceramic pot.

"Now look here," he said, "this is a good example of something you should leave behind. It's much too heavy and fragile."

Norra grabbed a ribbon out of a pile of empty wrapping paper and twisted it between her fingers. It still had the vague outline of a bow bent

into its shape. “I’m not *that* clumsy, you know. And I’m stronger than I look.”

Mama took a seat next to him on the large, straw mat that covered most of the floor. “Best to leave it behind, just in case,” she said. “It wouldn’t be worth anything if it’s broken.”

Once her parents had gone through and picked out all of the fragile items, only about half of the gifts remained. Norra wanted to protest and take them all. However, she knew deep down that they were right. She wasn’t nearly as strong or coordinated as a typical Yadrii, and she would be mortified if she broke something that someone had spent hours on. Then, around midnight, she finally went to bed.



Norra woke up in the middle of the night with the image of a looming figure still trapped in her mind. The nightmare had felt so real: inky black tendrils stretching out over her like an enormous hand, the human’s six eyes turned a glowing red... Without ever finding out what a shadow was, she had created a picture of one in her head. And it was terrifying.

She rose from her bed and yawned, her eyelids burning with exhaustion, and made her way to the kitchen for a glass of water. Apart from a lone candle in a corner of the living room, the house was dark. Whenever she turned her back to use the water pump, she imagined

those black tendrils creeping around the low ceiling, headed straight for her.

After a few uneasy sips of water, Norra headed back to her room with plans to hide under the covers for the rest of the night. However, before she made it into the hallway, she stepped on something small and hard. It was one of the dice from earlier. The other two were sitting nearby, and her eyes naturally scanned the numbers. They were seven, three, and one.

Maybe it was just a coincidence? She scooped them up and rolled again, only for the same numbers to appear. Then again, and again. Regardless of how many times she tried, the numbers were always seven, three, and one. She fell to her knees in disbelief, and her heart beat so loudly that she could hear the blood rushing through her temples. If rites of passage were sacred, who would have wanted to rig something as important as her dice roll?

As she recalled the events of the night, things began to add up. Papa had insisted that she use a specific set of dice, and he had personally handed them to her. Surely, he was behind it all. He didn't have faith that she could make it on her own, and that had led him to do a truly horrible thing.

He never said it out loud, but she could tell how little he trusted her to do anything right. The constant checking of her work, the leaning over her shoulder and correcting of every mistake, the poorly-hidden looks of disapproval when she accidentally missed a step in his instructions.

The only reason he never criticized her jewelry was because he wasn't a jeweler himself. If he was, well...she would have chosen a different trade. It was the one thing he didn't know everything about. She had hoped that her rite of passage would be different in some way; that maybe he would have faith in her for once. That she might even feel proud of herself. Instead, her stomach felt like it was tied in knots.

She gritted her teeth as she stood back up, determined to make things right. She had to re-roll the dice, but where would she get an unaltered set? She paced between the shelves, trying to remember if she had ever seen any in a kitchen drawer, or in the storage room. Wait. One of her relatives had gifted her a board game. When Mama had opened it earlier to check for fragile pieces, she was sure that she had seen a set of dice inside.

Quickly and quietly, in fear of waking the rest of her family, Norra dug through the gift pile until she found it. As she lifted the lid of the wide box and dug the dice out with shaky hands, the whole thing felt like an act of rebellion. She was doing the right thing though, she just knew it. Bori had said you could re-roll in the case of interference, right?

After scrambling to find where he had set the destination book, she sat down in the corner next to the dying candle. Her heart rate spiked as she shook the dice between her palms. What if her new destination was a frightening, inhospitable place? What if she couldn't even speak the native language there? It didn't matter. Whatever destination that Fate gave her, she would make the most of it. Then, with that thought still in

mind, she released them. The dice scattered across the floor. As soon as they stopped rolling, all was silent again. Norra bit her lip and looked down at the new numbers.

Two. Five. Nine.

Section two? That was probably somewhere in Tarensa. Before she allowed her mind to do any more guessing, she gently lifted the cover of the book. Papa had made the task look much simpler than it actually was. Its spine, being over five hundred years old, was riddled with cracks and creases. Some of the green threads that held the pages together had been frayed longer than she had been alive, and she really didn't want to add to the damage.

It took forever to get to section two, but her guess about Tarensa was correct. She took a deep breath. That was R'caesa territory, and *very* far from home. It didn't matter. Being a merchant meant facing challenges. As Bori had said, she needed to get over all of that shy stuff. Then she scanned down column five until she saw it, the destination that Fate had chosen for her:

Nevai.