

# Shadowrunner

*Rinka Tur*

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## *Last Wood ~325 ADS*

Kei stood before the Gate. Alone. Taim had made good time. Even with two wounded in his party, he'd beaten her here and already passed through. For that, she was glad. Though it meant she might not get the chance to say goodbye, it also meant there was no one to bar her way, or to try to dissuade her from taking this path.

She raised her hand to the stone archway, and concentrated, calling up enough magic to activate the Gate. After all this time, she still remembered the call. It shimmered to life before her.

"Last chance," she muttered to herself. The Chieftess glanced over her shoulder once more at the woods, at her home, at her prison. Her prison... that decided it. She clenched her teeth and stepped into the Gate's glow, into shadow.

For her freedom, she would go into the darkness, once more.

## *ShoreHold Outskirts Time of The Destruction*

The child stood silently, propped up against the stone archway, protected from arrows and stones by the Bard, who stood strumming madly on his lute before the Gate. Her eyes saw nothing. She was lost within her own mind, wading helplessly through the myriad of spirit voices that had bombarded her days before.

The Bard didn't see the creature that leapt at him from behind. All teeth and claws, it landed upon his back, tearing at his hair, clawing his neck, and ripping a chunk out of his arm. The Bard screamed in pain as he lost the thread of the magic he had been weaving, and the Gate's arch sparked and flickered, an opening only partially completed. He fell back, nearly crushing the child against the stone.

A blur of motion, and the creature was torn away, the Archer had intervened, but the damage was done, the casting was lost, the Bard couldn't work the instrument to channel his magic. All around, more creatures came. The air was filled with screams as the unarmed elves realized they were surrounded.

"Do something!" The Archer yelled as he stood covered in the gore from the beast he had pulled off the Bard. He looked from the Bard, the stranger, to his friend who knelt over him trying to heal the gaping wound.

"I am!" The Healer hissed. But it would be days, even under the best circumstances before this Bard would play again.

"Not him, the Gate! Open the Gate. Finish it! They're going to be slaughtered!" The Archer pointed to the approaching creatures.

"It will not work," The Healer muttered, stumbling to the partially opened gate. He knew there was no time to undo the Bard's work and start over with his own spell. "This is madness. Incompatible magic." The warnings and cautions of the Mages who had tutored him ringing in his ears, the Healer seized upon the Bard's unfinished casting and interwove it with magic of his own, and somehow, through sheer desperation, managed to open the Gate.

The Archer shouted and started shoving people forward; somehow, they managed to get all the refugees of ShoreHold through. Grumbling, the Archer slung the unconscious Bard over his shoulder and threw himself into the Gate's glow.

The Healer gently scooped up the child who had silently leaned against the stone arch through all the chaos and cradled her to his chest.

Unable to protest, she was carried into the darkness.

### *The Mage Guild Hall* ~27 ADS

Kei stood before the Council, these elders who would decide her fate. Some were known to her, some were even friends, offering her smiles from where they sat. She looked to Pendar, over by the doorway, noticing for the first time that his hair had gone quite a bit whiter. She wondered to herself, when had that happened? He had warned her not to gawk around like a novice, and so she stood, chin held high, facing the High Mages in their places of honor at the center of the podium.

"Child of ShoreHold, you have been called before us to prove your merit," said a very old elfin woman, so old that she was completely white-haired, and stooped of posture; quite possibly the oldest living person Kei had ever seen.

The Mage to her right nodded and intoned, "You have studied, you have learned, you have been tested."

Tested? She had already been tested? Kei was confused; she thought this was when and where the tests would be administered. The only outward sign of her confusion, however, was the quirk of one eyebrow as she looked to the next speaker. Her hands remained clenched behind her back, to keep from fidgeting.

*Yes, Woodling, you have already passed the test.* Pendar's familiar voice touched her mind and she almost smiled at the warmth and pride she sensed in his thoughts.

Yadoock, the only Mage of dwarfen descent sitting on the council stood and strode over to stand a few paces before Kei, which was good, since Kei didn't have to look down to meet his gaze, which might have been awkward.

"You've a talent, elf-girl," he said gruffly. "A resistance few possess to the Darkness. As well as that infernal spirit-walk-about nonsense." Now Kei smirked, she couldn't help it; during her time here at the guild, Yadoock had made no secret of his bafflement over her inherited ability, not in the many years she'd tried explaining it to him.

He caught her smirk and winked at her. She was going to miss him, when she was sent to where ever she had to serve her time. She had been given no choice in the matter; she would go wherever she was sent, to serve the council as repayment for the training and lessons she had received. When she had reached the Master levels, then she could choose where to live and work, but for now... she waited to hear what was to become of her for the next few years.

The dwarf spun on his heel and faced the podium. "I agree," he said simply, and returned to his seat.

A High Elf, one of the elders, now stood and circled Kei. She was a stranger, as most High Elves were to Kei, they did not mingle much with the "common" people of the region. After a few moments, she said nothing, but simply nodded her head before going to her place with the elders.

Pendar spoke now from his place by the door. "I have given my decision, it has not changed."

Kei realized that a discussion was being carried on in mind-speak, which was only to be expected given the company. It was disconcerting to know that she was the focus of the discussion. Though she felt like shrinking away from the gazes of those looking at her, she held her place and did not move so much as a hair.

The Grand High Mage stood now, and there was a fluttering through the hall as silence descended and all eyes looked to him. “Kei of the clan Mak, daughter of Newtale of ShoreHold, you have been judged ready to take up your task by those who have prepared you for the path.”

She held her breath. What was it to be? She had heard of some being sent for more intensive training. Others had been sent to the vaults, to study old scrolls and books for years. She felt a momentary wave of panic at the thought, she wanted to go back out into the world, she was weary of the constraints of the city, the closeness of the walls. She wanted to breathe the clean fresh wood air again.

“Shadowrunner,” said the High Mage. “Shadowrunner for the Guild.” Kei heard the chaos erupt around her. Some were not happy to hear of this appointment. Others expressed their doubts as to the abilities of a novice to take on such a task. The novice herself was shocked. The Gates. She was to go between the Gates.

For the Guild, for the council, she was to go into the darkness.

### *The Mage Guild Hall* ~57 ADS

Standing before Pendar’s desk, Kei asked loudly, “What do you mean lost?”

“He has not arrived at Shorehaven, he was expected days ago,” Pendar said quietly. He had called her from the Guild Hall, away from the class of novices she had been training, to give her this news.

She sat down in the chair across from him, chewing her lip nervously as she thought of the ramifications of this news.

“Perhaps he was simply detained...” she offered, but Pendar shook his head.

There was silence for a moment as she realized she was the last to know. She leapt to her feet and rounded the desk to grab his arms in desperation. “Pendar, Taim knows the paths, as well as I do, he would never tarry, he would never let the shadows have a chance to even approach him. Not once, not once in all these years has he even encountered a shade. I refuse to believe he is lost in the Shadowlands.”

He patted her hand and refused to meet her eyes. He pushed a piece of parchment towards her. She snatched it up, her eyes drawn first to the seal of Shorehaven at the bottom. She scanned it.

“Grellia? Grellia sends this news?” She sat with the letter and read it.

*...We did not wish to believe that our loyal Guardsman  
might be lost. However Our Courier, Togow, returned  
with evidence retrieved on the path through the Shadows.  
Sword, bow, shield and saddle, none of which were willingly  
left behind, all tainted with blood.*

*Please convey our condolences along with this dread news to  
Our dear friend Kei.*

Kei stared at the telling word. *Bow*. Taim would never give up that weapon. The steel, perhaps, but the bow... She gasped, and choked back tears.

“No,” Kei whispered, pushing the letter back to Pendar. “No.” She stood and went to the door of his study.

“Child, do not go in such a state. Have some tea, stay the night.” Pendar hurried to her side.

When had he grown so old? Kei wondered, putting a hand to his cheek, and noticing for the first time wrinkles at the corners of his blue eyes. Like most others, she had completely forgotten that this was only a glamour to make him appear a human, Pendar was in truth a High Elf, with all the eternal youth and beauty that entailed. His face was sad now, with grief he was feeling on her behalf. She patted his cheek.

"I cannot stay, my friend. I have to go look for him," she said.

He grasped her arm with surprising strength. "No. This is too dangerous."

She pulled away and opened the door. "Shadowrunning is what I DO, Pendar. Togow might have missed something. He is not dead. I would know if he was dead. If anyone would know, I would know. I have to do this. For him. He would do the same for me." She slipped out through the door.

Pendar sighed; he had known this would be the outcome. He had hoped perhaps to keep her safe, but knew she would take this path. He returned to his desk and sat, to wait.

As fully armed as she had ever been in her life, Kei stood before the city Gate, the same gate Taim had taken when he left two days prior. She checked her weapons again, short sword, bow, and knife. Pouches with a few ingredients she could hastily mix and hurl in the darkness. Little else; Shadowrunners had to travel light, had to move quickly.

She held her hand out expectantly and Togow passed her a lantern, magically enhanced to burn long, and burn bright. It was the first time she had ever attempted to carry such a light into the shadows. She nodded her head in thanks to her friend and stepped to the Gate.

She took a deep breath and calmed herself, cleared her thoughts. She needed to concentrate, to fix her mind on finding Taim. She put a hand to the arch and opened the Gate. Reaching out with her mind, she poured all her strength into seeking him. All acknowledged that Togow was the best Shadowrunner in the realms. But Shorehaven's Courier lacked two things that gave Kei a slim advantage and thus a chance to find Taim; a life bond with him, and the ability to walk the spirit plane, if it became necessary.

For Taim, for love, she went into the darkness.

### *High Hill* ~124 ADS

She rubbed her arms against a chill that had nothing to do with the temperature of the air, and everything to do with the Gate she now stood before.

Beuhrye, standing beside her, noticed the hesitation as Kei raised her hand to activate the arch. "What's wrong, Kei?" the healer asked.

Kei shook her head, declining to answer. Since her brother had made the announcement that they were leaving, abandoning High Hill, abandoning this realm completely, she had been fighting back a feeling of unease. Beuhrye touched her arm.

"Sneaky healer." Kei snatched her arm back. "I'm fine, really. Must be the babe, making me jumpy, seeing shadows where there are none." She gave Beuhrye a wavering smile that she most definitely did not feel, and the healer knew for the fallacy it was.

"More likely, you're dreading seeing Tidewild and that drafty old tomb of his again." Beuhrye teased, in an attempt at humor.

Kei gave a slight chuckle. "Yes, maybe. Go see that everyone is ready to pass through, I'm opening the gate now, Beuhrye."

She fingered the carvings on the stone. This was one of the oldest Gates. Old magic. She shivered again. There was a whispering at the back of her mind, a spirit voice... but it said nothing more, did not press further to make itself heard again. She chewed her lip and read the carvings for a moment, interpreting now what she knew the words should say. The language was old, and she realized this Gate held a warning that no other she had passed through ever had. There was no time to wonder more upon it, the crowd of her clan was waiting to go, to escape the danger that lay behind them.

She raised her hand and called up the magic. The glow came, as it should, and Kei was reassured by the familiarity of it. The darkness was all in her mind, she realized, she was dwelling on the loss of their home, on the unavoidable confrontations that lay ahead. But worse, much worse, lay behind, if they stayed.

For her clan, she slipped into the darkness to guide them on the path.

*Last Wood Holding*  
~131 ADS

She leaned against the stone framing the Gate, a slight smile on her lips. Things were peaceful, here in Last Wood. She thought of her daughter, who was now splashing happily in the river with her father. They had come to an arrangement, had smoothed over their differences and things were good between them again. They had agreed to raise the child together, to set aside their animosity and be at their best for her sake.

It was safe for her to slip away for a short time, now. Rinka would be safe with Taim and the others while she went to the city, to the Mages Guild, to try to find a way to reopen the Gate to High Hill. She hadn't told anyone other than Taim, Rinka and Beuhrye that she was leaving. The clan had wanted to tear down the Gate, after all the troubles of their early days here in Last Wood. But Kei had insisted that it be left alone, refusing to be cut off and isolated weeks from the nearest settlements.

She activated the Gate. The glow reflected back on her face, though it cast no warmth.

The dreams had begun again. The spirit voices within her mind were restless. She needed to put this to rest, once and for all. If she didn't she feared she might just go mad.

And so, for her sanity, she stepped through the archway.

It was six moons before she was able to extricate herself from matters at the Guild, pay her respects at Shorehaven and Wyn Eryi, and make her way home.

When she stepped through Wyn Eryi's Gate, onto the Path, her entire body froze. She found herself surrounded by living darkness.

Shades, or Shadows, she didn't know. For the first time, in all her years of Shadowrunning, she had encountered what it was they were running from. She opened her mouth to scream. But no sound came.

Instinct, years of training, and the need to get home to her child moved her forward. But the path was blocked. She turned to go back, and there were worse things, visible things, behind her. She remembered another time she had passed through shadow, had tarried in shadow, seeking her lost love. She had used up all her grace that day, it seemed.

Something moved forward, a figure.

A ... girl? Kei blinked in the darkness. A child, pale, fragile and beautiful, had appeared upon the path before her, and was approaching at a slow saunter. In her hands was a sharp blade, a knife, which she twirled on her finger. This was no child, Kei realized, despite outward appearances.

"You have overstepped your welcome here." The girl said quietly, her voice barely above a whisper, but as loud as a shout in the darkness.

The girl stepped aside and gestured with one hand to the path. "I will not give warning again. Death meets you on the next crossing." Then she was gone, and with her the shadows. Kei was alone in the cold darkness.

She ran. As she reached the far gate, a voice whispered close to her ear, "A reminder..." She felt a coldness seep into her, wrap around her heart, around her lungs, choking her, freezing her... "...should you ever consider passing this way again, Spirit-walker."

Unable to stand on her frozen legs any longer, she collapsed and fell forward through the archway.

She woke to find herself in her own bed, tended by Beuhrye. Her family hovered close by; she had apparently lingered close to death for a few days. She told them, and later Pendar, Wispen and Grellia when they came to see her, of what had happened. They all agreed that Kei should not attempt to use the Gates ever again, should never set foot in the Shadowlands. She had been lucky to escape with her life.

And so, she had not stepped through the darkness again, had confined herself to Last Wood, consigning herself to never leaving the warmth and safety of the forest.

*Shadowlands*  
~325 ADS

Fear of a whispered warning in the cold darkness had caged her in her own home, stolen part of her away. She had allowed that fear to keep her from her daughter, from her life's mate, both far away in Shorehaven all these years in another woman's fancy house.

No more. She had to face this, to see if it was real, or if it had only been a conjuring of her own mind that had frightened her.

Kei stepped into the Gate's arch, pausing in the light to consider once more the step she was making.

Tide was holed up in Wyn Eryi, a shadow of who he once was. She had not gone to him when he had needed family to comfort him. She had stayed safely in the Wood. No more.

Wispen could be dying, as could Mar'ten, now both on their way to Wyn Eryi. Rinka was missing, perhaps lost on the way to Rock Morrey. Her family and her friends needed her. She had to be there, she needed to be there.

She moved forward, out of the archway, onto the path.

It was only darkness.

She reached out with her mind, out of the practice of shadowrunning, but it soon came back to her. She wove the path, followed it. She had to get to Wyn Eryi. She ran.

To her credit, Kei almost made it. She could see the Gate; the distant Gate to Wyn Eryi was almost within reach. But the shades had sensed her. Her presence did not go unnoticed in the Shadowlands. Something followed her, trailed her. Fear made her breath come faster. She felt the cold, the same soul wrenching cold she had felt all those years ago, seeping around her, starting at her fingertips and spreading, taking over her whole being.

Her sight dimmed, and she lost the thread of her weaving. She lost the Path. She stopped. Lost. In the darkness. She moaned, in frustration, she had been so close. She sank to her knees and whimpered as she realized her fears had been real, not imagined. Her nightmares had been memories. She screamed.

Before she collapsed into a sobbing heap, she reached out once with her mind, a cry for help. She did so, even knowing there was no one to hear it.

Even bright and talented clan chieftains had their days to be wrong. As luck would have it, Kei was not alone on the paths of the Shadowlands.

Togow's ears perked as he "heard" Kei's mental cry for help. She did not answer when he responded, he concluded that the unknown sender was either unable to hear him or was outside his range. Togow picked up his pace, urging his horse forward into a gallop.

Curled in a tight ball, Kei heard a familiar noise, one that differed from the skitterings of the creatures of the darkness. She dared to look up as it approached; dared to drop the weak spell of protection she had woven around herself to hide from the shadows. A horse. She had heard hoofbeats and the jingle of bells, two sounds brought into the shadowlands by outsiders.

*HELP!* She screamed with her mind and leapt to her feet. *Please, help me.*

Togow stopped; a risky maneuver in the Shadowlands. *Where are you going? Which path are you on?*

With a sigh of relief, Kei answered, *I was going to Wyn Eryi, I lost the path, I got turned around, I don't know where I am now, I cannot find the markers.*

*Stay there, cloak yourself. I will find you.* He had a direction now, the female calling for aid was not too far off his own path. He quickly rewove his spell, checked his markers and altered his path.

He had little trouble finding her after that, she was at the center of a swarm of milling and searching shadow creatures, her cloak spell barely keeping them from finding her. He urged his horse into a run and leaned down to grab her as he passed.

Kei's teeth rattled as she was yanked off her feet, the horseman had caught her up by her woolen cloak, and the clasp was choking her. She struggled for air for a moment until he pulled her up and across the front of his saddle, though the pounding her midsection was taking wasn't much better than the choking, at least she could breathe.

*Got yourself in a little over your head? First time shadowrunning?* Togow commented as he reoriented himself and set out for the nearest Gate.

She knew him now, she recognized his mind-voice, but decided the questions and discussions could wait until they reached safety. She answered curtly, not inviting any further conversation. *Hardly. Mind the path.*

They had reached a Gate. She was so turned around after losing the path earlier, Kei had no idea which Gate it was. It didn't matter, at this point. She was alive; the Shadowlord had not caught her trespassing again.

Kei was never so glad to see the familiar glow of a Gate opening as she was in that moment, even when the Gate opened and she was nearly overwhelmed by the noise and the stench. Without even stepping outside, her ears and nose told Kei which Gate they had opened. Only the city sounded and smelled thus.

She slid down from the saddle and turned to look up at him, which gave him his first look at her face. "Thank you Togow. You saved my life. I am in your debt."

"Well, by the gods! I never thought to see you outside Last Wood, Chieftess." He dropped his head in a polite bow before he dismounted.

"Circumstances have changed. Was this your original destination?" Kei asked, looking around at the muddy slush covered cobble streets.

"Nay, I was going to Wyn Eryi."

"As I was, I really did get turned around, didn't I?" She smirked at him.

Laughter lit his eyes as he replied, "Yes, but you are a bit out of practice. Shall we brave the shadows again and make for Wyn Eryi?"

Kei ignored the chill that crept over her. Ignored the shadows that flitted in the darkness. She threw herself at the Gate and rushed through the spell to open it. Once it sprang to life she practically jumped through to the light.

Into snow.

"Oh, shit!" Kei cursed as she slipped and fell into several inches of the wet whiteness. Kei looked to the castle, the turrets just visible from here. It had been nearly two centuries, she realized, since she had set foot in the Hall. She had not seen her uncle in all that time.

"I'll go up and announce you," Togow offered, used to court and the demands of diplomats.

"No, that won't be necessary." Kei replied.

Within the Hall of Wyn Eryi, the Gameskeeper groaned. She was here. Oh, for the love of everything revered! Taim Tur and Grellia AND Kei Mak under the same roof. He thought Hell had come home to roost when Wispen had been carried through the door, repayment for all his past misdeeds. But now... no, THIS was the punishment for every wrong deed he had ever so much as contemplated!

"I'm coming, I'll see to this." Tracker told the page that had come running to convey the identities of travelers on their way up from the Gate. He threw a cloak around his shoulders and headed outside.

Despite the snow covered road, Kei walked beside Togow, who led his horse in deference to her desire to go up to the castle on foot.

Just outside the main gates, Minxson stopped and waited for them to reach him. Lost in thought, distracted with thoughts of the past, Kei started as she looked up into his very troubled eyes.

"Grellia is here," he said by way of explanation, and mild warning.

Another friend. Why was she destined to care so deeply for those who loved her life mate so, those who would take him from her if they could?

“It has been too long since I have seen my friends, Tracker. Don’t worry, I will try not to make things... difficult.”

“Did Taim arrive in time?” Kei asked, concerned for Wispen and Mar’ten.

“They’re alive. The Lord Healer is quite put out, to say the least, by this whole turn of events. He’s working on Mar’ten now. It seems the arrows were poison tipped. Wispen’s holding out better against the poison than the Bard.” Tracker turned and went through the gates.

Poisoned arrows, a new worry. Kei sighed and nudged the horse forward, eager now to see what was happening within the walls. Grellia was here. Wispen and Tidewild under the same roof once more. The Bard here as well. Wyn Eryi was very crowded this day, very crowded indeed.

But Kei didn’t regret her decision to chance the Shadowlands again. She was no longer a prisoner. She was where she needed to be.

### ~329 ADS

“Don’t act so surprised, you were warned.”

Kei heard the voice a moment before she felt herself surrounded by cold. There was no time to warn Taim, Wispen or even the gravely injured Tidewild that she had been caught. One moment she was with them on the path to Wyn Eryi, the next moment, she was somewhere else.

She was being restrained in the darkness, held fast by something she could not see. Her attempts to wriggle free were useless. She sagged in the grip of her invisible captor and waited for the being she knew was responsible to make her appearance. Kei wondered to herself, “Does the Shadowlord even have a gender?”

“What am I to do with you?” The Shadowlord appeared before Kei, in the same visage Kei had seen earlier, that of a young human female. She stood in a beam of dim light which revealed the same curling red hair, same vacant eyes, and the same knife wielded like a toy.

“Let me go?” Like that would happen, but Kei could hope.

“Too dangerous by half. For now, you stay here. I need time to consider this, Spirit-walker.”

That was the second time the Shadowlord had referred to Kei as Spirit-walker, and she couldn’t help but find it significant. Not Shadowrunner, but Spirit-walker, of the two talents apparently it was Kei’s magical ability that threatened the Shadowlord.

The former chieftess of Last Wood was not above begging. “If you’re worried about me stealing your minions, you needn’t, I promise I won’t spirit-walk, I won’t lead anyone here to the light. I just wanted to go home.”

“Well, your shortcut through my realm has cost you dear, Spirit-walker. Don’t make me promises, I don’t care.” With that, the Shadowlord disappeared.

She was released suddenly from the grip that had been holding her, and Kei slumped to the floor of the stone cell that materialized around her, her new surroundings the apparent whim of the Shadowlord. She sighed and mused that at least it wasn’t totally dark. There were torches high on the wall above her, casting an eerie light into the creepy dungeon.

Kei drew her knees tight to her chest, propped her chin on her hands and began the long wait for release or rescue. Taim would come for her; she knew that so long as he lived, Taim would not stop searching until he found her. She just had to wait.