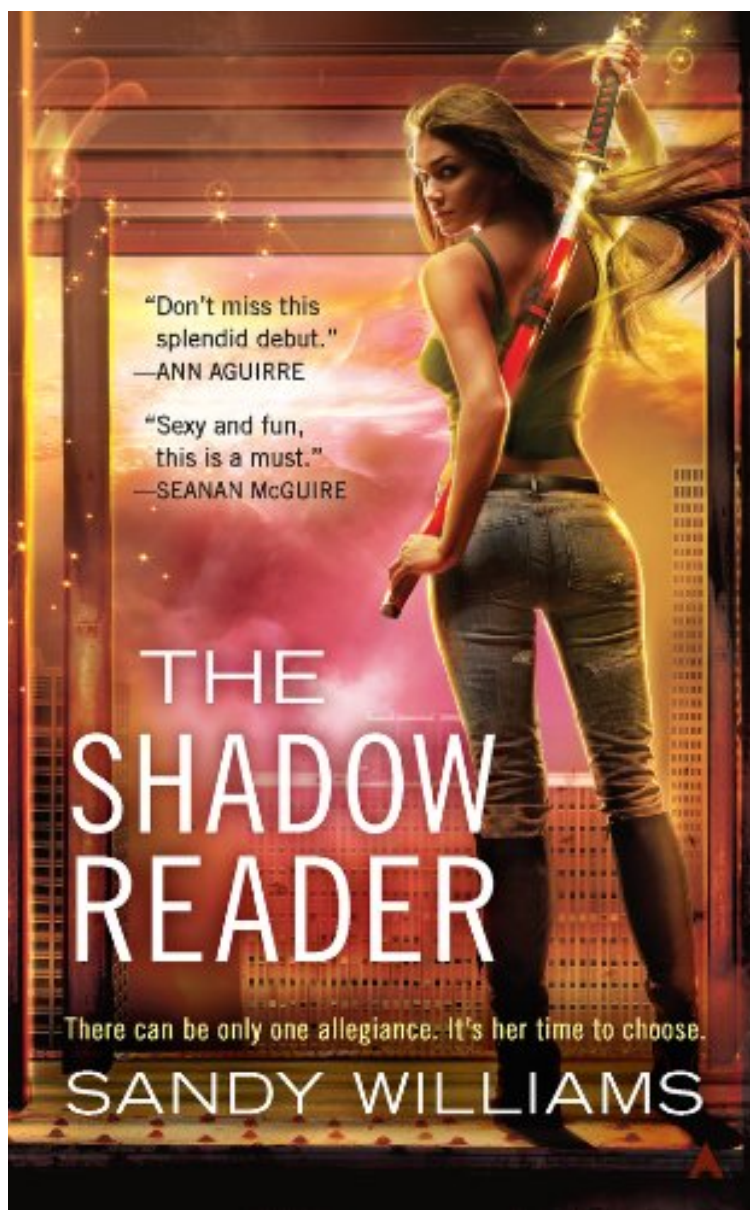


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The Shadow Reader



Par Sandy Williams
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA Houston college student, McKenzie Lewis can track fae by reading the shadows they leave behind. For years she has been working for the fae King, tracking rebels who would claim the Realm. Her job isn't her only secret. She's in love with Kyol, the King's sword-master-but human and fae relationships are forbidden. When McKenzie is captured by Aren, the fierce rebel leader, she learns that not everything is as she thought. And McKenzie must decide who to trust and where she stands in the face of a cataclysmic civil war.ExtraitChapter OneMy skin tingles a moment before a slash of white light flashes at the front of the lecture hall. I grit my teeth and keep my eyes locked on my scantron, refusing to

acknowledge the fae entering my world through that fissure. I dont give a damn if its the king himself, I will pass this test tonight. I darken in C on my answer sheet and then read the next question. McKenzie. Its Kyol. Of course the Court would send him. McKenzie, he says. We must go. No one else can hear or see him even though he towers over my professor, who stands less than two feet to his left. All the other students remain bowed over their desks, completely focused on their final exams. I grip my pencil and bubble in another circle. The fae climbs the steps to my fifth-row seat. Still not meeting his eyes, I shake my head. I told him I told all of them not to call on me this week, but none of the fae understand why I need this degree, not when the Court takes care of all my needs. I tried to explain Im human. I have human dreams and need a human life, and it shouldnt take anyone eight years to earn a Bachelor of Arts in English. They hadnt listened. At least, Kyol hadnt. Not now! I want to scream, but even the softest whisper will disturb the quiet in the lecture hall. I stare down at my exam, letting my long hair brush the top of my desk. It forms a brown curtain, cutting off my view of Kyol as I reread question ten. The Courts war can wait until I finish. Kyol lays a hand on my shoulder, and a pleasant warmth expands beneath the thin strap of my purple cami. If we were alone, Id lean into his touch, soak in his heat, his scent soak in him but not here, not now in the middle of a test I have to pass. I shift, trying to get away. When his hand remains, I slam my fist down on my desk. My classmates turn their heads to stare and Dr. Embry frowns. Fantastic. Number ten, I say with a nervous laugh. Its a doozy. It isnt. Its on the works of C. S. Lewis. Easy. I bubble in A. Kyol pulls on my shoulder and I squirm again. Theres no way in hell Im flunking this course a third time. I need it to graduate, and I dont care if Kyol drops his invisibility in front of all my classmates, my ass isnt budging until I finish my test and triple check my answers. Weve no time to waste, Kyol says. The rebels have found you. I suck in a frigid breath, hold it as I close my eyes for one brief, fragile moment, then I exhale, stuff my pencil into my backpack, and stand. Im sorry, I say to my surprised professor. I have to go. By the time I turn to hurry up the steps, Kyols already waiting by the exit. I brace for the surge of emotion I know is coming and finally meet his silver eyes. Most people dont see past his hard, unyielding scowl, but I do. Ive seen his eyes soften and sparkle in the moonlight. Ive seen a smile crack those lips, heard a laugh ring from that broad chest. And yet, even in those few, untroubled moments, theres always a certain gravitas to him, like he could stand in the middle of a battle and part the enemys line with one cool glare. He reaches for the door. I lock down my feelings and cut him off, not wanting my classmates to see it swing open seemingly on its own. He glances down at me, and a bolt of blue lightning skitters from his jaw to his temple before disappearing into his dark hair. Another bolt zigzags across the hand he rests on his swords hilt. Theyre chaos lusters, visual reminders that the fae dont belong in this world, and theyre beautiful, mesmerizing. With his quiet, strong confidence, hes mesmerizing. Where should I go? I ask after the door thumps shut. The River Bend. He seizes my arm and pulls me after him. God, hes really worried. Just how close are the rebels? I scan up and down the hallway, but theres only one other person in sight, a student asleep against the wall, newspaper pillowed under his head. I wish I could be oblivious like him, but I cant. If the rebels dont kill me on sight, theyll use me to hunt down the Courts officers one by one, just like Ive hunted them down over the years. My skin tingles again. I tense, then relax when three fae wearing the Courts jaedric armor join us, stepping through fissures to take up position around me. Escape would be easy if I could travel through one of those strips of narrow light, but Im only human. I cant use a fissure unless its opened at a gate and a fae escorts me through: not if I want to survive the trip. Kyol speaks to his soldiers in their language. They nod, acknowledging his orders, and we set off down the hall. I shove my worry aside and hurry to keep up with their quick strides, telling myself everything will be okay, Kyol will take care of me. He always takes care of me. Outside, a faint orange and pink haze smears the lowest portion of the sky. The growing darkness triggers the campus lights. They clank on, illuminating the faces of the students sitting on cement benches or walking alone or in groups of two or three. Even after dusk, this part of campus is always crowded because of the library. The River Bend Gate is about a mile northeast of it, past the construction for a new engineering building. I hitch my backpack up on my shoulders. Its not heavy. I left most of my books at home and brought only the essentials: my English Lit notes, sketchbook, cell phone, and the small, drawstring pouch that contains a handful of imprinted anchor-stones. Ill need the latter to pass through the gate unless Kyol gives me a new stone to use. I jog to keep up. When students start to stare, I try to free my hand from Kyols. Its not completely unusual to see someone run across campus, but my gait is awkward because hes pulling me, and Im sure theyre wondering what the hell Im doing with my arm. Kyol, I whisper. His gaze darts to the humans who dont see me holding his hand; they see me clutching wildly at the air. His jaw clenches before he lets me go. Im sorry, kaesha. I catch my breath. Kaesha. Its a term of endearment he calls me only when were

alone. I dont think he knows he said it theres no hitch in his stride as he leads me across the courtyard but if his soldiers overhear, if they report back to the king . . . An unnatural wind cuts through the previously still air, rustling through the trees and skittering a soda can across the cement. The hair at the nape of my neck stands on end and goose bumps prickle across my skin. The rebels are here. Theyre watching. Theyre hiding. Theyre Arrows whistle through the air. Light erupts around me as the Court fae vanish into their fissures. The arrows disappear when they touch the light, too, swallowed up by the In-Between. Only one hits its target: the shoulder of a fae who reacted an instant too late. With a grunt of pain, he escapes through his fissure. Hes the only one who doesnt return. The others reappear with reinforcements as the rebels release another barrage. Go! Kyol shoves me forward, but I spin to run back to the English building. No way am I running across the open courtyard. More arrows fire through the air. I dont see if any hit the fae Im struggling to get past Kyol but I hear the sound of more fissures opening. Each time the bright lights slash through the atmosphere, it sounds like someones ripping a thick cloth in two. Add to that noise the fact that my heartbeat is thudding in my ears, and I almost dont hear Kyols words. You must make it to the gate, McKenzie. You must! Instinct screams for me to get inside the building, but I trust Kyol with my life, so I stop fighting and glance over my shoulder. Arrows still fly through the air. A few seconds after they leave the rebels bows, theyll become visible to normal humans so if a fae misses his target or doesnt hit a fissure, people will see the bolts embed in trees or the ground or skidding across the cement. None of the students are reacting, though. The rebels are being careful. I take a small step forward. Some of the Court fae have fissured to the rooftops to fight; others remain on the ground, darting in and out of their fissures in smooth, defensive dances. Theyre drawing the rebels attacks, but its a long way to the gate. Theyll tire before I get there. Some of them might die. Kyol might die. Ill be fine, he says, reading the concern in my expression. He cups my cheek in his hand. As long as youre safe, Ill be fine. I bite my lip and nod. Of course hell be okay. Hes the kings sword-master. He can take care of himself. Besides, the fae will need me if any of the rebels are illusionists. Only a human with the Sight can see through that magic. Ignoring the stares students throw my way, I take a deep breath, grit my teeth, and run. Kyol and I have worked together for ten years were tuned in to how the other moves, how we think and react so when a rebel charges straight toward us and Kyol doesnt turn his way, I know he cant see him. Ten o'clock. Now! I say. Kyol swings as ordered, forcing the rebel to parry. Touch breaks a faes illusion, so as soon as their weapons clash, Kyol can see him. His blade cuts into the rebels arm three moves later, but its not a killing blow. The illusionist fissures away. Kyol returns to my side. I flinch when an arrow almost hits him, flinch again when another one whizzes past my face, disappearing into another Court faes fissure. I want to duck and dodge the rebels attack, but that will slow us down and draw even more attention from the humans. Ive already lied my way through one psychiatric evaluation; I dont think I can lie my way through another. We sprint past the library. Ahead, a metal fence blocks off the construction site to the new engineering building. I veer left to go around it, but a wall of fissures forms in my path. Six fae appear. All rebels. I tell Kyol their number. None of them must be hidden by illusion because he doesnt hesitate. His blade carves through the air as he charges the rebels, but he cant occupy all six at once. Two of them break away from the others and move toward me. I turn and run. To hell with going around the fence. I leap up and grab its top. My tennis shoes struggle for a foothold in the metal links and the wire cuts into my palms. I manage to pull myself over the top, but I land hard on my right hip. Ignoring the sharp burst of pain, I scurry back to my feet and sprint forward again. When a fissure opens in front of me, I almost run into it, but Kyol steps out, stopping me. Saving me. He extinguishes the fissure and then shoves me behind him. Metal clanks against metal as he takes on my pursuers. I dash under the exterior scaffolding and through the doorless entrance to the engineering building. The construction companys already erected the interior walls on the first floor. I run through what will be the common area, almost make it to the other side, but five fissures open in a semicircle in front of me. Five rebel fae appear. Im no military genius, but this is clearly an ambush. Ive been herded here, lured like a sheep to the wolfs den. McKenzie. Even if the fae in the center of the group hadnt spoken, my attention would be riveted to him. Hes tall, taller than Kyol, but not as thickly muscled, and his silver eyes, while intense, have a lighter, livelier hue to them. Hes wearing a poorly made, dark jaidric cuirass over a once-white tunic, loose gray pants, and scuffed black boots. His golden-blond hair looks like its been chopped off with a knife or, perhaps, the sword in his hand. Despite his haphazard appearance, hes confident, hes alert, and hes completely focused on me, his prey. McKenzie Lewis. A bolt of blue lightning flashes down his neck. He cocks his head slightly. A moment later, his sword-point dips and something changes in his posture. Are you hurt? he asks. I follow his gaze down to a dark stain on my purple cami. I press a hand against my stomach.

Its warm, wet. Are you hurt? the rebel asks again. No. Im not. I dont know where the blood came from. No ones touched me. No one but Kyol . . . Kyol. Oh, God. Hes hurt. I spin toward the exit, trying to get back to him, but two rebels move to block my path, their swords held ready to strike. I dont want to hurt you, the faes leader says. Id like to talk to you. He takes a step toward me. I take a step back. Look. He sheaths his sword, then holds his hands out, palms up like hes harmless. Screw him. I wont let them take me. I sprint for my only remaining escape route, the metal staircase in the buildings northeast corner. My backpack bounces as I run up the steps. I reach the second floor before I hear the rebels coming after me. I pause to consider my options, realize I have none. Shit! I have nowhere to go but up, and once Im up, Ill have nowhere to go at all. I sprint to the next floor because I dont know what else to do. I cant turn around. I cant stop. Theyre right behind me. Shit, shit, shit! My legs are burning by the time I reach the fourth level. I cant make it up the next flight of stairs so I run across this floor instead, watching my feet as I step over stacks of two-by-fours and through the wooden frames of the buildings future walls. The suns set. Its dark, but Im able to make out the outline of a piece of machinery in what will eventually be a hallway. I duck down behind it, praying Im out of sight in time. Soft footsteps walk across the cement. My hair clings to my face and neck. I swipe it out of my eyes and search for some way out of this. Theres an opening at the end of the hallway for what I assume will be a floor-to-ceiling window. An orange plastic safety fence runs across the gap, and seven or eight feet away from the edge of the building is the white, moonlit arm of a tower crane. Seven or eight feet. Can I jump that? Youre making this more difficult than it needs to be. I flinch at the voice. Hes close. He knows Im here. I grit my teeth and refuse to panic. I dont think the rebels will kill me immediately. Theyll try to use me. Theyll try to turn me against the Court, make me read the shadows. They probably wont hurt me until theyre certain I wont cooperate. I should have a few seconds to make my move. I wipe sweat from my face and focus on the crane outside the building. Seven or eight feet. I have to jump that. I dont give myself time to second-guess my decision. I sprint the distance to the plastic fence, scramble over it. No, wait! and jump, but the rebel grabs my backpack. I slip. I scream. My fingers tangle in the plastic fence. I fall. I hit the side of the building and keep screaming. My throats raw by the time I realize Im not dead. Im hanging between the third and fourth floors, holding on to the plastic fence like my life depends on it because . . . well, it does. A chuckle draws my attention upward. The damn fae peers over the edge, looking all jolly and relaxed. I cant believe you held on, he says. The moonlight highlights the planes of his face and even though Im dangling three and a half stories above the ground, Im suddenly more pissed than afraid. I dont recognize him, but my gut tells me who he is: Aren, son of Jorreb, the false-blood whos determined to overthrow the king. And hes laughing at me. The plastic fence stretches. My fingers cramp, but Im determined to hang on forever if it keeps me away from the killer above. Something snaps loose from the wall and I drop another foot. Whoa, easy there. Easy, Aren says. Back off! I mean to yell the words, but they come out as a hoarse croak. I know I should be begging for his help, but a part of me believes Kyol will rescue me. I choose to ignore the part that believes hes dead. Sure, Aren says in an infuriatingly devil-may-care voice. No problem, but how about you give me your hand first? Theres no need for you to fall. I wont help you! Im not asking for your help. Just give me your h The plastic rips free from the wall. I scream again and tense, bracing for impact. McKenzie. Hey, look up here, McKenzie. Ive got you. Heart thudding, I look up. He does have me. Sort of. Hes dangling over the edge of the building, his left hand wrapped in the fence, his right hand grasping the openings frame. Stop kicking, he says. I stop, not realizing I was moving at all. Good. Now, youre going to have to grab my legs. I think the fence will rip if I try to pull you up. Can you do that? I nod. I dont care who he is anymore. I dont want to die. I want to live. I want to be normal, graduate college, get a real job, and spend time with some real-life friends. Hell, I want to have sex at least once before I croak. The thought of death pulls my gaze toward the concrete. No, dont look down, McKenzie. Look up here. Look at me. I do as he says. His eyes are bright but soft, like silver sand with tiny shards of diamonds, and his expression is serious but not strained. The last part impresses me. I might be thin, but Im not dainty, and hes supporting both of our weights. Pull yourself up. Theres a bit more urgency in his voice now. He must feel the plastic stretching, too. I muster the strength to reach up and grab his legs. As soon as I wrap my arms around him, he releases the fence. With a grunt, he pulls himself up and over the edge. I scrape along the side of the building until he grabs my arm, dragging me to safety. I lay facedown on the cement floor. My arms feel like spaghetti and Im shaking, but I cant be weak right now. The rebels will demand a high price for saving my life, and I have no intention of sticking around to pay it. I lurch to my feet, but my knees buckle. Are you okay? Aren asks. I ignore him and rise again. This time, I manage to keep my balance. It doesnt matter, though. Three rebels block the staircase. One of them speaks in Fae. The police are coming, Aren translates behind me. No doubt

my screams have brought them. I consider screaming again, but Aren grabs my arm. Lightning flashes from his skin to mine. I cant shake loose. He wrestles me to a corner and, when he presses his lean body against mine, my brain stops functioning. The lightning between our skin increases, becoming almost volatile, and my body flushes with heat. The police cant help you, Aren says. Im sure that smirk on his face is due to my obvious discomfort. He feels the electricity between us the same as I do, but hes not bothered by it. Let go! I demand, trying to free my arms. Flashlight beams precede the cops up the stairs. Be quiet. Be still, Aren whispers. I twist. I almost slip free, but one strong arm locks around my waist. He covers my mouth with his other hand. Stupid move on his part. I bite down hard. He doesnt grimace, but his smirk vanishes. Sorry about this, he whispers in my ear. Pain explodes above my temple. I totter, but dont black out. My knees arent working, though. Arens holding me up. Im able to focus on his face well enough to see surprise in his eyes. Then the surprise disappears. His lips thin as he raises the weapon again. Its a dagger. He swings its hilt down a second time. Presentation de l'diteur

A Houston college student, McKenzie Lewis can track fae by reading the shadows they leave behind. For years she has been working for the fae King, tracking rebels who would claim the Realm. Her job isn't her only secret. She's in love with Kyol, the King's sword-master-but human and fae relationships are forbidden. When McKenzie is captured by Aren, the fierce rebel leader, she learns that not everything is as she thought. And McKenzie must decide who to trust and where she stands in the face of a cataclysmic civil war.