

PanTech Chronicles

Shadowfalcon

Book 1

F. Lockhaven

M.A. Owens

Editors

André MacLean

Katie Siciak

Grace Lockhaven

I began to open my eyes reluctantly before changing my mind and tightening them shut again. Normally, I'd leap from my bed the moment consciousness became mine, but last night, unlike most nights, my dream had been something pleasant. When this happened, I liked to lie still and hope to fall back into it again, picking up where I left off. Not an exciting, action-packed adventure, or a romantic getaway with my dream guy, or counting my limitless wealth. No. In this dream, I was in a world alone. I rested on the baking hot sands outside my village, no bloodthirsty insects swarming my body to shower me in stings and bites, no shouts to take me from—

“Taylor, what are you doing? Get up. Your brother is already packed and ready!” The shout echoed both inside and outside of my mind. My beautiful mother stood over me when I wrenched apart my eyelids to look up at her. Well, beautiful on the outside at least, with her jet-black hair, narrow brown eyes, and skin far too pale to be suited for the desert. Her hair and her heart matched, I think, but I dare not say so.

“I’m up. It’s the first time I’ve overslept in months, so cut me a break, huh?” I protested, though realizing I’d used up pointless oxygen in doing so no sooner than I’d finished the sentence.

“You haven’t slept in. Your brother’s just up early since he cares about making a good impression on others. You know that our guests are due any day now.” She shoved her hand in my hair, her fingers getting stuck after just a few inches of brushing through. “You’ve been gifted with beauty, the best of both your father and I, and you can’t even be bothered to take care of your hair.” She pushed my head away roughly.

“Right, gotta look pretty for digging up terror ants and stitching up wounded pets. Thanks, Mother.”

She frowned a deep, harsh frown that made her forehead wrinkle. “You never know who will walk by, or whose eye you’ll catch when you return, or whose pet you’re treating. If you fail your exam and get stuck here, your first goal should be to marry well.”

I tensed. I’d gotten to hear this lecture several times a week for the past few years, and since I’d turned seventeen, almost every day. To say I was sick of it would be an understatement. At seventeen, I was already our village’s veterinarian. I’d become an apprentice at fourteen and should’ve studied for ten years, but my teacher died suddenly of a stroke a few months ago,

leaving me to take over and the apprentice who'd started a year later than me, Cara, to become my apprentice. I could take care of myself.

At one time, my father had been a renowned inventor and teacher, but our... 'guests,' as Mother liked to call them, had put a stop to that. His inventions interfered with our village's adversity rating because they made everyone's lives easier, and he was warned that if he continued, they would have to raise the threshold for passing the exams, something our 'guests' came by to administer yearly and allowed every eighteen-year-old the opportunity to be selected for service by PanTech, and leave the adversity zone. Father became more and more bitter. It was hard to be around him nowadays. Even the most minor accident would send him into a tirade of expletives and combinations of expletives. Sometimes new ones, as though he was determined to at least be able to continue inventing something.

"Okay," I said to my mother, taking a deep breath. "I'll comb my hair. Now, could I have some privacy? I'd like to get dressed, so my dear brother doesn't have to keep waiting." I felt a tinge of guilt hit me the moment I finished the sentence. It was meant to be a sarcastic remark to irritate Mother, but my brother had always been good to me. Better than anyone else had, at least, even though he was a fool and a coward without equal.

Well, except for maybe Mother, with her ‘guests’, and ‘we should be thankful’ and all of her phrases that made Father’s face contort into shapes that might resemble a volcano if it were trying desperately not to erupt despite desperately wanting to...if volcanos were human, I guess.

“Good. Maybe try speaking a bit more lady-like too. I know you think you’re above it because you’ve been lucky in life, but if you are fortunate enough to experience greater adversity, your beauty and your manners may be all you have. Sharpen them while you can.”

I rubbed my forehead, wondering if my face was taking on the strange, furious, involuntary shapes my father’s did when she said things like this to him. I hoped I had better self-control than he did in that respect. “You’re right, of course. Thank you for your advice.” I opened the door, encouraging her to leave as politely but as quickly as I thought she’d let me away with. Thankfully, it worked. She sighed, nodded to me, and stepped quickly through the door, which I promptly closed behind her, calling up every ounce of my will not to slam it so hard it exploded into ten thousand splinters. At least, that’s what I imagined it would do if I could manage to convert my irritation directly into physical strength.

Closing the door left me staring into the mirror that hung from it, cracked, from the times I hadn't been able to summon that willpower. Maybe I'd inherited my temperament from my father, the way my brother did from our mother. I'd inherited his dark skin as well, but unfortunately not his hair and eyes. Every time I looked into this mirror, I saw a darker-skinned version of Mother, looking back at me and judging me for being such a disappointment. I'm not sure why I cared. Would Mother really be happy if I put on makeup, spent an hour brushing my hair, and walked around town pretending to struggle with carrying some tiny something until a handsome, rich boy tore it from my hands, steadied me on my feet, and kissed me deeply before promising I'd never want for anything ever again? My cheeks warmed a little at the thought, but I snapped back into reality, scolding myself for getting caught up in the scene that played out in my mind. Stupid imaginary handsome stranger and his perfect kissing technique, muscled arms, and long wavy hair blowing in the desert wind. Grrr! I'll punch him in the face if I ever see him...maybe. I shook my head violently and slammed my open hands into my cheeks. *Pull it together, Taylor.*

I threw open my closet doors. My tiny wardrobe of highly practical and very unladylike outfits filled the tiny space, including the very unpretty one I designed to slow

down a terror ant attack in the case that my latest technique of harvesting their hives didn't work or didn't work well enough. It was more of a psychological trick I played on myself than anything else. After all, it only took a few terror ant bites to leave you hunched over a bucket for days heaving out your guts and wishing your mother had never given birth to you in the first place, or that you could at least swap pains with her in the process. There was nothing quite like a terror ant bite. I was tempted to describe it as a hot nail being driven into the skin, but that would stop hurting after a few moments, whereas the terror ant's bite didn't for days. The tingling and numbness lasted weeks, sometimes months, in older bite victims. The lucky ones, that is. More than a few bites would land you in the grave. Your hollow bones, at least. They made quick work of everything else. I had to give my brother credit for being willing to go out and do this with me. Bravery and stupidity are siblings, my father used to say. It ended up being an ironic statement in his case.

I threw on the outfit and flung open my door before realizing I had forgotten to comb my hair. I quickly closed it again and spent the next few seconds brushing my comb through my hair painfully, completely disregarding the 'proper' technique my mother showed me. I didn't have all morning, after all. Correction, the

morning was all I had. Once it became light out, the terror ants were more active, and this would be suicide. It could be regardless, but we could at least take the proper precautions to put the odds in our favor. A terror ant hive was such a delicacy to PanTech's proper citizens that it could supply my clinic and feed my family for weeks. Apparently, you could only find them here, or so I guessed. It's not like we knew anything about the other adversity zones. Or how many there were. We assume that there must be several, considering we didn't recognize any of the employees who came by to check in our cozy little village to ensure our adversity level was still optimal. For our own good, of course.

My second attempt to leave my room worked out better. Just outside my door, rounding the corner, was the common room where my mother was preparing food. My brother was sitting at the table, a small piece of meat on his plate. He'd remembered my instructions, at least. If you ate a full meal while trying to wear these clothes, things would get unbearably tight very quickly. The longest I'd ever been able to wear it when testing it was a few hours, and by then, you're up against prolonged restricted breathing or a heat stroke, both of which were preferred death to terror ant bites. "Thanks for being ready," I offered. "We'd better get going."

My father's attention was held by a mess of papers on the large wooden table, glancing over them while finishing a long puff on his smoking pipe. Preparing the upcoming school year's curriculum in something, I suppose. He was brilliant, so it could've been anything. But, aside from my brother and I, he didn't have the heart to teach anymore. "I still think you're crazy for doing this, Tay, and even crazier for dragging your poor brother along. When you get back, I'll need you to deliver these to the school. I'm nearly done now, so I expect I'll be done with them by then." He never looked up at us or took his eyes off his papers. He only took another long pull from his pipe and blew out a cloud of smoke that filled the air with a pleasant cactus berry aroma. Father was clever with language. It was frowned upon to offer your children too many kind or encouraging words. It would affect their adversity, after all, to have parents who were too kind. But, in that one simple phrase, implying he expected us to be back soon, what he'd really said was, *You're brave. I believe in you. You'll succeed, and I'll see you soon.*

"Sure, I'll drop them off on my way to the clinic," I said. "Ferris, are you ready?"

"Born ready. Born ready to get this suit off as soon as possible, at least," Ferris replied, wiggling uncomfortably in his chair.

I sighed. “If you’re going to start complaining this early, you’re going to really love it when we start walking around in them. Or when you have to put the mask on. Or when the first terror ant crawls—”

“Okay! I get it. Try not to be too grateful. You’ll hurt yourself.” His tone said he meant it as an insult, but his smile said the opposite. Only I saw the smile.

“Alright, you two need to leave. I have work to do,” Father said. “You said you needed the cooler morning air before the sunrise for this to be safest, so you better get going.” *Good luck*, he was most likely thinking.

I took a deep breath, or at least what would have to substitute for a deep breath, grabbed my rucksack with the supplies I needed next to the door, and lit our lantern. I stopped just before opening the door and took a long look around. I was probably crazy for doing this, and who knew what my brother was thinking. The two of us looked at each other. I placed my hand on the door handle for a long moment, my way of offering him one last chance to change his mind. He didn’t.

We flung open the door and ventured out into the dark, open desert to tempt fate for profit.

“Did we really have to cover ourselves in that nasty-smelling meat grease?” Ferris whispered behind me.

“No. I mean, you didn’t have to. It would take you all day to get the suit on, and your sweat would attract the ants. Be my guest and try something different next time,” I replied at my normal volume, making no effort to mask my irritation at even being asked such a stupid question.

“Alright, sheesh. You’re the expert. I’m just making conversation.” He whispered, as though he couldn’t help himself but be polite, even in the dark when no one else was likely to hear him.

“Well...,” I started, “you could try asking useful questions. Like maybe ask me why I chose to use the grease instead of any one of the many more pleasant oils Mother keeps around the house. You could also ask me why the sugar water line in the sand works to draw them from their nest. You could ask—”

“You’re scared, aren’t you? Me too,” he offered, whispering even more quietly this time, his tone softening. He was the only person who could make me angry and remind me why I loved him in the span of a few seconds. Well, aside from Father, when he had one

of his verbal tirades. It was hard to tell at a glance that we were brother and sister. His hair was rough, like Father's, and he kept it tied in a tight ponytail. His skin was a softer brown, much closer to Mother's, and he had Father's emerald green eyes. He also had Father's natural affinity for language. If he said the wrong thing, he knew the right thing to say to instantly make it better, no matter who he was speaking to. He hadn't lost his temper and started shouting foul language for all the village to hear. At least, not yet. Maybe that would happen when he got older like they say it did with Father.

"You...", I started to say, in my usual snappy tone I often took with him, that he rarely deserved. I took a breath and started again. "You're right...I'm sorry. I'm a little on edge. And yeah, I'm a little scared. Have you ever seen a body swarmed by terror ants?"

"Unfortunately...yeah, I have."

"And you still came?" I laughed nervously.

"I know *you* have, and you're still going."

We both went quiet and continued to walk through our dark village by the dim lantern light. We could see not a single toy or a sign that children existed. They were carefully hidden away indoors. I'd heard of some parents going as far as hiding them in the walls or under the floor's stone. Mother forbade them in our house, but

Father always found a way to sneak things to us that *technically* weren't toys. I remembered the first doll he made for me. Anatomy reference, as he called it. You're never too young to study the human body, especially if you may have a future in medicine. Of course, it turned out that I would be interested in medicine, but the doll I just played with in my room. After he'd given me another, I made them talk to each other quietly. I still remember the day Mother caught me by listening through my door and meant to throw them into the fire. Father managed to stop her. He told her it was an exercise he'd given me to simulate human interaction in the role of a physician trying to diagnose a patient. There was no point in facing adversity as a child if you were too uneducated to be of use to PanTech.

That was when he still pretended, of course. When he was still trying to appease Mother. Now, he rarely did. He'd call PanTech every name in the book and say he didn't care if they executed him, before he'd finally calm down and return to his work as though nothing ever happened.

I shook my head vigorously, flinging the thoughts from my mind. The last thing I needed was for my head to be in the clouds. "I use the grease from rotten meat because the stench slows down the ants. They like sweat and sweet smells. Sweat is how they target their prey.

They aren't scavengers, so if you smell rotten, they think twice before swarming you. It buys you a little time if you rile them up. Not long. A few seconds at best before they do...whatever it is they do to determine you are, in fact, alive and swarm you anyway. I've tested this with animal carcasses. Sometimes they hesitate as long as five seconds. And, of course, these suits are too tight to get into otherwise."

"Ah, right, that makes sense. That explains the sugar water too," Ferris said, in his normal voice, I assume accidentally. He snapped his head around quickly to make sure no one had heard him and might be upset that he'd disturbed them. This is something I did not like about my brother. He was good at making everyone like him, but he cared far too much about whether or not they did.

"See, you're getting it. Now we just have to not die. I saw a hive not far from here, just out of sight of the village that needed to be dealt with anyway. Do you remember how to put the rest on?"

He started to twist to see inside his pack but realized he wouldn't easily be able to and just swung the pack around in front of him instead. He pilfered through it a moment. "Gloves, mask, wraps to cover the gaps. We're going to roast in these, Taylor."

I nodded. “Yep, if we drag our feet,” I said, slowing my pace. “It should be around here somewhere. We have to be careful not to get too close. We need to stop just at the edge of the lantern light.”

I wished now that I’d practiced more with spotting these in the dark by dim light. If we accidentally stepped on a hive, we’d be dead by the time we realized the ants bit us. Figures I’d overlook a detail *that* important....

“We have to be getting close,” I said. Now I was the one whispering. “We’re taking baby steps from here on out. Help me look for them. There’s usually one or two nearby, even at night.” I squinted and looked side to side as I walked, mere inches with each step. “I don’t see anything yet.” Suddenly, Ferris grabbed my arm hard. I turned to see what had alarmed him, but he didn’t speak. He only pointed. I followed his finger’s direction and saw one of the little demons crawling just at the edge of the light. “We’ll put our hat and gloves on. You go first. I’ll watch it. They never spend more than a few minutes out of the hive before switching guard with a new ant.”

“Got it.” He opened his pack, pulled out the gloves, and began working them on, taping them up at the small overlap at the wrist, before struggling several minutes with the hat. “Nice thinking with the mesh hood. I’m not sure how we could get bit through this thick leather either.”

“Don’t be so sure...,” I said. “Keep an eye on it.” Once I completed my suit, I took one more look up to the sky. Good, still pitch dark.

“Over there,” he said, pointing a few feet from where I’d last seen the ant. “I saw it crawl into the hive over there, after another crawled out.”

I dropped my pack on the ground, pulling out two small clay bowls and a large bottle filled with sugar water. “Stay here,” I whispered. “I have to isolate that one, quickly. Get the shovel ready. Remember, right along the lines of the water. Hard, just along the edge, then throw it aside. Three good times should do it, then run like your life depends on it. It does.”

He nodded, bent down, and started connecting the two parts of his shovel. I began to drag my feet toward the ant hive in even, smooth motions. In my previous experiments, I’d found that stepping alerted them the quickest. The vibrations underground set them off. Things sliding along the surface of the sand alerted them much more slowly. I stopped a foot or so away from the ant, swallowed hard, and brought the bowl down as quickly as I could, trapping the ant beneath. I dragged the bowl a few feet further from the nest, pushed it down into the sand, and let go. After a few tense moments of watching the nest open, I pulled the top from the bottle and began pouring the water in a narrow line a few inches

from the nest's opening, on the side opposite Ferris and I. I went back and forth for a moment until the bottle was finally emptied. I threw it back toward Ferris, and he caught it, tossing my second bowl toward me, which I also caught. I slid my feet back a few steps and waited for the second ant to cycle out. What was taking so long?

I glanced back to Ferris, who shrugged his shoulders. I held up my hand, signaling for him to wait or be calm, but maybe I was projecting my own nervousness. They usually didn't take this long to come out. Did something go wrong with the water? Too much sugar? Not enough?

On top of everything else, I'd begun sweating profusely, which just added to my anxiety. Finally, an ant popped out and was immediately distracted by the sugary water pooled on top of the sand. Again, I did the same thing, capturing it under my bowl and pulling it over next to the other. I stood next to them for a moment, watching the opening. I held up my hand, ready to signal Ferris. Counting in my head.

Nineteen, eighteen, seventeen, sixteen.

I slid my feet back, slowly making my way back toward Ferris.

Fifteen, fourteen, thirteen, twelve.

I held up my hand, looking at him over my shoulder. He gripped the shovel tightly and nodded.

Eleven, ten, nine, eight.

I bent down, sliding my bottle back into my pack.

Seven, six, five, four.

I picked up my pack with my free hand, sliding it off one shoulder.

Three, two, one.

I brought my hand down in a sharp motion, and Ferris sprinted toward the nest, burying the shovel into the ground, then turning out the sand beside him. One down. He plunged the shovel down a second time. The angle was too sharp. No!

Ants swarmed out of the hive in all different directions.

“Drop it and run!” I screamed.

He tossed the sand aside and plunged the shovel down a third time.

“I said drop it, idiot! Forget it!”

The third shovel went in smoothly, and he turned up the hive, roughly the size of a human head. Ants were already swarming onto the shovel from the nest and would be all over him soon after.

“Drop it and run!” I shouted to the very limits of my voice, even though he was just a few feet away from me. This time, at least, he listened. He threw the shovel aside and bolted in my direction. I grabbed his pack from the

ground and tossed it toward him before turning myself. We wouldn't have to sprint far. Just enough to get out of their range. We'd still be able to see the hive, but terror ants lost interest quickly beyond a certain distance.

After a few seconds of running, I stopped and looked over my shoulder. They'd stopped following us and instead swarmed around the nest with all the fury that comes with having your home unearthed when you were one of the most dangerous insects in the desert. They wanted something to pay.

"They'll swarm around for the morning, but they'll abandon the hive by noon," I said in my calmest voice before turning and punching him with everything I had in his shoulder.

"Ouch, what was that for?" he shouted, jumping back.

"Stupid! Stupid!" I screamed, punching him again, and drew back to hit him again before freezing in place. "Oh no...don't move. Don't even breathe."

He knew what that meant, and he became a statue. There was an ant on his shoulder...and another on his leg. I drew back my open hand and smashed the one on his shoulder.

He shrieked a full second later. At first, I thought I'd hit him too hard, but then I realized....

“Stay calm. Don’t move!” I said, circling him to get a better angle on the ant on his leg. It bit through the leather!

“Get it! Get it!” He was trembling now, and his voice gave away the tears. Fear, or pain, both of which were understandable. I dropped to my knees and quickly swatted it before it could bite again.

“Let me check the rest of you. You stupid, stupid idiot!”

“It burns. Oh, man. I’m going to die.” His trembling intensified.

I didn’t want to think about it, but there had been villagers who died from a single bite, but none of them as big as my brother.

“You’re not going to die,” I said, still looking him over. “Okay. Okay...I think that’s it. Next time when I say to drop the shovel, drop it!” I yelled, suppressing the urge to punch him again.

“I...,” he began speaking but didn’t continue, starting to sway. His head lowered.

“Ferris?”

His head snapped back up again. “I don’t think I can walk with my leg. I can’t feel it. Go get help.”

I eyed the rising sun. As much as I loved the sun, I hated the sight of it now. I dropped my pack and ripped

off my hat and gloves. “There’s no time. Between the bite and the heat, you’ll be dead before I make it back. Drop your pack. We have to beat the sunlight. Climb on my back.”

“No, Tay. It’s too far. That’ll kill you too. Just go.”

“Now!” I shouted, punching him again in the shoulder, though I held back a little this time.

He winced, though I knew it wasn’t from me. I ripped off his hat and turned my back to him, kneeling.

“Ferris, hurry.”

We stood there like that a moment in a stalemate of stubbornness, but he finally gave in, collapsing onto my back. Could I actually carry him all the way back? I could barely stand up with him. He was so much bigger than me. No. No, I would have to. I’d have to find a way.

I stared into the distance toward our village, not even in sight, my body already feeling like it was roasting beneath the breaking dawn. I wrapped my arms behind his knees and cried out as I shrugged to my feet. I gritted my teeth, closed off my mind from the heat and the pain, and took my first steps.

I had the same dream again, lying on the hot desert sands, not a sound other than the light breeze passing over me. I stretched my limbs, grabbing handfuls of sand and letting it fall between my fingers. I was startled this time when I looked up and saw Ferris there. He was standing there, smiling, the wind blowing through his hair. I smiled back and tried to speak to him, but no sound escaped my mouth.

“You did this,” he said, still smiling.

I tried to answer, but again, I couldn’t speak.

“You did this,” he repeated.

I panicked, grabbing my throat. I tried to stand but couldn’t sit up. Ants swarmed up around me, but they passed over me, climbing up Ferris’s legs, then his torso.

“You did this,” he said again.

No, I wanted to scream. *I’m sorry*, is what I should have tried to say.

The ants bit at him ferociously, tearing his skin, but still, he smiled at me.

“You did this.”

I opened my mouth to scream, but there was nothing. Finally, my voice came to me, as well as my strength. I bound up from the desert floor with a shriek, but something grabbed me—something I couldn't see.

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Thank you so much for reading a sample of *Shadowfalcon*! I hope you've enjoyed the beginning. If you'd like to continue reading, [click here](#) to find the book on Amazon.