Silverwing: Chapter 1

Shade

Skimming over the banks of the stream, Shade heard the beetle warming up its wings. He flapped harder, picking up speed as he homed in on the musical whine. He was almost invisible against the night sky, the streaks of silver in his thick black fur flashing in the moon's glow.

Airborne now, the beetle was a whirl of shell and wing. Shade still couldn't see it with his eyes -- but he could see it with his ears. Caught in his echo vision, the insect hummed and glowed in his mind like a shadow edged in quicksilver. The air whistled in his flared ears as he swooped down. Braking sharply he scooped the beetle up with his tail membrane, flicked it into his left wing, and volleyed it straight into his open mouth. He Veered up and away, and cracked the hard shell with his teeth, savouring the delicious beetle meat as it squirted down his throat. After a few good chomps, he swallowed it whole. Very tasty. Beetles were far and away the best food in the forest. Mealworms and midges weren't bad either. Mosquitoes didn't really taste like much -- gauzy, a little prickly at times -- but they were also the easiest to catch. He'd already eaten over six hundred this evening, something like that anyway, he'd lost count. They were so slow and clumsy all you had to do was keep your mouth open and swallow every once in a while.

He spun out a web of sound, searching for insects. He was starting to feel full, but he knew he should be eating more. His mother had told him (she'd been telling for the past ten nights) he had to get fat, because winter was coming. Shade grimaced as he snatched a mealworm from a leaf and gulped. As if he could ever be fat! He knew, though, that there was a long journey ahead of him, south to Hibernaculum where the whole colony would spend the winter.

All around him in the crisp autumn night, he could hear and see other Silverwings streaking through the forest, hunting. Shade stretched his wings luxuriously, only wishing they were longer, more powerful. For a moment he closed his eyes, sailing by sound alone, feeling the air caress the fur of his face and stomach.

His ears pricked suddenly. It was the telltale drumming of a tiger moth in flight. He tilted his right wing and wheeled, locking onto his prey. If he could just catch one... everyone knew how hard they were to catch, and then he'd have a story of his own to tell back at Tree Haven at sunrise.

There it was, chopping its gossamer wings, rocking clumsily. It was laughable, really. He was almost upon it, and maybe this wasn't so hard after all. He cast a net of sound around it and drew in his wings for the plunge. But a hail storm of noise tore apart his echo vision, and in his mind's eye, he suddenly saw not one but a dozen silvery tiger moths, all veering in different directions.

Shade blinked in confusion. The moth was still in front of him -- he could see it with his eyes. Somehow it was scrambling up his echoes with its own. Use your eyes, just your eyes now, he told himself. He flapped harder, coming in fast, claws extended. Wings billowing, he pulled back, and scooped his tail forward to catch his prize when --

The tiger moth simply folded shut its wings and dropped straight down out of his path.
Shade was going too fast, and he couldn't stop. His tail just swept right round underneath him, and he flipped. Clawing air, he plummeted for a split second before righting himself. He cast around for the tiger moth in amazement.

Above him, it fluttered along placidly.

"Oh no you don't!" He beat his wings and climbed swiftly, gaining. But another bat suddenly flashed in front of him, snapping the tiger moth into his mouth.

"Hey!" cried Shade. "That was mine!"

"You had your chance," said the other bat, and Shade recognized his voice instantly. Chinook. One of the other newborns in the colony.

"I had it," Shade insisted.

"Doubt it." Chinook chewed vigorously and let the wings flutter from his teeth. "This is fabulous, by the way." He made exaggerated smacking sounds. "Well, maybe you'll get lucky one of these nights, runt."

Shade heard laughter and saw that there was an audience, other newborns fluttering down to roost on a nearby branch. Just wonderful, he thought, everyone will be talking about this for the next two nights.

Flaring his impressive wings, Chinook made a graceful landing, planting both rear claws on the branch and swinging upside down. Shade watched him with a mixture of envy and rage as he preened amongst his besotted admirers, all shifting hurriedly to give him space. There was Jarod, who was never more than a wingbeat from Chinook; he'd fly above the treeline in a lightning storm if Chinook told him to. And there was Yara, and Osric, and Penumbra. They were always together. Shade didn't want to join them, but flying away now seemed like even more of a defeat. He settled on the branch, a little ways off. His right forearm smarted from his mid-air flip.

Runt. He hated that -- even though he knew it was true. Compared to Chinook and some of the other newborns, he was small, very small. He'd been born early. Mom wasn't even sure he would survive -- that's what she told him later. As a baby he was tiny and furless, floppy-skinned, and so weak he could barely cling to her fur. She'd carried him everywhere, even when she went out hunting. When Shade's feeble claws began to falter, she would keep hold of him gently with her own. She saved him from falling from the sky.

Drinking her milk, he'd gradually grown stronger. Within a few weeks, he could even eat some of the mulched up bugs she caught. His fur started to grow, sleek and black. He gained weight, not a lot, but enough. And everyone in the nursery roost was surprised when he took his first leap, and stayed aloft, wings churning for a few whole seconds before having to make a clumsy and inglorious landing on his chin. He would live after all.

But all the others in the nursery colony were growing faster than him, even the females, with deeper chests, broader wings, and stronger arms to power them. Chinook was considered the most promising newborn, a skilled flyer and hunter. Shade would have given anything for
Chinook's body -- he certainly didn't want his brain, which was about as active and useful as a pebble. But he was stuck inside his own body, and it was a runt's body, for now anyway.

"Chinook, that was incredible," Jarod said enthusiastically. "The way you just swooped down on that moth -- amazing!"

"That was number two tonight."

"Two?" said Jarod. "No! You got two tonight? That's..." His admiration seemed boundless. "Incredible!"

Shade ground his teeth as the others muttered their agreement.

Chinook sniffed disdainfully. "I'd have caught more if the hunting was better. It's better in the south. I can hardly wait to get there."

"Oh, sure," agreed Jarod, nodding furiously. "Of course it's better in the south. It's amazing you can get anything to eat up here at all. I can't wait to get down there, too."

"My mother says we're leaving in three nights," Chinook went on. "And when we get to Hiba -- Hiber --"

"Hibernaculum," murmured Shade.

"Yeah," said Chinook, not even glancing at him. It was as if he wasn't even there. Shade was used to being ignored. He wondered why he bothered talking at all. He hated having to watch Chinook hold forth and act like a king.

"So when we get to this place," Chinook went on, "we sleep in these really deep caves with these huge icicles hanging from the roof."

"Stalactites," said Shade. He'd asked his mother about it. "They're not icicles, they're made of minerals dripping from the ceiling. It's not frozen water."

Chinook ignored him, and kept talking about the icicles in the caves. Shade grimaced. Chinook wasn't even interested enough to get things right. He had no curiosity. He doubted he'd even seen ice. Shade had, for the first time just last night. Close to dawn, in the creek where they drank, he'd noticed a translucent skin on the water, spreading out from the bank. He couldn't resist testing it, making a low pass, and smacking it with his rear claws. On the second try, he felt the ice give way with a satisfying crackle. He'd noticed the other signs of winter coming over the past weeks: the changing brightness of the falling leaves, the sharpness of the air. But the ice was what made him realize winter really was coming, and it made him anxious.

He didn't like to think about the coming migration. Hibernaculum was millions of wingbeats away, and he harboured a secret fear he wasn't strong enough to make it. And his mother must have been worried, too, or she wouldn't be telling him to eat all the time. And even if he got there, the idea of sleeping for four months filled him with dread. They wouldn't be feeding at all through the winter, just sleeping, their bodies glinting with frost. And what if he couldn't sleep? What if he just hung there in the cave, with everyone else fast asleep around him? It was a
stupid idea anyway, sleeping for so long. Such a waste! Maybe other bats could sleep that long, but he knew he couldn't. It just wasn't possible. Sometimes he found it hard enough sleeping through even a single day. There was so much he needed to do: practise flying, learn how to land better, hunt better, catch a tiger moth. He needed to get bigger and stronger, and he didn't see how he was expected to do that while sleeping away the winter.

"I can't wait to meet my father," Chinook was saying.

"Me either," Rasha agreed.

And then everyone was talking about fathers, repeating stories from their mothers and sisters. At the moment, the Silverwings were split in half. Tree Haven was a nursery colony, where the females reared the newborns. Further to the southeast, the males spent the summer at Stone Hold. But once the migration started, they'd rendezvous and make the long journey south to Hibernaculum together.

Shade listened silently, feeling his face harden, wishing they'd all just shut up.

"My father's huge," Chinook was saying over the others. Chinook never waited for anyone to finish talking. He just barged right in and everyone always stopped to listen. Shade couldn't understand why: the only things Chinook ever talked about were how much he'd eaten, or which of his muscles was sorest from his latest heroic feat.

"My father's wings," he told them now, "go from here to that tree over there, and he can eat ten thousand bugs in one night, and he's faster than anyone else in the colony. And once he fought with an owl and killed it."

"No bat can kill an owl," Shade snapped. It was the first thing he'd said in a while, and the anger in his voice surprised him.

"My father did."

"They're too big." He knew Chinook was just boasting, but he couldn't let it go.

"A strong bat can do it, easy."

"No chance." "You don't know everything, runt. You calling me a liar?"

Shade felt his fur bristle in defiance. He knew he was being taunted, and he knew he was about to say yes, yes, you are a liar. The words were snagged in his throat like dry shell.

But a few sharp notes of birdsong carried through the forest, and they all stiffened.

"There's the dawn chorus," said Penumbra unnecessarily. Everyone knew what it was. "I guess we should head back."

Chinook and the other newborns rustled their wings in agreement, ready for flight.

"Yeah, go ahead," said Shade with a casual yawn, "I'm just going to take a peek at the sun."
Their reaction was so satisfying, he had to wrinkle his nostrils to keep from smiling. They all stared at him in silence, the fur between their eyes ridged with consternation.

"What're you talking about?" Chinook scoffed.

"You can't look at the sun," said Yara, shaking her head. "Well, I thought I'd give it a try."

It was the first and most important thing all newborns were told. There were other rules -- too many, as far as Shade was concerned -- but this was the one they were taught most fiercely. You must never look at the sun. It was as simple and final as that.

"It'll blind you," said Jarod. "Burn your eyeballs right out of your head."

"Then turn you to dust," Osric added, not without relish.

Shade shrugged with regal indifference. "And there's the owls," said Penumbra fretfully. She looked around. "We should get going."

In the distance, Shade could hear the mothers, calling their children back to Tree Haven. And then his mother, Ariel's, unmistakable voice: "Shade... Shade..." He felt a quick tug at his heart. She would worry. And he was already in trouble from a few nights ago when he landed on the ground (breaking another rule) just to get a closer look at a glistening spider's web. Just for a few seconds, but he'd been caught, and scolded ferociously in front of the other newborns.

"Just a quick peek," he told the others, glancing at the brightening sky. "Won't be long."

"You're so weird," said Osric, but there it was, that look Shade had been craving, a look of grudging admiration.

"He's not going to see the sun," said Chinook irritably. "He's just saying that."

"I'll tell you about it when I get back to Tree Haven," said Shade breezily. "Unless you want to come, Chinook."

It was a delicious moment of silence as Jarod, Penumbra, Yara and Osric all looked expectantly at their hero. A challenge had been issued, and Chinook knew it. He gouged one of his claws into the bark.

"Well, never mind," said Shade cheerfully, ready to light from the branch. "Wait! I'm coming," said Chinook, and then, more fiercely, "I'm coming with you."

* * *

"I know this is just some stupid game," said Chinook as they flew through the forest, away from Tree Haven. "We'll see who backs down first."
Shade had to push himself to keep up, and it irritated him. He was always having to flap harder, try harder, so he wouldn't fall behind. He hated the easy pump of Chinook's wings, but watched carefully, trying to copy it.

"We'll go to the top of the hill," he said, hoping he didn't sound out of breath. "We'll see the sun quicker there. What d'you think?"

Chinook just grunted distractedly, then, "What about the owls?"

Was that a note of worry in his voice? Shade felt encouraged.

"Just stick close to the trees, they won't even see us."

Another grunt.

Shade could see birds beginning to stir in their nests and on their perches, joining in on the dawn chorus, puffing out their feathers. Sleeping birds were such a normal part of his nighttime world, but he'd never seen many awake, and now a few sang out in surprise as he and Chinook darted past.

They reached the summit and roosted at the tip of the highest tree, pressed close against the trunk for cover. The long valley curved before them, an unbroken canopy of trees except for the one dusty human road cutting through. He'd never seen anything on it, not a Human, not one of their noisy vehicles. They were a long way away from most things, his mother used to say.

The dawn chorus was building now, rising up all around them.

"What d'you want to see the sun for anyway?"

"I just want to see it."

"What for?"

"I'm curious. Aren't you?"

A slight pause. "No." Another pause. "What if it turns us to dust?"

"It doesn't turn anything else to dust."

He was enjoying this: Chinook was actually listening to him for a change; it was almost as if he needed reassurance.

"My mother told a story a bat. All his wings and bones and teeth, just a pile of dust."

"Just a story."

But he felt a twist of fear in his stomach.
"Let's go back," said Chinook after a moment. "We can tell the others we saw it. We'll keep it secret, OK?"

Shade considered this. Here was Chinook, asking him for something. It was certainly pleasant, this feeling of power.

"Go ahead," said Shade. He would not leave. He wanted his victory without any compromise.

The sky was very bright in the east now, brighter than he'd ever seen it. He squinted with the faint whiskery pain behind his eyes. What if the stories were right? What if it did blind him?

"Not much longer," he muttered.

Chinook shifted on the branch, wings rustling against the bark.


An owl sat stone still in a nearby tree, half hidden behind a screen of leaves.

"Not afraid are you?" he whispered at Chinook. "A strong bat has nothing to be afraid of."

Shade was afraid, but he didn't think the owl had seen them. Even if it had, he knew it wasn't allowed to attack them until the sun had risen. It was the law. He doubted Chinook knew this, though, since it wasn't the kind of thing mothers told the newborns. The only reason he knew was he'd overheard his own mother talking with some of the colony elders when she thought he was asleep. It was about the only good thing about being a runt: when he was younger he'd been carried everywhere with her, even to special meetings for the adults. He'd picked up a lot of things that way.

A dreadful hooting noise emanated from the owl's throat, making Shade's fur lift. Then, with a flurry, the owl lit from the branch and flew away across the sky, its wings pumping silently.

Shade let out his breath.

"I -- I can't," said Chinook and he dropped from the branch, pounding his way fast towards Tree Haven. Shade watched him disappear into the foliage. He felt strangely disappointed, and didn't know why.

He could go now too.

He'd won.

But it wasn't enough. He wanted something more, and it surprised him. He genuinely wanted to see the sun. This thing that they were absolutely forbidden.

Across the valley, a band of white light spread from the treeline. He was surprised how long this was all taking. Half the sky was already pale gray, and still no sun? What was it doing?
He blinked, turned away and found himself staring straight at a wall of dense feathers. He looked up into the huge hooded eyes of an owl, perched at the end of his branch. Without a sound, Shade pressed himself deep against the bark, but he knew he'd been spotted. They were so quiet, an owl's wings. They could sneak up on you. The owl's eyes held on him, and then the massive horned head swivelled eerily to the bright horizon, checking for the sun. Shade let his echo vision creep across the owl, taking a good long look: the thick feathers cloaking ferocious strength, the wickedly hooked beak that could rip through flesh in a second. And he knew it didn't even need its eyes to see him. Like him, all owls had echo vision too.

He stared, hating the owl. No bat could kill an owl. They were giants, five times as big, maybe more. He should have been more afraid. He was smaller, but he could go places it couldn't, between tight gaps in branches; he could fold himself into a crevice in a tree's trunk, he could make himself almost invisible against bark.

There was a sudden rush of air behind him and there was his mother, hovering.

"Fly!" she hissed. "Now!"

Her voice was so urgent and so angry he followed her instantly. Down the hill they plunged, hugging the treeline. He looked back over his wing, and saw the owl, following at a distance, its gigantic wings swinging leisurely. The sun had not yet broken the horizon.

They flew over the creek and the owl was still there. Shade felt a sudden warmth on his wings, and looked. They shone brightly. The sun.

"Into the trees!" Ariel cried over her wing. "Don't look back!"

He looked.

A tiny sliver of the sun had cleared the horizon, spilling dazzling light into the valley. It was so powerful, so intense it sucked the breath right out of him, and he had to close his eyes tight.

He locked onto his mother with his echo vision, and followed her as she plunged below the tree line. The rank smell of the owl crashed over him as its claws whistled past his tail, nearly piercing his wings.

He was down amongst the trees now, and all around him, the birds were rising, and setting up a terrible shriek. Weaving crazily through the foliage, he pushed himself hard to keep up with his mother. At last, they burst out into the clearing. But so did the owl, who'd been following from above the trees. It dropped towards them like a hailstone. Shade and his mother rolled in opposite directions to avoid its claws, then came together again, streaking towards the mighty, gnarled branches of Tree Haven, through the knothole and into the safe darkness inside.

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