
FREE SAMPLE
SEALED
IRON CROWS
BOOK ONE
SHALEEN THOMAS

Sealed Sample

Shaleen Thomas

Vivienza

Sealed

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Sealed Sample Chapter / Shaleen Thomas

Summary: Reese Nollan, a Seattle thief who can feel fae magic, is bound by magical contract to a demon crime lord. When a job to steal a fae pistol from a moving train goes wrong, she ends up on the run with Graham, the crew's mild-mannered professor, who knows more than he's let on.

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Dedication

For my fifth graders

Chapter 1

If I had to choose the best location for pulling one over on a squad of fae guards, a fast-moving train headed for downtown Seattle would come in dead last. But, hey, beggars can't be choosers, and I never pass up a chance to ruin the Fae Court's day.

I put a hand to my ear and pitched my voice for a phone call. "Sylwen, give me a timeframe."

The answer didn't come through the earbuds. It came up through the bones behind my ear, light and airy and pleased with itself. "Aye, aye, Captain."

"Please don't call me that."

She chuckled. "Fifteen minutes 'til the Sounder puts you into King Street. Give or take the pilot's mood."

I nodded, as though Sylwen or any member of the team were there to see it.

The car smelled of wet wool, burnt coffee, and some acrid cleaning chemical. I worked my way down the aisle, the vinyl seat backs tacky under my palm, and studied windows. Reflections were better than faces. A glamour held up beautifully head-on, but never quite survived the secondhand version.

One woman bent over her phone, thumbing through email with her mouth pulled down at the corner, probably unhappy with the sheer volume that would still be waiting when she got downtown. A boy in a cracked leather jacket had his hood up and his arms folded, watching the Duwamish River slide past the tinted glass. Everything in the set of his shoulders screamed, *Leave me alone*. A man in a pressed suit leaned forward, both hands closed too tight on the handle of a briefcase. If I had to guess, he was bracing for an interview, and not one he expected to enjoy.

All of them read human. Beyond that, each of them held their warmth as I walked past, steady and whole, no chill moving underneath. My *coldsense* had nothing to say about any of them. Nothing out of place.

"Nothing down here but commuters," I said, still mid-conversation on my imaginary call. "Graham, can you get a lock on it? Any idea where we're headed?"

The voice that answered was a pleasant baritone, warm and unhurried. "I'm forming a reading now. The train's movement is unhelpful. The compass nearly settles, then gives up on me."

"Keep at it. I'd like to know where we're going before we're standing in it." I kept my chin down and my voice under the rail noise. "Brannigan, meet me in the next car. If I walk into the guards, I'd like somebody watching my back."

"*Claro*, Reese," Brannigan's reply came in gruff and surly.

I reached the end of the car and shouldered the connecting door open into the vestibule. The sound changed first, the clack under the coupling gone sharp and close, the steel walls throwing it back instead of the car swallowing it whole. Through the small window in the far door, the gray afternoon smeared past, reluctant to commit to rain. Two steps across the grated floor, I had my hand on the next handle.

Through the glass, the car ahead sat nearly empty, with only three passengers. Midday runs never filled up like the morning or evening commute. For once, that worked in our favor.

I unlatched the door, stepped through, and the cold rose to meet me.

Not the kind that comes in through a window. It came from three directions at once, low and steady, the way a draft finds every gap in a room at the same time. I caught the edge of a seat back and let it settle into something I could read. While I waited, I looked.

The surface of all three occupants said business traveler, obliging and ordinary, exactly as warm as it needed to be. Underneath, something raw seeped up through the seams and never once matched the thing it was covering.

The man on the left sat with one leg crossed over the other, boredom arranged carefully across his face. Every few seconds, his eyes came up, scanned

the car, and dropped again. A cat in a strange room. His gaze slid over me and kept going. There wasn't a fae alive who could see through my glamour, and this one wouldn't be the first. To him, I was just another human he hoped would keep walking.

The woman sat two rows behind him on the other side, welded to her tablet. Her stylus hovered a quarter inch above the screen without touching it. Dark hair scraped back into a tight bun, rings gleaming on dark fingers, lashes long enough to hide whatever her eyes were doing. Around her, the cold pulsed, slow and even, as if it were breathing. The glamour.

The third stood at the far end, near the stairs to the upper level, with a magazine open in front of him. He hadn't turned a page since I came in.

I watched all three of them in the window glass rather than looking at them straight on. We were coming up on the ball fields, and the overcast sky made the interior lights strong enough to lay them out clearly against the pane. Their reflections were skewed, leaning when they didn't. Walking toward them was like venturing out onto a lake in the last week of winter, hearing the ice crack underfoot. The closer I got, the more of my own heat drained into the room to meet them.

I slid into a seat across the aisle from the man. Behind me, the woman let out a small grunt at the imposition. Of course she wasn't pleased. Nobody minding a volatile artifact wanted company.

"Gotcha." I had the phone to my ear again, speaking low. "Brannigan, how close are you?"

"Five minutes. The conductor's working this car, and I'm not going through him."

Sylwen cut across him. "The clock's already in a warp slide, Brannigan. You don't have that much time."

"It's fine, Sylwen. Graham, stop sightseeing and get up here in position. In and out, like we practiced."

"On my way." A pause. "To where, exactly?"

I rolled my eyes at the window. "Fourth car from the front, Professor. Bring your box. The artifact is hidden well, and I want it found before we're at the

platform. Sylwen, dampen the sound in this car. All of it. It'll get dead loud in here the moment Brannigan arrives."

"So are you going to give me the guards' positions, or am I guessing?" Brannigan's snarl came low, deep in his throat. "I need coordinates for these beauties to work."

I flexed my fingers against the chill creeping into them and checked the window to be sure nobody had moved. The one by the stairs had his chin up over the top of his magazine, looking right at me.

"One east side, one west, one at the stairs. I'll stall."

"Knew you were good for something."

Glamour was half magic and half performance. I pulled mine on like a favorite hoodie and tucked myself down inside it. A half-remembered dimple. A face somebody was sure they'd seen once in a warm room and couldn't place. A friendly tilt at the corner of the mouth. A twinkle. Angled right, a fae smile did more damage than my sword ever had.

I turned my head just enough to catch the eye of the guard across the aisle. "Is this the line that stops at King Street?"

He blinked, then nodded slowly. "Yes. Last stop, about fifteen minutes."

"Perfect." I let relief do its work across my face. "I always worry I've got on the wrong train when it's this quiet. Feels like I missed the memo."

His mouth quirked. "Midday runs are like that. You get used to it."

Coldsense caught it before he finished the sentence. Goosebumps shivered across my arms, there and gone, the way a leaf pulls in from frost. I kept it off my face.

Fae were good liars. The whole empire was poured onto that foundation, generation after generation of it, until the truth became a thing you kept in a drawer for special occasions. This guy hadn't gotten used to anything. Had he ever ridden a train before this morning? Not a chance.

Once, I swore I'd never be like him. That was a lifetime ago.

"You commute this way a lot?" I gave him the teasing version of my smile.

He returned a polite laugh. "First time on this particular route." That much was true. His warmth stayed whole around the words, not so much as a flicker

in it. His accent was faint, fae vowels sanded down into Pacific Northwest. "I'm, ah, on assignment."

Then, the truth behind it arrived without being asked, a flash of real feeling cutting up through all that cold, straight past my ears and into the middle of my head. *Carrying a volatile artifact across your fragile city and hoping nobody notices.*

I cleared my throat and made a small production of retrieving the phone from where it had slid down the seat. I did *not* look at the guard by the stairs, who had turned a few degrees toward us and come off his slouch. "Sounds important."

"It is." Pride, sitting right on top of the word.

Typical. Fae would drone on about duty and loyalty all day long, as though they weren't famous the world over for fine print and knives in the back.

A recording came on over the speaker, urbane and pleasant and entirely indifferent. "This is the Sounder commuter train. Next stop, King Street Station."

High time we ended the pleasantries. I hoped Brannigan was ready.

"Well," I said. "Best of luck."

A clank came from the stairwell. Then a rolling rhythm, unhurried, the sound of a thing that had all the time in the world and gravity working for it.

Everything happened at once.

Metal rang on metal, step after step, and six pairs of eyes locked on the stairs. The two seated guards were off their chairs and into the aisle before the clatter reached the bottom. I came up with them, my short sword clear of the sheath. The man by the stairs looked back over his shoulder, saw me standing, and shouted. Too late. Three black spheres came off the last step and onto the floor of the car, two trundling forward between the seats. They were laced with a network of thin blue lines. The woman got her stylus halfway out.

A flash filled the car, white and total and gone. When my sight returned, the two guards by the windows had crumpled, chins dropped to their chests. The one at the stairwell lay flat, the magazine still open under his hand.

Just like that, the threat was gone.

Brannigan came trotting down the stairs behind his orbs. His standard glamour read as a stocky Latino somewhere in his fifties with dark hair cropped

short and going silver at the temples, rough hands, layered jackets, a scarf, and boots worn down at the heel. His amber-brown eyes were tired, as though they'd watched every possible way a job could go sideways. He crossed the car, scooping the used spheres off the floor as he came, and tossing them into the bag at his hip. As always, he smelled of smoke and machine oil and ozone.

"Neat trick," I said.

"Clean." Brannigan dusted his palms. "Three down, no permanent damage. Unless I got the charge wrong, in which case: oops."

"Do not joke about that." Graham's voice was firm over the comms.

Brannigan ignored him. "Where's the artifact, eh?"

"That's what I hope Graham can tell us."

Grunting as he shoved one of the fae aside, Brannigan grumbled, "I still say it's a bad idea, bringing a human on a job like this."

I shrugged. "This human is a very smart professor who built a box that finds things I can't. That buys him a seat."

Sylwen came over the comms. "You'll want to hurry that along, Reese. Five minutes to the platform."

The door at the end of the car opened, and Graham Everly poked his head in.

He had somehow missed the memo on the sleek and dangerous getup, opting instead for an olive blazer over a pale turtleneck that had lost its argument with an iron, dark jeans, and a charcoal scarf looped around his throat with no particular plan behind it. Dark curls escaped in every direction as if they'd never once submitted to a comb, and his skin was a deep, warm brown that made the pale shirt seem paler by comparison.

Graham looked like a man who had taken a wrong turn out of a Hallmark movie and decided to see it through. The leather satchel at his hip held notebooks, where a bag on this train should have held something with a trigger. No holster. No tactical bulk anywhere on him. Just long, dark fingers hooked through the strap and a face that belonged in a university library.

Which meant I couldn't blame the warm assurance that came over me on hidden blades or suspicious bulges. Only on him, and on the quiet calm he carried around with him.

He smiled at me, nervous around the edges. "Did someone ask for directions?"

Brannigan rolled his eyes. "Guards are already down. Get in here and tell us where it is."

Graham wet his lips and entered, closing the vestibule door carefully behind him. He already had the compass out, cradled like a fragile animal in one palm. It was built of brass and walnut composite, layered in rings of glass etched with words that caught the overhead lights and bent them. The outer ring turned lazily. The inner rings ran out of sync with it, aligned, then drifted apart again, as though the thing were trying to hear something and couldn't.

"It should read more cleanly at this range," he said.

"Then read it," Brannigan growled. "That platform is coming, ready or no."

I laughed. "Someone's cranky that the new man's toy works better than his."

"Different is not the same as better."

Graham held the compass up and studied it. His expression drifted away, the absent-minded professor sloughing off him like a coat. The sharp intelligence left behind made it easy to understand why he was one of the leading professors at the University of Washington. Slowly, he began to nod. He took a step forward, reversed the compass, and turned to the side. Then he went down the aisle toward the stairs. He hesitated when he reached the guard on the floor, throat working, eyes closing for half a second as though bracing for impact.

Graham thought this job mattered. He thought we were here to keep the fae from pointing a dangerous artifact at the human population because that was what I had told him, in those words, with my hand on his arm. I couldn't tell him we were stealing it because a demon lord wanted a new bauble. That landed somewhere messier.

Lying to fae was easy. They forfeited their honesty privileges a long time ago, and I had never lost a minute's sleep over it. Looking Graham Everly in the face

and manipulating him into using his invention for me was the part that cost something.

Not that I had a choice about it. I never did.

"I'm not rushing you," Brannigan said, strained and low. "But we're on a tight schedule here."

Graham took a deep breath, stepped over the guard on the floor, and moved past the stairs, all the way to the far wall of the car. He jutted his chin at a stretch of empty air along the wall. "The instrument says it's right there. I don't see anything."

I came up beside him and studied the space. Cold radiated all along the metal frame. The light bent around the spot and refused to touch it, avoiding it like a live wire. Subtle, and impossible to miss once you knew where to look.

"It's a fold," I said.

"A what?"

"The Fae Court folded a strip of Tigraen into the structure of the car and put the artifact inside it."

Brannigan grunted and shouldered past Graham with a stubby metal contraption already coming out of his bag. "Finally. Something fun." A ring of dim LEDs blinked around the base of the gadget, a telescoping prong at the business end. "Both of you step back. If the fold jumps, I don't want you two falling in by accident."

"Field trip to the Fae Court." I grimaced. "Not on today's list."

Brannigan had already gone somewhere that didn't include me. He set the tip against the fold, and chills shivered up my arms. I got a hand on a seatback. For one long heartbeat, the temperature in the car seemed to drop, as though icy winds sucked the warmth from my body, spilling it into the fold. I reached for an old scar on my left hand between my thumb and forefinger and pressed, rubbing feeling back into my fingertips.

Brannigan spun one dial, then a second. The gadget came up to a hum, high and thin and sharp enough to lift the hair on my arms, and heat began to shimmer in the air above the casing.

Goblin work burned hot and burned out. Whatever he had built into that housing, he had built it to open something once.

"*Afloja*, you stubborn knot," he growled. "Unwind."

The pressure snapped.

There was no sound to it, just a silent shockwave that went out through the floor and up through my bones and left my teeth aching. The metal panel sagged inward. A narrow seam irised open down the frame, colorless and depthless as a paper cut in reality. Where the window should have shown me Seattle going by, there was green instead, and the hollow of a timbered space, as though we were looking into the bowl of a tree. A wooden box sat inside it. Unmasking the truth brought heat flooding back into my body.

"And that," Brannigan said, "is why goblins shouldn't be left unsupervised."

Graham reached in and lifted out the box. "Is this it?"

The loudspeaker answered before I could. "Arrival at King Street Station in one minute."

"We'd better hope so," I said. "We just ran out of time."

The box was carved over every surface with vines and leaves, the grain worn smooth by the countless hands that had carried it. Graham ran his palm along the length of the box, fingers searching. He pressed a lever, raising the lid reverently.

On a bed of velvet lay a pistol with a brass shaft, the ivory grip curved and yellowed with age and traced over in gold filigree, delicate and refined. There were slits along the barrel with a slow furnace orange moving behind them. At the lock, a single ember of light pulsed like something breathing in its sleep.

My hand drifted toward it before I told it to. I pulled it back. *Coldsense* gave me nothing. No warmth, no chill, no warning of any kind. The weapon simply winked in the artificial glare. I shoved the desire to grasp it down where I shoved everything else.

Brannigan gave a sharp nod. "That's it. Now, we go."

Graham snapped the lid shut. At the same time, the door behind me at the far end of the car whooshed open, and somebody shouted.

As I turned, frost hit me broadside, harder than anything the other three had put out.

The man coming up the aisle was tall and wearing the same cut of suit as the rest, with sharp features and blond hair cropped to a soldier's length. Glamour rolled off him in waves that nearly buckled my knees. A fourth. We had counted three, watched three, and there had been four on this train the whole time. What else had I walked straight past?

"Other way," I barked. "We're going out the other way." I turned back. "Brannigan. Graham. We have to—"

Only Brannigan stood there, staring past me at the fae guard in flat dismay.

Graham Everly—and the pistol—had disappeared.

Thanks for Reading!

I hope Chapter 1 left you wanting more.
Sealed is on Kickstarter from Tuesday, November 3, to Thursday, November 19, 2026. The full ebook starts at $10. You're only charged if the campaign reaches its goal.

Check out *Sealed* on Kickstarter

I'd love to know what you thought of chapter one. Write to me at contact@shaleenthomas.com. I read every email.
—Shaleen Thomas

Stay in Touch



Want to keep up with all my latest exploits? Join my newsletter for new releases and behind-the-scenes peeks, and I'll send you the novella *Once You Agree* free, as an ebook or an audiobook. It's my thank-you for reading.

ebook

audiobook

Meet the Crew...

TIGRAE
OFFICE



NAME: BRANNIGAN HA

SPECIES: GOBLIN

GLAMOUR: CLASS 6

OCCUPATION: ENGINEER

AGE: UNKNOWN

CONTRACT: ADRIEN GREY

REMARKS:

WATCH OUT FOR HIS BAG. HE ALWAYS HAS A TRICK AVAILABLE TO PULL OUT IN A DESPERATE SITUATION.

TIGRAE

OFFIC



NAME: SYLWEN KEEN

SPECIES: BANSHEE

GLAMOUR: CLASS 4

OCCUPATION: AUDIO ENGINEER

AGE: TWENTY-FIVE

CONTRACT: ADRIEN GREY

REMARKS:

DO NOT ALLOW HER TO OPEN HER MOUTH OR YOU'LL BE SORRY. IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE.

TIGRAEN

OFFICE OF T



NAME: GRAHAM EVERLY

SPECIES: HUMAN

GLAMOUR: NONE

OCCUPATION: HISTORY PROFESSOR

AGE: THIRTY-FOUR

CONTRACT: NONE

REMARKS:

APPEARS TO KNOW MORE THAN HE SHOULD. KEEP AN EYE ON THIS ONE.

TIGRAEN
OFFICE O



NAME: REESE NOLLAN

SPECIES: FAE

GLAMOUR: CLASS 10

OCCUPATION: OPERATIONS OFFICER

AGE: THIRTY-EIGHT

CONTRACT: ADRIEN GREY

REMARKS:

WHILE DANGEROUS, SHE HAS BEEN SAFELY CONTAINED BY HER CONTRACT TO THE DEMON LORD AND IS NO LONGER A PROBLEM.

About the Author



In the worlds of Shaleen Thomas, the pace is fast, the humor cuts sharp, and danger always arrives before breakfast. Monsters don't scare her, unless they smear chocolate on a first draft. In a former life, she wrote YA and MG novels as Shauna E. Black, conjuring magic, mayhem, and second chances and earning multiple awards as well as an MA in teaching English.

Now, she writes urban fantasy as Shaleen that is rooted in places she knows and loves. She lived in the Seattle area after college, where gray skies, hidden corners, and layered histories lodged permanently in her imagination. Though she now writes from the red-rock desert of the U.S. Four Corners—where she waits daily for rain that seldom comes—the Pacific Northwest still calls to her and finds its way into her work.

A devout fantasy addict since childhood, Shaleen is the mother of four grown daughters and is married to a husband who can do almost anything.

If you're ready to see clearly, learn more at shaleenthomas.com, where not everything dangerous looks the part.

Books by Shaleen Thomas

Iron Crows

Sealed

(Coming Soon!)

Pledged

Enforced

Forged

Cracked

Restored

Find out more on https://shaleenthomas.com