

STAR TOUCHED  VAMPIRE BRIDE 1



BLACK  
SUN

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MICHELLE MADOW

# *Black Sun*

STAR TOUCHED: VAMPIRE BRIDE

BOOK ONE

MICHELLE MADOW



# Amber



THE BASEMENT STUDIO apartment in New York City that I recently inherited from my grandmother is basically a dungeon.

Scuffs and scratches line the hardwood floors. The slit of a window barely lets in any natural light. And the manager's tip for when it gets cold in the winter? Stay near the hot water pipe.

Luckily, it's the start of summer.

But even though the apartment is tiny and falling apart, it's *mine*. And it couldn't get more different from the home I shared with my mom in Vermont if it tried.

"Different" is exactly what I need right now. Because even though a nineteen-year-old is supposed to know what they want to do with the rest of their life—mainly, what to major in for college—I don't.

This gap year in the city might be what I need to figure out who I am and what I want. Thanks to the grandmother I barely knew, who—for some unknown reason—left me everything she had.

I'm placing a pile of shirts in the rickety dresser when a knock at the door yanks me out of my thoughts.

My heart jumps into my throat.

I didn't order delivery. No one knows where I live.

I don't even know anyone in the city.

My eyes dart to the kitchen counter, spotting a knife. Next to it, there's a small pink canister of mace—a parting gift from Mom.

"Just in case," she'd said with a wink.

Mace it is.

Grabbing the mace, I approach the door slowly, trying not to be heard.

They knock again. Harder, more insistent this time.

“Who’s there?” I call out, trying to sound more confident than I feel.

“Eva,” a bright, airy voice says from the other side. “Your neighbor?”

I instantly relax.

Not a serial killer. A neighbor.

That makes sense.

I take a deep breath to shake off my nerves, unlock the bolt, and open the door.

The woman in front of me has sparkling blue eyes and hair that shines like spun gold. There’s a timeless quality about her, but if I had to guess, I’d say she’s in her mid-twenties.

“Hi,” she says with a radiant smile. “I saw you pull up earlier. Welcome to the building! I’m Eva—but you know that already.”

“I’m Amber.” I go to push a strand of hair behind my ear, and that’s when I remember—the mace. “Sorry about the…”

I motion to the pink can, heat rushing into my cheeks.

“No need to apologize,” she says with a warm chuckle. “It’s always better to be safe. The city can be overwhelming at times.”

“It’s definitely a lot to get used to,” I agree, glancing over my shoulder at the rundown apartment. “Everything’s so different from my hometown.”

She tilts her head, studying me. “Maplewood, Vermont. Right?”

I blink in surprise. “Yes. How did you—“

She waves a hand dismissively, her bracelets clinking along her wrist. “I knew your grandma,” she says. “She was always talking about her hometown, and how happy she was to get out of it. She talked about you a lot, too. How she hoped that when you inherited this apartment, you’d love living here just as much as she did. When I heard she died, I figured…” She shrugs and looks around. “Well, I hoped you’d move here instead of selling it and staying in Vermont.”

“Thanks,” I say, and she gives me another encouraging smile. “This apartment may not be much, but I feel like it’s a fresh start for me. A chance to find my path.”

A knowing look crosses her eyes. “Then you got here on the perfect day. Because there’s something happening this afternoon that you shouldn’t miss.”

“And what’s that?”

“A solar eclipse.” She just about bounces on her toes from excitement.

“It’s been on the news for weeks. The view from the rooftop is going to be incredible. Want to join me? In an hour?”

A solar eclipse.

I’ve read about them—the rare alignment of the sun and the moon. But to witness one in the heart of New York City?

“That sounds amazing,” I tell her. “I’ll be there.”

It’s not like I have any other plans.

“Perfect!” She beams and takes a step back. “See you there. It’s a walkup building, so just take the stairs all the way to the top. You can’t miss it.”

With that, she turns on her heels, disappearing down the hall before I can ask her anything more.

Sort of weird.

But also interesting.

Happy that I’ve already met a friend, I close the door again and return to unpacking. The time seems to fly, and before I know it, the hour is up.

The old stairs creak under my weight as I make my way up the building. But, like my new apartment, there’s a certain charm to it. Like the floor is sharing its history and secrets with my every step.

Eva’s already on the roof. She’s having a hushed conversation with another woman, whose back is turned to me.

I hesitate, not wanting to interrupt.

Before I can figure out how to break in without being rude, Eva catches sight of me and waves me over with a grin. “Amber! You made it!”

The other woman turns around, her gaze meeting mine. It’s both unsettling and magnetic, filled with a depth that pierces straight through me.

She’s younger than I expected. Maybe my age? A year or two older?

“This is Morgan,” Eva says, quick with the introduction. “She’s an old friend.”

“Hi,” I say, still not walking toward them. “Nice to meet you.”

“You, too.” She gives Eva a knowing look, then turns back to me. “I was just leaving.”

“Already?” I glance up at the sky, where the sun is already starting to get covered by the moon. It looks like someone’s taken a big bite out of it.

“I told another friend I’d watch the eclipse at their place,” she says. “Have fun. And good luck.”

She rushes past me and down the stairs, leaving me alone with Eva, who gives me a bright smile and holds out glasses that look like the ones people

wear for 3D movies.

“Eclipse glasses,” she explains. “It’s not safe to look directly at the sun. You don’t want to burn your eyes out.”

“No. I definitely don’t.” I walk over to her and take them. “Thanks.”

She puts on her glasses, I do the same, and we situate ourselves on lounge chairs facing the skyline. The skyscrapers beyond our downtown West Village apartment spread out around us, and the sound of heavy traffic comes from the street below. It’s an endless sea of steel and glass, and the city’s frantic heartbeat syncs with my own, a ripple of excitement coursing through me.

“So, Amber.” Eva makes herself comfortable and faces me. “Tell me about yourself. What do you like to do? What do you *want* to do?”

“Um...” I bite my lip, thinking.

“I like reading. And music.” I search my mind for something more, since I’m not exactly coming across as the most interesting person on the planet. “I’m good at sports, but I don’t really enjoy playing them. I also bake, but that’s more of my mom’s thing than mine.”

“Interesting,” she says, and we continue to chat as the moon crawls across the sun.

Eventually, the sky takes on a twilight hue, even though it’s mid-afternoon. There’s a final sparkle of light, and then the sun turns black, minus a ring of fire in a halo around it.

It’s like it went from day to night in a few seconds.

“We can remove our glasses now,” Eva says, sounding as awe-struck as I feel.

The eclipse, when the sun is completely covered by the moon, is even more breathtaking without the screens of the glasses dimming my view.

But as I gaze up at the covered sun, Eva remains focused on me. There must be something strange going on with the reflection of the light, because it’s like her pupils are mini eclipses, the sunbursts around them glowing on their own.

“Are you okay?” I ask slowly.

She doesn’t respond.

Instead, she reaches forward, touches my forehead, and it’s like the power of a million electric shocks travels through her fingers and into my mind.

The pain is blinding. It’s like the worst migraine of my life, amplified beyond anything I could ever imagine, and I gasp, struggling to breathe.

“Relax.” Eva’s voice is distant, yet clear. “I know it hurts. But you’re going to be okay. I promise.”

The world tilts, my eyes burn, and before I can ask what she means, I fall back and tumble down into the darkness.

\* \* \*

I awake to a soft light filtering through the window, the smell of roses, and something spicy, like cinnamon.

It’s nothing like the pine scent of home.

*Because I’m not home*, I think, and the memories of recent events crash through my mind. Arriving at my grandmother’s apartment, Eva introducing herself, and the eclipse that all but burned a hole through my brain.

And, judging from the fact that there’s an actual *window* in here, I’m not in my basement apartment.

Luckily, the window looks out to my new street. Which makes it safe to assume that I’m currently in Eva’s apartment. And if it’s already sunrise, that means I just slept for... over twelve hours.

My head throbs, but I force myself up in the bed.

Eva’s sitting on the chair at her vanity, with two mugs in front of her. “You’re up,” she says, giving me that radiant smile of hers. “How are you feeling?”

“Like my brain exploded and then melded back together.” I press my fingers to my forehead, remembering how she did the exact same thing to me during the eclipse. “What happened?”

“There must have been some defect with the glasses,” she says. “I’m so sorry. You experienced some solar retinopathy, but we caught it early.”

“Solar what?” I ask.

“Solar retinopathy,” she repeats. “The sun burned your eyes a bit.”

“That... doesn’t sound good.”

Understatement of the century.

“Don’t worry—you’re totally fine now,” she says quickly. “I didn’t have a chance to tell you much about me, but I’m a nurse practitioner. I checked your eyes, and all was well.” She picks up one of the mugs and holds it out to me. “Here. Drink this. It’ll help you feel better.”

It does smell good. And my throat is so dry that it hurts.



“What is it?” I ask.

“Chamomile tea.”

It’s exactly what my mom always made me when I felt sick at home.

“Thanks.” I accept the mug and take a sip. “Is this your apartment?”

“It is. I couldn’t just leave you on the roof,” she explains, and I nod slowly, taking another sip of the tea. It grounds me. I feel warm. Safe.

At the same time, I don’t want to stay here any longer than necessary. I have a lot to do with the move, and I need to get it all done, on top of having to search for a job.

Anxiety tightens in my chest at the thought.

“Thanks for everything, but I have to go,” I say, grabbing my bag from the nightstand. “See you around?”

“Of course.” She flashes me another smile. “Oh, and one more thing.”

“Yes?” I stop midway to the door and turn to face her.

“I won a ticket to a show tonight. *Wicked*—the musical,” she says. “But work called earlier and let me know that one of the nurses is sick, and they need me to take over an extra shift. Do you want it?”

“What do you mean that you ‘won’ a ticket?” I ask.

“Have you ever heard of the Broadway lottery?” she asks, and I shake my head no, waiting for her to continue. “It’s a system where anyone can enter to win tickets for Broadway shows a day in advance at a much lower price. I enter every day and win a decent amount of the time. But I can’t resell it, and I don’t want it to go to waste. So, do you want it?”

“How much is it?”

I know she said a “much lower price,” but I’m on a pretty strict budget over here.

“I’m gifting it to you,” she says. “So... it’s free.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m sure,” she says, and then she adds, “Please take it. It would be a shame for it to go to waste.”

I pause, thinking. I feel bad taking it without paying. At the same time, she *is* offering...

“That would be great,” I finally say.

“Cool—I’ll text you the ticket,” she says. “Let me know how you like it!”

“Will do,” I say, smiling again. “And, thanks.”

“Anytime.”

The rest of the day passes in a blur as I work non-stop to situate myself in

the apartment. Eventually, it's time to head out for the show. And I leave *extra* early. It's my first time using the subway, and despite all the instructions I've read online, I don't want to mess up and get there late.

It all goes... surprisingly smoothly.

The show is amazing.

When I exit the theatre, the city is alive and buzzing, even at this time of night. Everyone in Maplewood is probably home and getting ready for bed right now.

Maybe I should hail a taxi to get home. I have no idea if the subway is safe this late.

But taxis are expensive. I have no job yet. Sure, my grandmother left me a bit of money, but I need to save it for apartment fees and anything else that might go wrong and need fixing.

So, the subway it is.

I follow my phone's directions to the station and head down the steps, hurrying to the platform at the sound of the train approaching. With a final sprint, I dive into the back car, just as the doors slide closed behind me.

*Victory.*

Catching my breath, I lean against a pole and scan the subway car. There are only a few other passengers inside. They're engrossed in their own worlds, headphones in or phones out.

Then, my eyes lock with a man's at the opposite side. Blond hair. A perfectly tailored suit. He radiates power and wealth, seeming entirely out of place here.

No way does he need to save money by taking the subway instead of a taxi.

Or instead of being driven around by a chauffeur.

I should look away. By now, he's totally realized I'm staring. Well, he's doing it right back, but still—it's probably because I looked at him first and he's wondering why a stranger is staring at him on the subway.

Before I can shake myself out of it, the train jolts, and I stagger, gripping the pole tighter and miraculously avoiding falling on my face.

The lights flicker.

My heart jumps into my throat, and I glance around at the others in the car, checking to see if this is normal, or if the train's breaking down.

As I do, coldness wraps around my bones. Because there's something not right about the others in the car. Their eyes are eerily vacant. Hollow.

Hungry.

And then, their bodies and faces stretch and contort, shifting into something twisted and grotesque.

*No, I think. This can't be real. My eyes are playing tricks on me.*

A side effect from what happened during the eclipse?

I shouldn't have trusted that Eva could properly diagnose me and know I was okay. Why *did* I trust her?

I need to go to a doctor.

I try blinking the visions away, but then one of the ghoulish creatures lunges at me with an inhuman speed, his eyes fixated hungrily on mine.

My scream gets stuck in my throat.

From the corner of my eye, the blond man from earlier leaps into action, plunging a dagger into the attacker's chest.

"Stay behind me!" he shouts as the ghoul disintegrates and melts into a sticky puddle on the floor.

He doesn't have to say it twice.

I scramble backward, into the corner. My eyes dart around, searching for a way to escape. But there's nowhere to go. I'm trapped.

I turn back around, my breaths shallow, watching in horror as the ghoulish things try coming closer.

Luckily, the man in the suit and a bigger, broader man with silver hair keep using their daggers to ward the creatures off and disintegrate them.

This can't be happening.

I have to be seeing things.

Before I can come close to processing it, one of the creatures breaks through the men's defense. A darker, more menacing one than the rest, with dead eyes and long fingers that reach out to wrap around my throat.

His touch is as cold as death.

I gasp for air, trying to pry away his icy grip, but it's useless. His gaze burns into my soul. And as he grins down at me, his sharp teeth glinting in the flickering light, a haze creeps into the corners of my vision.

It feels like he's trying to suck the life out of me.

But whatever this thing is trying to do to me... I won't let it. I might not know what my purpose in life is yet, but it sure as hell isn't to die at the hands of a monster in the subway on my second day in the city.

Determination fills me, and something stirs within me. A deep warmth—a vibrant, burning energy. It starts in my chest, radiating outward, rushing

through my veins like liquid fire.

The creature's eyes widen in surprise, and he hisses, recoiling in pain.

And then that warmth—the one I felt building inside me—*comes out*. The blinding orb collides with the creature's chest, so bright that it fills the car with a radiant, golden light.

The ghoul releases a blood curdling scream, his face twisting and distorting even more, and then he dissolves—*melts*—into a brown, sticky puddle on the floor.

As I stare down at it in shock, the two men finish off the other creatures in the car.

The last one dissolves, and the world silences for the first time since the lights started flickering.

Now that it's over—or seems to be over—exhaustion hits me like a truck. Every muscle, every fiber of my being screams in agony. I can barely stand, let alone speak as the darkness at the edges of my vision closes in. I reach for the wall behind me, but it's no use.

I'm slipping, sliding.

The blond man rushes over, catching me just in time.

I try to focus on his face, to find some comfort in the ice blue eyes of the man who just saved my life, but everything seems so distant. Whatever just happened—that monster sucking my soul out, the light that burst out of me—it's like it drained every bit of energy out of my body.

Amidst the impending darkness, a phone rings.

“We found her,” I hear, and then the world fades to nothing.

# Damien



THE PULSE of the helicopter blades cuts through the air, and I lean forward, scanning the expanse of mountains below.

Pine Valley sprawls out like an emerald jewel in the night, tucked amidst the rolling Adirondack Mountains. Even from this height, I sense the raw, primal power of the land—where shifters and witches rule supreme, and outsiders tread carefully.

Being a vampire in wolf territory is no simple matter, regardless of our alliance. But the Pine Valley pack is different. Our treaty is a rare bridge of trust between vampires and wolves.

A clearing in the forest comes into view—the one just outside pack territory—and the helicopter begins to descend. The pilot, Theo, is a long-time member of my clan. With black hair pulled into a tight ponytail and a scar that runs down his left cheek, he's a silent, brooding type, more accustomed to taking action than indulging in idle chitchat.

As we touch down, two figures emerge from the trees, both with dark brown hair that shines under the moonlight.

Connor and Ruby.

The alphas of the Pine Valley pack. Despite their young ages, they move with a grace and confidence that come from mastering their powers and leading their people.

Despite being new to the supernatural world, Ruby's taken to it as if she's been preparing for her entire life.

Her mate, Connor—always serious and duty-bound—*has* been preparing for it his entire life.

I disembark from the helicopter and meet their gazes, asserting the fact

that while they're alphas, they hold no power over me.

Connor's lips curl into a half-smile. "You always did know how to make an entrance," he says, although his dark eyes remain guarded.

"I've had a few years of practice."

It's the understatement of the century.

Well, of the past *three* centuries. Which is how long I've been alive.

"Damien." Ruby watches me carefully with her bright turquoise eyes, intrigued but guarded. "It's nice to finally meet you."

"You have your mother's eyes," I reply, and while she gives me a soft smile, the sadness on her face is evident.

Connor steps closer to his mate in a show of support. "So," he says to me. "To what do we owe this surprise visit?"

I remain focused on Ruby. "We found another one. Of you," I clarify.

She's immediately on edge, and a slew of emotions cross over her face. Mainly, surprise.

"Another star touched," she finally says.

"Her name's Amber," I say. "I was hunting shadow souls on the subway, and she got into the car with us. That was the first sign that there was something different about her. Humans instinctively stay away from a subway car full of shadow souls more than they avoid a car with no air conditioning. I was positive she'd be a goner."

From there, I tell them about what happened during the fight with the shadow souls, ending with the bright ray of light the girl released from her hands before dissolving the creature and passing out.

"How do you know she's star touched?" Connor asks when I'm done.

"There's a mark," I inform them. "A North Star. On her hip bone."

"You saw her hip bone?" Ruby raises an eyebrow, clearly suspecting... nefarious intent.

She's correct about my attraction toward the girl. As for my intent...

"Your mother found the mark," I tell her. "She's been watching over Amber until she wakes."

Ruby seems momentarily caught off guard, as if the thought of her mother intimately caring for someone who isn't her brings a wave of sadness upon her. I understand her feelings, yet part of me wonders if she realizes how fortunate she is to have her parents still alive. She'll be able to see them again eventually.

Not everyone in this world can say the same.

Sensing the perfect opportunity, I take a deep breath and present my offer.

“I came here to personally invite you to the Fairmont,” I tell her, referring to the name of the building where I reside in the city with my clan. “Not just to see your parents, but to meet Amber. She’s new to all this, and you know better than anyone how overwhelming it can be to discover that the supernatural world exists. You’re also the only one who can relate to her specific circumstance.”

Also known as being star touched by a celestial goddess.

Connor stiffens. But it’s Ruby I’m focused on, with the internal battle in her eyes as she contemplates my offer.

Before she can answer, a blast of heat rolls through the clearing, and a swirl of flames converge into a dazzling pillar between us.

A witch steps out of it, her brown hair highlighted with gold, and the fire disappears behind her.

“Morgan,” Ruby gasps. “You’re back.”

“It’s good to see you, too.” Morgan smiles, warm and welcoming. “Apologies for the surprise entrance.”

“It was certainly dramatic,” Connor says, and then he turns his attention to me. “Damien, this is Morgan—a witch from the Blood Coven. She has the ability to scry for information. Morgan, this is Damien—king of the Uptown Clan.”

The Blood Coven—the three witch sisters who can perform blood magic. Morgan, Zara, and Willow. We’ve discussed them at length, but this is assumedly the first time I’ve crossed paths with any of them. Their relationship with the Pine Valley pack is complicated, to say the least, but Morgan has proven trustworthy so far.

Morgan gives me a nod of acknowledgment, and I do the same for her, careful to not bring attention to the fact that this isn’t the first time she and I have met.

How else would I have known exactly where to run into the only star touched other than Ruby in the world?

“As much as I’d like to stay and chat, I’m here because there’s something you all need to know,” Morgan says quickly, eager to get to the point.

“We’re listening,” I say slowly.

“I was scrying for information, and I received a message from the stars,” she begins, her focus returning to Connor and Ruby. “The vision was

fragmented, as most of them are. But I needed to come here immediately to remind you that your duty—both of you—is to Pine Valley. The shadows in the city are gaining strength, and while it will be tempting to go there to help, your pack needs you. You must lead them and protect them, especially now.”

Silence weighs heavily in the air as the implication of her words sets in.

Ruby glances at the ground, then refocuses on Morgan. “You’re saying I shouldn’t go to the city to meet Amber and see my parents.”

Morgan’s gaze is unwavering. “Exactly,” she says, and then she adds, “Your parents are strong. Amber has her own journey ahead, and her own magic to discover. Your paths might cross eventually. But not now. It’s too soon.”

Ruby takes a deep breath, as if drawing strength from the earth.

I expect her to ask questions. To demand more from Morgan.

But Morgan radiates authority. It’s clear from the darkness brewing in her normally bright eyes that she wouldn’t be saying all of this if it wasn’t absolutely necessary.

Connor reaches for his mate’s hand and squeezes it. “Whatever decision you make, I stand by you,” he tells her. “I can’t go with you to the city, but I’ll support you in any way I can.”

Energy buzzes in the air between them as they gaze at each other. They can’t communicate telepathically—no supernatural can—but it’s clear that the feelings being passed between them don’t need words to be said.

I wait patiently for Ruby to sort through her thoughts.

When she meets my eyes again, it’s obvious her decision is made. “I appreciate your offer to come to the Fairmont, but I’m staying here,” she says, and Morgan nods in approval. “I’m an alpha of the Pine Valley pack, and I won’t let them down. Ever. Plus, like Morgan said, my parents are strong. I trust that they’re safe with you and your clan.”

She and Connor both radiate a strength that even I, with my centuries of experience, can’t help but respect.

“Pine Valley is fortunate to have you both,” I tell her, meaning it. “And Morgan—thank you for coming here, to advise all of us.”

“Yes. Thank you,” Connor says to her, and then his attention returns to me. “If you ever need assistance with the growing darkness in the city, don’t hesitate to reach out. Even though Ruby and I can’t go there directly, I can still see what we can do to help.”

“My clan is well trained, with centuries of experience,” I remind him.



“This is, however, a new threat to all of us, and your commitment to our alliance is appreciated. If there’s one thing I’ve learned over the years, it’s that unity is our greatest strength against the darkness. And now that the new star touched is staying with us, I’m sure we have what we need to emerge victorious.”

“Especially with me also there, fighting by your side,” Morgan adds.

I raise an eyebrow. “Are you requesting an invitation to stay at the Fairmont?”

“You’re going to accept,” she says. “I’ve seen it.”

I can’t help but chuckle, liking the little witch despite the age-old feud between our kinds. “Then consider the invitation extended.”

She gives me a knowing smile. “I had a feeling you’d say that.”

Ruby steps forward before I can reply. “Damien, whatever happens in the city, promise you’ll keep Amber safe,” she says. “She’s new to this world, and if she’s truly a star touched like me, she’s bound to be a target.”

I meet her gaze head-on. “On my honor, I promise she’ll be protected.”

She and Connor exchange a final glance with me, and a mutual understanding passes between us.

“Until we meet again,” Connor says.

“Until then,” I say.

The wind stirs around me, and I can feel that it’s time to go.

“Well?” Morgan motions toward the helicopter. “Ready to head out?”

“You won’t be traveling by fire?” I ask.

While most witches can control the element of fire, Morgan’s ability to travel in it is a rare one. I’ve only seen it a few times in my long life.

“My magic is strong, but as you know, we all have our limits,” she says. “Best not to push them when possible. Plus, I don’t want my arrival at your home to bring unneeded attention. We’ll already have enough to explain as it is.”

“Very well then.” I nod in agreement, happy to hear that there’s sense beneath her theatrics. “Let’s not waste any more time.”

I step aside so Morgan can board the helicopter, then get in after her. As we take off, I steal one last glance at the pair below. Ruby’s eyes shine with hope, while Connor stands protectively by her side, a solid and unwavering force.

As we ascend, the challenges ahead loom large in my mind. With Amber’s safety to ensure, Morgan’s visions to decipher, and the shadow

souls growing in power, the coming days are bound to be filled with danger.

But this isn't the first time I've faced challenges, and it won't be my last. My clan and I will come out victorious. We always have, and we always will.

Especially now that I'll have my star touched queen by my side.

# Amber



TWO NIGHTS IN THE CITY, and I've yet to wake up in my own bed.

This time, I'm underneath white silk sheets, gazing up at a crystal chandelier far fancier than anything in either my apartment or Eva's.

Memories of the past two days flash through my mind.

The eclipse.

My burning eyes.

The man on the train.

The monstrous, ghoulish things... and the way I fought them off with that bright light I'm pretty sure I created.

It wasn't a dream. I know it deep inside.

Everything that happened was *real*.

A soft shuffle sounds from the other side of the room, and I sit up, seeing a woman with mesmerizing turquoise eyes across from me. Rich brown hair tumbles down her back in waves, and her skin is flawless and radiant.

Inhumanely so.

"Amber," she says, instantly by my side. "It's good to see you awake. How do you feel?"

"Who are you?" I ask as I take in more of the room that looks like it belongs in a luxury hotel more expensive than anything I've ever—and probably will ever—be able to afford. "How do you know my name? And where am I?"

The questions tumble out one after the other, and she smiles in amusement.

"I'm Abigail," she says. "I know your name because a friend of yours informed us of your coming arrival. Eva. And you're in a guest room at the

Fairmont, a building in Midtown Manhattan, just south of Central Park.”

I glance out the huge window ahead, and sure enough, the giant park sprawls out below.

Way below.

This building isn't a walkup in West Village. It's a skyscraper. And this room seems to be at the very top of it.

I turn my attention back to Abigail, who's now sitting down at the vanity near the bed. But out of everything, one thing she said stands out above all the rest.

“You know Eva?”

“I do.” She smiles again—a warm smile that's impossible to not find comforting. “Although, that's just a nickname. Her full name is Sunneva. She's a celestial goddess—specifically, a goddess of the sun.”

She waits for her words to sink in, watching my face for my reaction.

I blink a few times as I process it.

“You're saying that Eva—my new neighbor—is a sun goddess.”

This has to be some kind of joke.

“Correct,” she says, either not noticing my shock, or ignoring it. “She's been waiting for you for a while. A *long* while. You see, you come from a line of witches, although not a powerful line by any means. You, your mother, and your grandmother are unable to access the element typically controlled by witches: fire.”

Again, I run through her words in my mind, trying to process them.

This doesn't make any sense.

She has to be lying.

Witches don't exist. Neither do sun goddesses.

Although, neither do ghouls, and that was proven wrong to me on the train when they tried to *kill me*.

“That's not possible,” I finally say. “And, on the off chance that my family is some ancient line of witches, my mom would have told me.”

She listens to me with a hint of sadness in her eyes. “Your family lost their connection with—and eventually their knowledge of—the supernatural world generations ago,” she says. “However, the sun goddess has always felt a pull toward all of you. When you moved in on the same day as the solar eclipse, she knew you're the one she's been waiting for to gift with her sun magic. To star touch.”

I stare at her in silence.

I'd think this was a joke... if I hadn't created that beam of light myself.

"Sunneva's a sun goddess," I finally say, repeating this to get it straight. "And she gifted me with sun magic. Because we met on the day of the solar eclipse."

"Precisely." Abigail beams, as if I just passed an exam with flying colors.

"And the attack on the subway. By those ghouls," I say, not knowing what else to call them.

"The shadow souls," she fills in. "They're sort of like ghouls, but they feed on the energy of humans and supernaturals."

"There are ghouls in Manhattan," I say slowly.

"Shadow souls," she corrects me. "And yes—they're here, in Manhattan. They were released from the Underworld a few months ago—a long story that you'll hear soon—and their numbers in the city have been growing at an alarmingly fast rate. It's a good thing Damien and Viktor were there to help you when they did."

My heart leaps at the memory of my saviors on the subway. The tall blond man and his silver-haired companion.

Particularly, the blond.

"They're also star touched?" I ask. "And you, too?"

"No," she says carefully, as if she knows I'm not going to like whatever's coming next. "There's only one other star touched in the world. My daughter, Ruby, gifted with magic from the moon goddess. As for Damien, Viktor, and I... well, we're vampires."

*Vampires.*

She can't be serious.

My hand instinctively goes to guard my neck.

"Don't worry—you're safe here with us," Abigail says in a hurry. "There are laws that forbid vampires from feeding on other supernaturals, and in our world, the laws are valued above all else. Unless you run into a vampire with a death wish, you're not on the menu for dinner anytime soon."

"Oh." I relax—but not much. "Is Ruby here? Can I meet her?"

"I'm afraid not." Sadness drifts across Abigail's eyes. "Along with being star touched, Ruby's a wolf shifter. She and her mate live upstate, in a town called Pine Valley, where they lead their pack and provide a safe haven for supernaturals who need it."

"Okay," I say, still barely able to take all this in.

It's crazy.

At the same time, I can't deny what I saw in front of my eyes.

"But back to the present," Abigail continues, as if she didn't just shatter the world as I knew it. "Tonight, you're expected at dinner. A feast held in your honor, where you'll be presented to our king."

"A king," I repeat. "He's also a vampire?"

"He is." She walks over to the wardrobe, opens it, and pulls out a long, flowing evening gown in a shade of gold that seems to shimmer with its own light. "I was thinking this might suit you. What do you think?"

"I think I've never worn anything that fancy in my life."

She smiles again, and I'm relieved that despite her apparently being a vampire, I don't see any fangs.

"Then this is the perfect night to start," she says.

"Is this really necessary?" I ask. "Can't the king and I just... talk over coffee or something?"

Then, once we're done, I can get the hell out of this place.

And go where? Back home to Maplewood, where my mom—and everyone else in the town—is clueless about this crazy supernatural world?

What would I do from there? Show them my magic? Keep it secret? Try to forget this all ever happened?

Every bone in my body tells me that none of that would go very well.

"I'm afraid our world isn't as casual as that, especially when it comes to royalty," Abigail says, and again, I hate the way she almost seems to feel *bad* for me. "You'll be fine. In the meantime, that door leads to the bathroom." She motions to the door in question, at the side of the room. "I'll be back in an hour to help you finish getting ready, and then escort you to the feast, where you'll meet our king."

With that, she sees herself out, leaving me alone with my whirling thoughts and the weight of the night that awaits me.

I'm going to meet a king.

A *vampire* king.

And I've never felt less prepared for anything in my life.

# Amber



IN THE SHOWER, I see it.

The mark on my hip. One that definitely wasn't there before the eclipse.

The North Star. A physical representation of the fact that I've been "star touched."

However, despite the proof literally etched on my skin confirming this happened to me, I'm unable to recreate whatever I did with generating that light back in the subway.

*My magic.*

Sun magic. Whatever that means.

Apparently, it involves generating a light that disintegrates ghouls who try to kill me on the subway.

No, not ghouls.

*Shadow souls.*

Ice cold fear rushes through me every time I remember the attack. The murder in that thing's eyes as it set its sights on me, the deadly touch of its fingers, the way my chest hollowed as it tried to pull the life straight out of me and steal it for itself...

None of it feels real. But I'm sure that if—or when—it does, I'll sink into the shock of it all over again.

As it is, I focus on the only thing I can actually control right now.

Getting ready for this feast where I'm going to meet a vampire king. Which, in its own way, might be even more intimidating than facing down a shadow soul.

Eventually, Abigail returns to my room. While she knows no more about sun magic than I do—which is annoyingly frustrating—she fills me in more

about the supernatural world as she helps me finish getting ready. There's so much to keep track of, and it feels more like I'm floating in a dream as we talk.

Or rather, a nightmare.

Before long, it's time for dinner. But first, I stop in front of the full-length mirror.

The version of myself staring back at me is nothing like I've ever seen before.

The golden gown hugs my body, its shimmering fabric casting a radiant glow against my skin. As for my skin, it's definitely tanner than it was the last time I saw it. A healthy, smooth tan. The type people use filters for to try getting in pictures. The makeup enhances my features while not being overpowering—especially the blue of my eyes, which look brighter than they ever have—and my blonde hair cascades down my back in loose waves. Then there's the earrings Abigail added as a final touch. Large amber studs, that sparkle with the light of a thousand suns.

"You look positively regal," she says. "Like a queen."

"Hailing from the renowned land of Maplewood, Vermont." I laugh, although it sounds hollow when I do.

Apparently sensing my unease, Abigail places a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "You'll be fine," she says. "Just be yourself, and everything will fall into place."

"You mean your king will give me some answers?"

"If he has them," she says, which doesn't comfort me as much as I was hoping. "But you'll be safe here. And I'll be in that room with you the entire time."

Part of myself thrums with a warning that I shouldn't trust her so easily. I trusted Eva—*Sunneva*—and look how well that turned out?

But what are my other options right now? Jump out the window?

I don't know much about this new magic of mine, but I'm not willing to bet that it would save me from a dive off the top of a skyscraper.

So, with one last look at my reflection, I nod, trying to believe it'll be as easy as Abigail says. "Okay. Let's do this."

She guides me out of the room, and we walk down an elaborate corridor, my heels sinking slightly into the plush carpet. When we come out of the elevator, the faint hum of conversation grows louder as we make our way across the marble floor and approach a majestic set of double doors.



Abigail pauses, turning to me. “Remember, deep breaths. You’re not alone in this.”

Given that I met her a few hours ago, I am, basically, alone.

I’ve been alone since moving to the city.

What was I thinking by coming here by myself, knowing no one and having no job offer? It was crazy. Maybe I should have just stayed in Maplewood. Then everything would be calm. Normal. *Safe*.

I don’t think my life’s going to be any of those things ever again.

“I’m ready,” I lie, and then she pushes the doors open, revealing a dining hall grander than I could possibly imagine.

Vaulted ceilings rise above, crowned with crystal chandeliers that scatter light in every direction. Long tables covered in white linen line the room, each setting complete with sparkling glassware and polished silver. At the room’s far end, a larger, elevated table sits on a platform, obviously reserved for the most distinguished guests.

At the center of the table is a man in an impeccably tailored suit who’s blond, tall, and unmistakably familiar.

The one who saved my life in the subway.

His eyes lock with mine, like they did the first time we saw each other. It’s a look of recognition, approval, and something deeper I can’t quite decipher.

He stands, and as if on cue, everyone in the hall falls silent and rises as well.

“Amber.” His voice drips with a charm that’s both unsettling and alluring. “I don’t believe we’ve been properly introduced. I’m Damien. *King* Damien. And it’s my pleasure to welcome you to the Fairmont.”

This has to be a joke.

“*You’re* the king,” I say, and the next words escape my lips before I can stop them. “But you were riding the subway.”

By some miracle, this earns me a genuine smile.

“A king has many places to be, and the subway is the quickest way around the city,” he says, a hint of amusement in his tone. “Now, come. Join me.”

Given the empty seat by his side, it’s obvious what he means.

He wants me to sit next to him. In front of all these people.

No, not people.

*Vampires.*

I suppose there's nothing else to do but get on with this. Despite what Abigail said about supernaturals obeying the laws above all else, I still don't want to risk my neck.

"Thank you," I say, my voice sounding sweeter than the syrup produced in Maplewood. "*Your Majesty.*"

He waits, his eyes pinning me down with unspoken challenge, and our gazes remain locked as I ascend the platform. My heart thuds, and everyone else in the hall turn into blurs around me as I take my assigned seat.

After I do, I notice the humans along the sides of the walls, waiting to serve the vampires.

Abigail told me that they're all here by choice. They're all dressed respectably, and physically, they look healthy.

But there's something in their eyes that's... vacant. Not quite as empty as the shadow souls on the train when they were disguised as humans, but there's still something noticeably *off*. Like they're on drugs.

Damien leans in, his voice a murmur only meant for my ears, pulling my attention away from the humans. "Relax," he says smoothly. "If I wanted to harm you, I would have let that shadow soul finish what he started."

"You mean you would have let him kill me."

"That's exactly what I mean." He stares me down with those intense eyes of his, as if warning me to not challenge him further.

There's a *lot* I want to ask him.

But at the memory of last night on the train, my throat tightens at the reminder of the terror I felt while my life force was being inhaled by the shadow's icy grip. And yes, I did whatever I did with my magic to vanquish the creature. But there was more than only one shadow soul on the train with us. I'm not sure I want to know how the night would have ended if I didn't have Damien and his silver-haired companion on my side.

Like it or not, this man in front of me—this *vampire king*—is a big reason why I'm still alive right now. There's also the fact that he could have simply left me unconscious on the train, but he didn't. He brought me here. Sure, it's a secret vampire lair, but would I have preferred for him to have just left me there, alone, confused, and vulnerable?

No. I absolutely wouldn't.

And despite the less-than-ideal way he just revealed his identity to me, not acknowledging his help right now would be wrong.

So, I take a deep breath and hold his gaze, trying to see the warrior I

fought beside last night instead of the unsettlingly calm vampire king before me.

“Thank you for what you did for me back there,” I say honestly. “I believe I owe you my life.”

“You owe me nothing, Amber,” he says, and my heart races again when he speaks my name. “All I ask of from you is a chance.”

“A chance at what?”

The words hang in the air, and I’m hyper-aware of the distance that separates our hands under the table.

I’ve *got* to rein it in. Even though Damien saved me back there, he’s still a vampire. He might not be trying to suck the life out of me like that shadow soul, and he might not have left me alone and unconscious on the train, but there’s no saying what his actual intentions might be.

However, instead of answering my question, he raises his glass in a toast.

Everyone else in the hall does the same.

They watch me, waiting.

Not wanting a mob of angry vampires to pounce on me for disrespecting their king, I also raise my glass.

Damien gives me a slight nod of approval. “To new beginnings,” he says, his gaze never leaving mine. “And, most importantly, to my star touched future queen.”

I freeze in place. My gown feels tighter, the amber studs in my ears heavy to the point where they’re all but pulling me down to the ground.

*Queen?*

No. I can’t have heard him right. And even if I did, there’s no way he could mean what it sounds like he could mean.

“What are you saying?” I ask, praying for an explanation that makes sense.

Anything other than his expecting me to *marry him*.

“You’re a rarity—a gem amongst supernaturals,” he says, as if this is all perfectly normal. “In my centuries of life, I’ve yet to meet anyone deserving to rule by my side. That is, until meeting you.”

The room blurs around me.

This can’t be happening.

Yes, I’m grateful that he protected me in the subway. And yes, I’m attracted to him. But a sudden proposal, without him getting to know me or even asking me, is enough to turn me off in a heartbeat.

“I’m not going to be your queen,” I say, sharp and to the point.

Silence descends upon the hall.

The other vampires—including Abigail and her husband, Xavier—all stare at us, waiting for their king’s response.

“Not immediately.” Damien’s unbothered—as if I didn’t just reject him in front of his entire clan. “After all, you still have much to learn. But our union has been written in the stars. And, as you’ll soon come to realize, fighting fate is useless.”

The certainty in his tone makes me want to toss the contents of my wine glass at his face.

As is it, heat grows within me. Simmering at first, then getting warmer and warmer until it flows out of my palm, and I hear bubbling coming from my glass.

I glance down to see what’s going on, and sure enough, it’s exactly as I suspected.

The wine.

It’s *boiling*.

## Amber



I PLACE the wine glass back down on the table and quickly pull my hand away from it, as if it's about to burn me. Which I suppose makes no sense, since I'm pretty sure I was the one who was burning *it*.

I need to get out of here.

But I'm trapped. Surrounded by vampires who are decades—maybe *centuries*—older than I am. I might have defeated that shadow soul in the subway, but I'm not crazy enough to think I can do the same to a hall full of vampires.

Damien looks around again, his glass still raised, and he takes a sip of his wine.

The others in the room do the same.

Not me. No way am I agreeing to this twisted proposal of his. And there's zero chance I'm touching that wine. What if it's drugged? Or worse—what if it's *blood*?

I shudder at the thought.

Just then, the scent of food fills the air, and my stomach growls—loudly. I haven't eaten since the dinner I scarfed down before the show last night.

That was nearly twenty-four hours ago. Everything since then happened so fast that I didn't realize how hungry I was until now, as the lightheadedness hits me at once. It's like my stomach is trying to eat itself alive.

I don't want to touch their food. At the same time, I need to eat. I'm not going to be able to escape this place if I have such little energy that I pass out from hunger.

As if on cue, humans in perfectly formed lines emerge from a door at the

side. Their steps are synchronized as they move gracefully between the tables, placing plates filled with colorful fruits in front of each person here.

The girl who places the plate in front of me, with bobbed hair that makes her look like she stepped straight out of the Roaring Twenties, stares me down with those glassy eyes. As she does, something flares in them.

Contempt. A warning?

I'm not sure.

Her gaze flicks to Damien, and she backs away, stepping into line along the back wall with the other human servers.

“Go ahead.” Damien motions to the food, not paying the humans any attention. “I promise I have no intention of harming you.”

I scowl at him. “I suppose it wouldn't make any sense for you to kill your ‘future queen.’”

“Correct.”

He doesn't elaborate.

So, I glare at him, then focus on my food. Among the array of fruits, my eyes are drawn to one in particular—a purplish, glistening blackberry.

My stomach growls again, so I pluck it out of the pile and pop it into my mouth.

It's incredible. Both sweet and tart at the same time, but with a depth that feels like I'm tasting the very essence of the night. I chew it slowly, savoring it, amazed that more flavor keeps coming out of it the longer I taste it.

The others eat and chat amongst themselves, finally having something else to focus on besides me.

“Enjoying the duskberry?” Damien's voice slices through my concentration like a cold blade, and I freeze, the fruit poised at my lips.

I pause before I can eat it. “What's a duskberry?”

“A rare and unique fruit.” He glances at the one I'm holding between my fingers. “From the fae realm. Delicious, isn't it?”

*The fae realm.*

Dread fills my stomach, and the berry tumbles from my fingers, forgotten.

I shouldn't have eaten it. I should have just sat here and starved. Yes, I'd be hungry and weak for my escape attempt later. But at least I'd be... well, not affected by an enchanted fruit.

“What did you do to me?” I keep my eyes on his, hot anger roaring through me again.

Then, a strange calmness blankets my anger, like the eye of a storm. A rush of emotions—a longing, a deep admiration, and a sense of protectiveness—all directed at me.

He leans in, the intensity in his eyes taking my breath away, and it's like there's no one else in the room but us.

"I want you to see yourself through my eyes," he murmurs. "Strong. Powerful. Beautiful. You're the beacon and the inspiration that this kingdom needs to ensure we defeat the darkness that's threatening the city. The duskberry allows me to give you a window into all those feelings."

I think he means it to be romantic. Comforting.

No, I don't *think* that's what he means. I can *feel* it.

"You're trying to control me," I say, and he looks like I've struck him in his perfectly chiseled face—or thrown boiling wine at it.

His expression cracks, just for a moment, revealing a flash of something raw and unguarded. Hurt.

Then, the "window" into his feelings slams shut.

The sudden loss of it—along with the silence that descends upon the room—feels hollow and cold.

"Your feelings are, and will always be, your own," he continues, gently, but still firm. "I'm merely giving you an insight into mine. Not to control, but to offer transparency."

I'm not buying it.

"You tricked me," I say, refusing to back down.

"I'm helping you get to know me."

"Because you want me to marry you."

I can barely hear the words over the blood thundering in my ears.

But then, the connection between us re-opens, and another emotion rolls through me. A deep, overwhelming sense of loneliness and yearning.

All coming from him.

"Yes, I do want you to become my queen," he continues, and while most of his focus remains on me, he's also directing some of what he's saying to everyone else in the room. "However, this alliance isn't just about marriage. Because now, more than ever, I want someone to stand by my side and help bear the weight of this kingdom. When I saw you use your magic against that shadow soul, I knew you were the one."

I still feel the pull, the inexplicable draw towards him, but my resistance is iron-clad. He may be alluring, but I won't be swayed.

“So you seat me at your table, feed me fae fruit, and declare me your future bride in front of your entire kingdom? Were you not going to tell me that this is an *engagement dinner*?” My voice rises, and I don’t care that they’re all staring.

Let them.

“I did tell you.” His voice drops to a velvety caress that somehow echoes through the silence. “Right now.”

“And I reject it,” I reply with equal measure, my heart pounding as I do.

A slight breeze picks up around us, enough to blow some of my hair around my shoulders.

Air magic. Each supernatural species controls a different magical element, and vampires have an affinity for air.

My rejection’s affecting Damien more than he’s allowing his expression to let on.

Good.

But just as quickly as it formed, the breeze stills.

“You need to eat,” he finally says, and he picks up his fork, as if the matter is settled.

He can’t be serious.

“I’m not hungry,” I lie, but at the thought of food, my stomach growls in betrayal.

He tilts his head, amused. “Are you sure about that?”

“Completely.” I give him a tight, annoyed smile. “I suppose the duskberry filled me up.”

The corner of his lips tilts up into a small smirk. “Suit yourself,” he says, and then he returns to his meal.

“Thanks,” I mutter. “I will.”

I push the plate away, my mind racing with plans. Because when this joke of a dinner is over and I’m no longer surrounded by vampires, I’m going to channel the magic I used against those shadow souls to hightail it out of here and get as far away from Damien and his twisted proposal as possible.

No matter how magnetic he might be, I won’t be swayed by his ideas of destiny, alliances, and whatever else is going through that calculating mind of his.

Not now, and not ever.



# Amber



AFTER DINNER, Abigail escorts me back to my room.

We don't speak as we make our way up in the elevator and down the hall. But she knows that what happened tonight was wrong. I can see it in her eyes.

Once we're back, she closes the door behind us, and I turn to her, somehow cooling the angry heat that's trying to push its way up from under my skin.

Abigail isn't the one I should be angry with. At least, I don't think she is.

For all I know, she could just be an excellent liar—just like everyone else I've met so far in this city.

"Did you know?" I ask, not bothering to dance around the subject.

"I didn't." Concern etches her flawless features, and she tries to step closer, but I back away. "I knew he wanted to meet you. I had no idea about his intent. But I promise you, Amber—everything will be okay. I'm on your side, as is my husband. We'll help you get through this."

"Through this?" I raise an eyebrow. "Or do you mean *out* of this?"

She pauses, and I wait for her to speak, pretty sure I'm not going to like what she's going to say next.

"You're star touched in a city that's being invaded by the darkest force we've seen in centuries," she says slowly, carefully. "Leaving the Fairmont now would be unwise."

"And marrying your king *would* be wise? Against my will, might I add?"

Sympathy flashes in her bright turquoise eyes.

"Like I said—we'll figure it out. I just need you to hang tight for a little bit. Can you do that?"

“Yeah. Sure.”

*Absolutely not.*

“Great,” she says. “Get some rest. We’ll talk more tomorrow.”

She gives me what I think is supposed to be a reassuring smile, then opens the door to leave.

As she does, I spot a tall, broad-shouldered vampire with a stern expression guarding the hall.

I’m not surprised that they’ve stationed a guard outside my room. But honestly—can he be worse than that shadow soul? And would he truly harm me, given that everyone in this place now thinks I’m their future queen?

I doubt it.

And so, I pace around and wait, trying to ignore the hunger eating at the marrow of my bones. I’m careful not to deadbolt the door—like I did earlier while I was getting ready—because I don’t want anyone to hear me turning it to unlock it.

Specifically, I don’t want the guard stationed outside of it to hear.

This room is nothing more than a lavish cage overlooking Central Park and the surrounding city. And as I change out of the heavy gown into pajamas I found in the dresser, the weight of the day’s events crashes over me in a wave of disbelief and fear. Almost being killed, learning about the supernatural world, Damien’s proposal...

It’s too much for one person to process.

But I refuse to drown in it. I don’t know what I’m going to do when I’m out of here, but for now, all I want is to *get* out.

After what feels like an eternity, I press my ear against the door. All seems quiet.

It’s now or never. The longer I wait, the hungrier I’ll get. I can’t afford to sit around weakening by the minute.

Mustering all the courage I can, I take a deep breath and zero in on the feelings that have connected me to my magic so far. My rage, my fear, and my determination to survive, no matter what.

Warm light swirls inside me, and my hands glow with the soft, sunlit warmth of my newfound magic. They’re like tiny suns in my hands, and they’re mine to command.

The power I feel in this moment is unlike any I’ve ever felt in my life.

I allow one of them to dim out, since I’ll need a hand free, and reach for the handle of the door. Abigail was able to let herself out, so I assume I’ll be

able to as well. If not, well... I'll deal with that if it comes to that.

The handle moves.

Not wanting to waste any time, I swing the door open... and come face to face with the guard from earlier.

I can't afford to lose even a single second. And so, just like with the shadow soul, I release my magic to form a sort of heat shield around me. It shines around my skin, and as I hoped, forces the guard to step back.

He raises his arm to protect his eyes from the sudden brightness, and I slip past him, darting down the hallway.

"Hey!" the guard yells, and wind blasts at me, pushing me into the wall.

He's using his magic against me. I expected as much, but I didn't expect it to be that *strong*.

My shoulder throbs, but I somehow stop myself from falling to the ground. Instead, I spin around to face him, rage fueling my magic, and push what looks to be twin *sun flares* out of my palms.

He whizzes out of the way, and I hurry toward the elevators, keeping the little suns in my hands and using the bottom of my foot to hit the button. After all, I'm on too high a floor to have a chance of making it down the stairs without being cornered. At least if the elevator stops to let someone in, I can surprise them with a burst of light and stop them from entering.

This elevator needs to get here *quickly*. In the meantime, I need to hold off the guard—who's actually trained for this stuff and isn't just going off instinct.

He tries to throw another gust of wind at me, but I throw a wall of heat at it, stopping his magic before it can hit me.

*Ding.*

The elevator.

I jump inside it faster than I've ever moved in my life, using my foot to press the L button, followed by the doors close button.

Just as they begin to slide shut, the guard rushes at me. But I shoot another sun flare through the closing gap and stop him in his tracks.

The doors seal shut.

My stomach drops as the elevator begins to descend. I glance at the numbers above, counting them in my head as I get closer and closer to freedom.

*Twenty-three, twenty-two, twenty-one...*

A siren blares through the silence, and red warning lights flash through

the tiny room.

My blood runs cold as the elevator shudders to a halt between floors.

I look around, desperate now, the lights and siren making my head spin. My lungs tighten, the walls of the already small space feeling like they're closing in on me. I'm stuck. Trapped. I need *out*.

I slam my palm onto the doors open button, but nothing happens.

I try again.

The lights stop flashing, and the siren stops wailing.

Then, a creak from above.

Before I can process what's happening, the ceiling hatch is thrown open. Three vampires drop down, landing gracefully on the elevator floor, the last one closing the door behind him.

Two male, one female. Their eyes, cold and focused, assess me as if I'm a mouse in a cage.

I clench my fists, sun magic glowing, ready to defend myself. "Stay back."

"Looks like the star touched queen has some fight in her." The woman smiles, cold and chilling.

"Don't call me that." My magic hums beneath my skin, and I take slow, deep breaths, trying to not let it explode out of me. The space is too small to let that happen. If I fry the elevator, we could all end up as pancakes at the bottom of the shaft.

The thought sends a wave of fear through me, deep under my skin.

Then, one of the males—the leaner one—lunges at me.

On instinct, I create a barrier of light between us. The flash is strong enough to blind not only him for a moment, but the other two as well.

Just as I'm celebrating my minor victory, the broader man grabs my wrist. His hand is huge, his fingers strong, and his grip's so tight that he's seconds away from snapping my bone. The pain roars through my entire body, making it feel like the world's on fire.

Heat sears out of my skin.

He hisses, releasing his grip.

Then the third vampire takes his chance, trying to circle behind me, and panic closes in. The elevator is too cramped. It's impossible to use my sun magic in full force against them without sending us plunging to our deaths.

But they're not shadow souls. They're not trying to steal my life force for themselves.

Maybe—and this is a big maybe—I can try to reason with them?

“I don’t want to hurt you.” I stare each of them in the eyes, unwilling to show signs of weakness despite the terror clawing its way up my throat. “But I will defend myself if I have to.”

“You have to.” The woman grins and blasts her air magic at me with so much force that I smack into the wall, knocking the wind out of me.

The elevator jolts.

All of us freeze. Fear flashes in the woman’s eyes, and I can see it clear as day—she thinks it’s going to break.

Instead, it resumes its descent.

But it’s not even close to being time to relax. I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to relax again for as long as I live. As it is, dread swirls in my stomach as I watch the numbers counting down above the doors. Now that I’ve set off the alarms, there’s no saying what’s waiting for me in the lobby. Sure, I can still make a run for it, but I have a feeling the odds are no longer in my favor.

They likely never were.

The elevator reaches the lobby, and the doors slide open, revealing Damien.

He’s wearing pajamas—albeit, fancy pajamas—but he’s just as commanding as when in his tailored suits.

He meets my gaze, an unreadable expression on his face. “Your instincts are impressive, which makes you quite the fighter,” he says with approval. “I already knew as much back in the subway, but you did well tonight. And now I’m more than confident that you’re going to excel in your upcoming training.”

# Amber



DAMIEN REFUSES to answer any of my questions as he and the three vampires from the elevator escort me back to my room.

We take one of the other elevators, since the one that brought me down here is definitely in need of repair. The burnt walls of the hall leading to my room need repair, too.

I've only been here for a day, but I've certainly made my mark on the Fairmont.

The vampire soldiers remain behind us as we walk. Damien's next to me, and I feel his icy gaze occasionally flicker to me, studying my every move.

I pointedly ignore him.

I also feel no emotions from him through the duskberry connection. Maybe it's worn off?

We get to my door, and Damien signals to the other three vampires to stop.

"Leave us," he tells them.

They all bow slightly—the only one who meets my eyes for a second is the female—and then they retreat down the corridor, leaving me alone with Damien.

He opens my door and motions inside.

"After you," he says.

I glare at him. "I'm not going in there with you."

"I'm not going to do anything to you that you don't want me to do," he says. "You can trust me."

As he says it, he opens that window to his soul, and the sincerity in his eyes flows through to me. His desire does as well, but I know with certainty

that he won't let it override his promise.

"No," I say, refusing to let whatever trust he's trying to build with me sway me. "We stay in the hall."

He sighs in frustration, but steps away from the door. "As you wish."

I eye the opening to my room, noting that he didn't close the door. I can run inside whenever I want and deadbolt the lock to stop him from getting in. I'm not sure that would stop him, but it doesn't mean I won't try.

At the same time, I want to know more about the "training" he mentioned. Not like I'm going to be here long enough to *do* said training, but still, I'm curious.

Before asking, I reach inside myself, ready to call on my sun magic if necessary.

Unfortunately, it doesn't feel as strong as it did before. Whatever surge of adrenaline I experienced while trying to escape has worn off, and combined with the hunger, it takes all my effort to not lean against the wall for some support.

His breath hitches, and I can see that he wants to reach for me to help. But he doesn't. And I'm glad for it.

The last thing I want him to do right now is touch me.

"Your spirit is impressive," he says instead. "That was a solid escape attempt."

"So you're admitting you're keeping me prisoner here?"

"Do you really think it's a good idea to leave after what happened last night?" he asks, infuriating me by answering my question with a question.

If I didn't feel so drained, I'm sure my skin would be so hot that he'd be glad he's keeping an acceptable amount of space between us.

"Do you mean the part where demonic ghoul creatures tried to kill me?" I ask. "Or when vampires kidnapped me?"

And there's that amused smile again.

I don't care how attractive he is when he looks at me like that. I was trying to make a point. Not to *entertain* him.

This man is absolutely infuriating.

"Don't you mean when vampires *saved* you?" he asks.

"Do you always answer questions with more questions?"

"I could ask the same of you."

The air stills between us, and I nearly groan in frustration. Because he does have a point.

“What sort of training were you talking about?” I change the subject, since the other route of conversation clearly wasn’t going anywhere.

The dim lighting in the hall casts shadows on his face, but his eyes remain clear and focused. “You’ll find out tomorrow,” he says. “Now, are there any more questions you want to throw at me? Because you look like you could use some rest.”

I’m not sure if that’s an insult or not.

Either way, I square my shoulders, refusing to be intimidated. “Sure,” I say. “Let’s move on to the duskberry. Does it give you access to my emotions, like it does for me with you?”

“Only if you want it to,” he says.

Relief fills me. At least he’s not intruding on my feelings.

At the same time, I have a fun idea.

“How do I ‘open’ the window?” I ask sweetly.

He observes me carefully, although his expression is impossible to read.

“Focus inwardly,” he finally says. “Imagine there’s a door between our souls. You control the lock on your side. Then visualize unlocking it and opening it.”

I raise an eyebrow. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

I can’t help but give him a small smile.

This is going to be fun.

As instructed, I imagine a glowing door deep within me, representing the connection between us. It feels warm, vibrant, pulsating with a quiet energy. I find a golden lock and slowly turn the key, allowing a sliver of light to spill through.

It cracks open, and I push my emotions out at him, releasing them full force. My burning hot anger, frustration, and resentment pour out—all aimed directly at him.

He steps back, his usually composed face showing a hint of discomfort.

“Feeling that, are you?” I say, and now another emotion floods through the connection between us.

*Victory.*

“Loud and clear.” The coolness in his voice is back, but his eyes betray a hint of pain.

For a moment, I feel slightly bad.

But only for a moment.



Feeling like I made my point, I rein the emotions back in and slam the metaphorical door between us shut. When I glance around, no one is in the hall. Either they're all sleeping, or they hear us talking and are staying clear. Although, since I'm staying in a guest hall, it's more likely that the Fairmont simply isn't hosting any visitors right now.

"Thank you," he says, completely composed again. "But I have to warn you—you're not going to like what I'm going to tell you next."

"Won't be much of a change from anything else you've told me since I got here."

He sighs and runs a hand through his perfectly tousled blond hair. "The duskberry doesn't just create the bond between us," he begins. "It also binds you to a specific location. For your safety, you'll be bound to stay within the perimeter of Manhattan."

I stare at him, dumbfounded.

He can't be serious.

But, judging by the intensity swirling in his eyes as he waits for my response, he's telling the truth.

My magic flares inside of me, and a thin beam of golden light flows through my arms and out of my palms, directed straight at Damien.

Not to kill—as much as I hate him, I don't want to kill him. And he'll rapidly heal from anything I throw at him.

He does, however, deserve some pain.

Unfortunately for me, he disperses my sun magic with a gust of air.

It hits the walls and singses them instead of his skin.

I try again, but thanks to the brawl in the elevator, that was the last surge of adrenaline left in me. My next attempt is far dimmer than the first, and he easily counters it.

"You have good instincts, but I've always had them, too," he says coolly. "Along with centuries of training."

Wind circles both of us like a vortex, proving his point.

I glare at him and stop my attacks.

Not like they were doing much, anyway.

He stops his as well.

"You're a key player in something bigger than you understand, and you're more powerful than you realize," he continues, now that the brewing hurricane around us has eased. "That power is going to grow as you train. The city—and the world—needs you here." He pauses, then adds, "However,

I'd like to offer you a deal."

I watch him carefully, unable to hide my interest. "What kind of deal?"

"Give me a year. Train here and become the star touched warrior queen you're destined to be," he says, and I flinch at that word—*queen*. "If, after that year, you still want to leave, I'll grant you the freedom to choose your path."

I stare at him, processing his words.

"After your year of training, you'll have the skills you need to survive out there," he continues. "It's a fair offer, especially considering that if you go back to your apartment here, you'll be attacked by more shadow souls than you can handle. You need us just as much as we need you."

The weight of his proposal presses down on me so much that for a moment, I can't find my voice.

But then, I see the loophole in his words.

He said I have to *train* to be his warrior queen. Not become it.

"One year," I repeat, emphasizing the timeline. "Then I can choose my own path, no strings attached?"

"Yes," he confirms. "Then the choice is yours."

"And how do I know you'll hold up your end of the bargain?"

He doesn't speak his reply. Instead, the warmth of his sincerity floods through the bond, and I know deep in my soul that he intends to honor his offer.

Just as quickly as he opened it, he shuts down the connection between us, pulling his emotions back inside himself.

An emptiness encases me when he does. But I shake it off and extend my hand, making our agreement official. "Deal," I say, and as our hands clasp, a spark passes between us.

I pull back as if he's burned me.

He stretches out his fingers, as if he felt the same energy between us, then he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a familiar rectangular object.

My phone.

"I believe this belongs to you," he says, his eyes locked on mine.

"You're giving it back to me? Just like that?"

"I am."

"And how do you know I'm not going to call my mom and tell her everything, or post online asking for help, or... something?"

Even as I speak the words, I know I won't do it. Because who would

believe me? And what could my mom do to help me?

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

If I tell her any of this, all I'll be doing is putting her in danger.

"Think of it as a peace offering." He extends the phone farther, and I snatch it from his grasp, making sure our fingers don't touch again.

"Thank you," I say, since I *am* grateful to have it back.

He nods, looking like he wants to say more.

Instead, he turns and heads down the hall, toward the elevators.

But before turning the corner, he glances back at me, a look of deep contemplation on his face. "Sleep well," he says softly, and then mischief dances across his eyes, the previous intensity erased. "You're going to need it for training tomorrow. And Amber?"

"Yes?"

"Breakfast will be delivered to your room tomorrow morning. I highly recommend that you eat it."

With that, he's gone, leaving me clutching my phone and wondering what on Earth I've gotten myself into.

# Amber



“ARE YOU SURE EVERYTHING’S OKAY?” my mom asks on the other end of the phone. “You sound a little... off.”

I stare out the huge windows into Central Park, which looks beautiful under the morning light, and I force a smile, even though she can’t see me. “Everything’s amazing,” I say. “The city’s just a little overwhelming, that’s all.”

I leave out the fact that being thrust into a supernatural world, complete with vampires and magic, might be the reason I sound a little different. There’s also the fact that I caved a bit ago, inhaled the massive breakfast that was brought up to my room, and am praying that the eggs, toast, and ham aren’t going to turn me into a radioactive spider or something.

Needless to say, I stayed away from the fruit.

“You already have some job interviews lined up?” she asks, returning to the subject matter at hand—what I’m going to do with myself now that I’m in the city.

“Yeah,” I say. “A few.”

Assuming training to become a supernatural warrior counts as a job.

So, I suppose it’s *sort of* true?

Before I can launch into lying about the “job interviews,” a knock sounds on the door. I jump, startled, and pray my mom didn’t hear.

“Who’s that?” she asks.

So much for not hearing.

“Just my neighbor,” I say quickly. “Eva. She’s coming with me to the interviews today. Gotta run—sorry!”

“Good luck,” she says, and I end the call before she can ask any more

questions.

I steady myself, stride over to the door, and open it.

Damien's standing on the other side, his tailored suit a far cry from the pajamas last night. And as striking as he is when he's all put together, I liked the pajamas. They humanized him a bit.

But only a bit. Now that I know the truth, I don't see how anyone could ever think he's anything other than the vampire king he is.

"Like what you see?" he asks, and much to my dismay, heat rises to my cheeks.

He's the most conceited person on the planet.

"It's too bad the suit can't distract from that ego of yours," I quickly say the first thing that pops into my mind.

His lips twitch into a smirk, clearly amused. Again. Then his gaze shifts, taking in my attire—fitted leggings, a breathable tank top, sneakers, and my hair pulled back into a ponytail.

"I see you found your gear," he observes. "Ready to head out?"

No.

"As I'll ever be."

I nearly surprise myself by how confident I sound.

Pulling myself together, I follow Damien down in the elevator to the twenty-third floor, where a huge set of double doors awaits.

He swings them open, revealing a massive gym unlike any I've ever seen. Vampires are sparring, practicing combat with inhuman speed and grace. The two male guards from the elevator are amongst them. Some others are even gliding through the air, looking like gods in flight, harnessing their air magic.

In the center of it all stands a tall, muscular man, his silver hair gleaming under the bright gym lights.

The other man from the subway. I spotted him at the feast last night, but we didn't exactly have time to chat.

"Amber," Damien begins, and the vampires all stop training, focusing on us. "Please reacquaint yourself with Viktor."

Viktor sizes me up, and I shift uncomfortably at the judgment in his eyes.

"Viktor's the best warrior we have," Damien continues. "Partly because of all the street fighting and thievery in his human days. He'll be overseeing your training."

I'm close to confident he threw in that part about street fighting and thievery to warn me about what I'm dealing with. To attempt to intimidate

me.

But after the shadow souls in the subway and the attack in the elevator, it's going to take more than that.

"And here I thought all vampires were born with a silver spoon," I say, making sure I don't sound—or look—like prey.

Viktor's grin widens. "Some of us had to steal those spoons first."

In a second, he moves in a blur toward me, faster than anything I've ever seen.

I reach inside myself to summon my magic, but am taken down to the floor, pinned, before I can even think.

His sharp green eyes drill into mine, inches from my face. "First rule of being a warrior," he says in a cold, hard whisper. "Always be on guard."

Humiliation flares up inside me, hot and biting. I struggle against Viktor's hold, but it's useless. Like trying to push into a metal wall.

And here I thought I'd have an edge with my sun magic and supposed good instincts about how to use it.

*Speaking of instincts...*

I reach for my magic, gearing up to make my skin hot enough to scorch Viktor where he's touching me. But before I can, he releases me and stands, pointedly not offering to help me up.

All right, then.

I jump back onto my feet, trying to look as composed as possible, and glance back at Damien.

He's taken a step back, clearing comfortable leaving me in Viktor's hands.

"As Viktor said—if you're going to last here, you'll need to always be prepared," he says. "Especially with shadow souls on the loose."

I take a deep breath, pushing down my embarrassment at having been taken down so easily. "Noted."

Electricity buzzes in the air between us. It's so intense that I'm sure everyone else in the gym can feel it, too.

I expect Damien to turn and leave.

Instead, he steps next to me and puts a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "It's a learning curve," he says softly, for my ears only. "And remember, they've had centuries to hone their skills. You'll get there. Just focus, be patient, and practice."

Calmness rushes through his body and into mine.

The duskberry bond. It's flooding through me, relaxing me. Every instinct urges me to lean into it and absorb as much of his soothing energy as possible.

But no. I need to snap out of it.

And so, as if the window to his emotions is a physical attack, I move away from him, not wanting him to touch me.

Or, more honestly, not wanting to *like* the way he's touching me.

As I do, a figure steps forward. Short, with golden brown hair pulled back into a thick ponytail, its curls flowing down her back.

The girl from Eva's rooftop. Morgan.

I haven't thought about her since then—there's been so much else going on—but it figures that she's a supernatural, too.

Unlike then, when she was aloof and secretive, she walks toward me with a warm smile that lights up her face.

"Hi, Amber. I'm sure you remember our meeting?" she says when she reaches me. "Although back then, you seemed less... radiant."

The meaning behind her words makes sense in a second.

"Pre star touching," I say, and she nods in confirmation. "Did you know it was going to happen? Is that why you left me and Eva there alone?"

"I know a lot of things." Her eyes sparkle with mischief, and she leans in closer, turning serious. "For instance, I know this world can be overwhelming. And people like Viktor will push you to your limits. But remember—you have power. Real power. Don't let anyone, vampire or otherwise, tell you otherwise."

I meet her gaze, caught off-guard by the fact that it seems like she's on my side.

It's not the same as Abigail, who sees me as someone she needs to watch out for like her own daughter, and not the same as Damien, with his insane intention to make me his queen.

The girl in front of me seems like someone who might become a friend.

"Thanks, Morgan." I hesitate, then add, "I'll remember that."

"Every fire starts with a single spark," she says. "And you, Amber, have a whole inferno inside of you."

My magic warms inside me, as if it's assuring me that she's correct.

It's nice to know that my magic's renewed itself after I expended so much of it last night. And that the breakfast earlier didn't seem to do anything other than give me energy and make me feel a bit too full.

“Well, isn’t this a heartwarming sight?” a familiar voice slices through the air. “Witches playing pretend amongst the true elites.”

The female vampire from the elevator. She’s sneering at me with her arms crossed over her chest, and my hands ball into fists, rage scorching through my veins.

“As if I didn’t nearly burn you to a crisp last night,” I say, and then I release my magic through my palms, directing a beam of light about a foot above her head.

She recoils, shock and anger flaring in her beady eyes.

The others in the gym are all looking at me with matching amounts of surprise—excluding Morgan and Damien.

Dare I say it, but they both look... proud.

Viktor breaks the silence, clapping slowly. “Impressive,” he says, and the others—minus my foe from the elevator—relax a bit. “It seems you’re more ready than we thought.”

Morgan grins, tilting her head. “Told you she’s got an inferno inside.”

I give her a grateful smile and toss my hair over my shoulder, feeling more empowered than I have since first waking up in the Fairmont.

I’m more than a pawn in this supernatural chess game.

And it’s time for me to fight for my freedom.

Decision made, I hold Viktor’s gaze. “Ready for a rematch?” I ask, and I stand firm and strong, preparing for him to zoom at me again to try taking me down.

If he tries, he better be prepared to burn.

Murmurs of approval ripple through the vampires, and finally, I feel like I’ve done something right around here.

“All right, then,” Viktor says. “Maybe there’s some potential in you yet.”

I roll my eyes. “You say that as if you didn’t see me incinerate that shadow soul in the train.”

“Remember—that was instinct. Pure emotion.” He circles me, like he’s a hawk and I’m his prey. “Here, you’re going to learn to be stealthy. Calculating. A true warrior.”

I keep my gaze locked on his, refusing to let the others in the gym see any trace of the worry I have that this man—who’s probably three or four times bigger than me—might crush me to the ground before I can take another breath.

Damien interrupts before our match can continue. “I should leave you to



it,” he says, and he nods at Viktor, an unspoken understanding between them.

“Are you sure you don’t want to join us?” Viktor asks. “Might be entertaining to watch your future queen in action.”

I nearly scorch Viktor on the spot for calling me that.

“As much as I’d love to, I trust Amber in your hands,” Damien says, turning his attention back to me. “Remember what I said—this is your destiny. You just need to focus, be patient, and practice.”

Then, with a nod to the other vampires and a final lingering look my way, he strides out of the gym, the doors slowly closing behind him.

Viktor’s stopped circling, and he’s watching me with a mix of determination and fascination. Like I’m a prize for the taking.

It puts me more on guard than I’ve been since entering the gym.

“So, Amber,” he says. “Ready to light up the room?”

Energized by his challenge, I call on my magic to create miniature balls of sunlight on the tips of my fingers.

“Always,” I say, and as sparring session resumes, I’m more determined than ever to prove myself.

I’m going to fight. I’m going to improve. I’m going to master my magic.

And ultimately, I’m going to earn my freedom.

# Amber



THE BEGINNING of the training session was child's play compared to the hours that followed.

At first, Viktor had me practice basic stances and movements, ensuring I knew how to properly pivot and dodge. Then running. Combat training. Endurance testing. Weightlifting. More cardio.

We didn't even touch on anything involving the use of magic.

At least supernaturals heal—fast. The bruises, broken bones, and sore muscles I should have acquired during training are nonexistent.

But the mental exhaustion and energy drain?

They're more real than any other experience in my life.

Collapsing onto the bed without even changing, I stretch out and rest my eyes for a bit.

I'm quickly startled by a buzzing on the nightstand.

My phone.

I groan and reach over to check it. There's a message from my mom, plus a ton of other notifications.

I look at hers first.

*How did the job interviews go today?*

The rest of the texts are the group chat with my two best friends from home, Lucy and Max. They're gossiping about one of the girls in our grade having a house party when her parents were out of town last night, and how everyone ran into the woods when it got busted by the police.

It's only been a few days, but Maplewood and its town gossip already feel like a lifetime ago.

Not having the energy to reply to any of them, I swipe the notifications

away and place my phone back on the nightstand.

I'm about to drag myself up to shower when there's a knock on the door. Annoyingly, I recognize the pattern of the raps from this morning.

Damien.

I'm tempted to ignore him.

But he knows I'm in here. So, grudgingly, I drag myself off the bed and open the door.

Sure enough, Damien's on the other side of it. He's dressed casually in black jeans and a matching t-shirt, the inky color making his icy blue eyes even more piercing than usual.

"All okay?" he asks with a knowing smirk. "You look... startled."

"You look different." The words escape my lips before I have time to think about them, and I force myself to snap back into focus. "Did the laundromat lose your royal robes, or are you going undercover tonight?"

"Just trying to not distract from my ego." He shrugs, and despite myself, I can't help smiling.

"An impossible task." I look him up and down, annoyed at myself—as always—for liking what I see. "Why are you here?"

"I thought you might want to see the city," he says. "It could be a chance for us to get to know each other outside the confines of vampire politics and combat training."

"You want to take me out," I deadpan. "Even though you were set on not letting me out of the building last night."

"After the deal we made, I trust you've come to your senses regarding trying to leave," he says, as if that's a proper synonym for "escape."

At the same time, I'm taken aback by his sincerity. There's a part of me that's curious about Damien. Plus, getting to know him could help me learn about the inner workings of the vampire kingdom. Or, more usefully, get me more on his good side.

Frustratingly, I know through the bond that he does, in fact, have a good side. It will never validate what he did to me, but it's impossible to deny that it's there.

There's also the fact that I wouldn't mind a change of scenery.

"All right," I concede, earning another annoyingly knowing smile from him. "What did you have in mind?"

"There's a place in Central Park—Shakespeare's Garden," he says. "It's peaceful, and it captures the beauty of time long past. Plus, it's in public,

while still feeling private. How does that sound?”

“Much better than a fancy restaurant, or whatever it is that vampire kings do in their free time.”

“Such as riding the subway?” He arches an eyebrow, and I laugh a bit.

“Okay. I’ll go,” I give in. “But first, I need a shower. I’m pretty sure I smell worse than the streets of New York right now.”

“Perfect,” he says, and I step back, a bit self-conscious that he didn’t refute my statement about smelling like garbage. “What’s your number?”

He takes out his phone, waiting, and I rattle it off.

“There.” He taps the screen a final time, then puts his phone back into his pocket. “Just sent you a text. Message me when you’re ready, and I’ll come down to get you.”

“Sure,” I say, and he nods and heads back down the hall to the elevators before I can second guess my decision.

I watch him for a few seconds, then close the door and hurry to the bathroom. The water rejuvenates me a bit, and when I go to get dressed, I find most of the clothes I brought with me to New York in the wardrobe and dresser.

Eva’s doing? Or Morgan’s?

I don’t know. But despite the intrusiveness of it, I happily change into my favorite jeans and tank top, glad to have my stuff.

Once I’m ready, I shoot Damien a text.

He’s back at my door in less than a minute.

“If I didn’t look too closely, you could almost pass as a human,” he says with an approving nod.

“Is that the look you’re going for, too?” I give his all-black outfit another look over. “Human chic?”

He leans against the doorframe, his eyes raking over my body in a way that makes my blood still and my heart race. “Do you truly think I could ever be mistaken as a human?”

His words snap me out of whatever annoying effect he was having on me.

“There’s that ego again.” I roll my eyes, and together, we head out and make our way across the street into the park. It’s so different from the busyness of the city. Tourists stop in front of the lush scenery to take pictures, joggers pass by, and dogs happily trot next to their owners.

We eventually pass a vendor, and the mouth-watering aroma of hot dogs wafts towards us, making my stomach growl.

“Is that your way of telling me they didn’t feed you enough today?” Damien asks with an amused smile.

I wrap my arms protectively around my stomach. “I’m pretty sure I burned way more calories during training than I’m capable of eating.”

“Then it seems like one of the city’s finest delicacies awaits.”

Soon, we’re both holding steaming hot dogs covered in every sort of topping imaginable. We eat as we walk—a graceful feat I’m not sure I could have accomplished before being gifted with magic—and make our way up the stone steps that lead into Shakespeare’s Garden.

It feels like stepping into a fairy tale. Tulips bloom in abundance, wood fences look like they were carved by hand, and there’s even a cottage with a steep roof covered in moss.

“You like it?” he asks, looking pleased as I gaze around in wonder.

“It’s all right.” I shrug and give him a small smile to show I’m joking.

He leads the way up some more steps and takes a seat in one of the many benches. As I sit next to him—as far to the opposite side of the bench as possible—I notice that there’s no one else around us.

“The shadow souls don’t leave the subway,” he tells me. “It’s safe here.”

“Minus the part where I’m in an empty area of the park, nearly after sunset, alone with a vampire.”

“The sun never sets when you’re around,” he says slowly and carefully. “Its light lives inside you.”

Even though he’s not wrong, I roll my eyes at how corny it sounds.

“Speaking of your being star touched,” he says, changing the subject. “One of the reasons I brought you here is because you’re not the only star touched to have set foot in this park.”

“You’re talking about Ruby.” I lean forward, instantly curious about Abigail’s daughter—the only other person in the world who’s like me.

“I am,” he replies. “Although, she didn’t come here when the park was open. She and three of her friends waited until one in the morning, when the park closes and the fae realm takes over.”

“To get the Key of Hades,” I recall, naming the artifact from one of the stories Abigail told me.

“Correct,” he says, and then he tells me more about the trials Ruby and the others encountered in the fae realm.

“The key got into the hands of a coven of witches that wanted to resurrect the original vampire, Ambrogio,” he finishes. “Ruby stopped them, but not

before the shadow souls were released from the Underworld.”

“Did you not like this original vampire?” I ask. “Ambrogio?”

“Ambrogio was sent to the Underworld before I was even born,” he says. “By Sunneva’s mother—the goddess of the moon, Selene. He loved Selene. They were together for a bit, but then he was cursed by the gods, which resulted in him becoming the original vampire. He wanted Selene to become a vampire as well, but she was horrified by what he’d become. So, she went behind his back and had him banished to the Underworld.”

“She thought he was a monster.” I study Damien when I say the word, waiting for him to flinch.

Instead, he meets my gaze straight on. “People are only monsters when they choose to give in to their dark sides,” he says. “What we are—vampire, shifter witch, fae, or star touched—doesn’t define us. It’s the choices we make that matter.”

“Says the man who made the choice to trick me into eating a magical fae fruit.”

This time, he flinches.

“I’ve made choices that I believed were for the greater good,” he says. “Not all of them have been right. Not all of them have been kind. But every choice has reflected the world I’ve lived in, the battles I’ve fought, and the goal to keep the people I care about safe from threats like the shadow souls.”

As he speaks, the vampire king falls away, revealing just a man—one with hopes, regrets, and a lifetime of stories. There’s an unspoken tension, a pull between us that grows stronger with each passing second.

My breath catches as his gaze moves from my eyes to my lips, and he leans in, the world blurring around us.

I freeze, pull away, and narrow my eyes. “You’re projecting your emotions onto me.”

“I wasn’t.”

And then, to prove his point, he opens that window between our souls and *does* project his emotions onto me.

Suddenly, I can barely breathe.

Because the passion, the desire, the *need*... it’s so intense that it threatens to consume me on the spot.

# Amber



JUST WHEN I feel like I'm going to lose myself to the weight of Damien's emotions, he reins it back in.

"I'd never use our connection to control your emotions," he says. "Our bond exists so you can see me for who I am—not so I can manipulate you." He stands up suddenly, his entire demeanor changed into one as cold as his ice blue eyes. "Let's go."

I give him a small nod, swallow the ball in my throat, and stand as well.

How was I seconds away from letting him kiss me? Maybe he accidentally left his guard down, and the duskberry connection opened without his realizing it?

Or maybe I'm stupidly attracted to him, despite how much I hate him.

Is my hatred of him making me *more* attracted to him? Desiring the forbidden fruit, so to speak?

God, that's so messed up.

I'm lost in thought as we descend the stone steps. Soon, the previously peaceful sounds of the park are replaced by a low, eerie silence.

Something's not right.

From the way Damien appears on high alert, he feels it, too.

A pit of unease grows in my stomach as he quickens our pace. But before we can leave the garden, five people emerge from the shadows.

I come to a sudden, confused stop.

Damien said shadow souls don't venture out of the tunnels underneath the city.

Was he lying to me?

It wouldn't be the first time.

But the five figures move closer, and their faces become clearer. The otherworldly sheen on their skin, the predatory sharpness in their eyes, the hard lines of their features...

Vampires.

Damien steps closer to me and zeroes in on the leader of the group. “Lucas. What brings you uptown?” he asks, and I realize these vampires aren’t from his kingdom.

They’re from downtown.

The uncivilized, smaller clans who disagree with Damien’s philosophy that vampires can practice control of their thirst and co-exist with humans.

The leader of the group—Lucas—steps forward, his loose jeans and oversized sweatshirt a far cry from Damien’s tailored clothing. He pushes his sleeves up, revealing tattoos wrapped around each of his wrists.

The four others in his clan do the same.

Their tattoos are all identical.

Thick, broken shackles.

“Don’t get your shoes scuffed just yet—we haven’t harmed anyone on your territory.” Lucas turns his attention to me, his scrutiny making it feel like bugs are crawling up my arms. “We simply wanted to meet your star touched bride.”

“I’m not his bride.” My magic pulses, pushing through my palms so they glow with a soft, radiant light.

“Semantics.” He shrugs and scans me from head to toe, his smirk widening.

My magic grows brighter.

“Amber,” Damien murmurs, his shoulder nearly touching mine. “It’s against our treaty to launch attacks on other supernaturals without due cause. Control yourself.”

As much as I want to scorch the smirk off Lucas’s face, I’m not looking to put the uptown and downtown vampires at war. We have enough on our hands with the shadow souls. So, I take a few deep breaths and call my magic inward, dimming it out until the light disappears.

“Aren’t you a good little girl.” Mockery drips from Lucas’s tone. “Obeying the orders of your king instead of embracing your true potential.”

“I obey no one.” My magic flares again, tiny balls of sunlight on the tips of my fingers.

“There you go.” Lucas smiles, challenge gleaming in his dark eyes. “Let



it out.”

He remains focused on me. Watching, waiting, ready for me to cave.  
I won't let him.

“I'd love to,” I finally say. “But like I told you—I obey no one. Especially not you.”

My light flashes, then blinks out.

Heavy silence weighs down the air around us.

“We've seen her now,” one of the other vampires, a woman with jet-black hair, breaks in. “Can we go?”

Lucas shoots her a withering look before refocusing on me. “You should come with us, Amber. Learn from true warriors who've fought tooth and nail to survive. Not these uptown pretenders who are so focused on suppressing their own darkness that they can't do what's necessary to take out the true threat.”

A breeze circles around Damien's feet. His magic.

Lucas is getting him riled up.

“Your clan's misguided beliefs about ‘true nature’ and ‘freedom’ have no place here,” Damien says. “And neither do you.”

Lucas's eyes flash dangerously. “Careful, Damien. Your uptown luxuries have made you soft. Do you really think you and your people can stand against the shadow souls?”

“My warriors have thousands of years of combined experienced between us. We're more than prepared to handle threats that come our way.” He stands firm, energy crackling in the air between him and Lucas. “The real question is—are you ready for the fallout of breaking our truce?”

“Always trying to play the noble king, aren't you?” Lucas sneers, turns back to me, and points to the broken shackles tattooed on his wrist. “This is a reminder of our freedom. Our power. If you ever get tired of playing house with His Royal Majesty, then come to Washington Square Park. From there, you'll figure out how to find me. I'll make sure of it.”

With a final glare of warning, Lucas and his clan retreat, merging with the shadows once more.

Damien looks me over as if he's scanning for injuries, even though there's no way I could have gotten any.

“I'm fine,” I snap, and he takes a step back, clearly caught off guard by my reaction. “Can we go?”

He's silent for a few moments.

Then he nods, concern shining in his eyes. “Of course.”

I don't look at him as we exit Shakespeare's Garden, relieved when the sounds of the city return, bringing with it a sense of normalcy.

But only a sense.

Because my life is never going to be normal again. And after this added glimpse into the supernatural world, I feel more ready than ever to figure out who—and what—I'm truly fighting for.

# *Damien*



ONE MONTH.

That's how long it's been since that night with Amber in Central Park.

After our encounter with Lucas, I requested that she not leave the Fairmont without someone from my kingdom by her side. Thankfully, she saw the reason behind it and agreed. From what I've heard, she's been spending most of her time with Morgan.

Just like many nights since then, my feet guide me to the bench where she and I sat at Shakespeare's Garden. It's my sanctuary, and I read the book I brought with me, needing some peace from the turmoil.

Before long, it's almost one in the morning. Time to leave. I can't risk being here when the park transforms into the fae realm, making it so I'm unable to return home until it reopens at six.

I'm just out of the park when, from the corner of my eye, I spot someone slinking their way inside the gate. It's not uncommon for humans with nowhere to go to seek refuge in the park during the hours when it's closed, and in moments like this, I take it upon myself to distract them until the park's finished transitioning into the fae realm. It will only take a minute, and it'll put me one step closer to repenting for the sins of my past.

Then I notice the person's hands. Elongated fingers connected to arms that are twisted at an angle not quite human.

My heart doesn't beat, but if it did, it would've skipped one.

Because that's no human. It's a shadow soul.

Here. Above ground. Where, as far as I and the other supernaturals in the city are aware, they've yet to make an appearance.

Their strength must be growing.

I could easily do nothing and let him wander into the park. In there, he'll become a problem for the fae to deal with. Then I could go back to the Fairmont and inform the others about the increased threat.

However, I can't bring myself to walk away. The last time I saw the fae queen—Lysandra—we parted under tense terms, but there's no part of me that wishes the darkness of the shadow souls on her realm.

Decision made, I tail the shadow soul, maintaining enough distance to avoid detection.

Seconds after stepping through the gate, the park transforms. The colors of the trees intensify, the grass shimmers, and the air becomes electric with magic. Then there's the sky. The aurora dancing overhead—a near impossible display in New York City.

The shadow soul halts, sensing the change around him.

I glance around to wait for the final part of my plan to fall into place.

All is quiet for a few moments. Then the shadow soul starts walking again, continuing his hunt, and I follow, unheard and unseen.

It isn't long until I see what I'm waiting for.

Movement near the trees.

Fae.

The shadow soul's ears perk up.

But before he can make his move, I unsheathe the dagger from my belt and dart forward, closing the distance between us in seconds.

He spins around, his soulless eyes dead set on me as his face contorts into multiple grotesque expressions. His fingers swipe at me, but I narrowly avoid them, the cold bite of dark magic trailing in their wake.

Not so fast.

I call upon my air magic and blast the creature so hard that he crashes to the ground.

The squealing sound he releases is so nail-biting that if any of my onlookers didn't realize he wasn't human before, they sure do now.

In a split second, he pushes off the ground and lunges at me. His hands are outstretched, his mouth open, ready to suck out my soul and take my energy for himself.

I easily dart out of his way.

Our dance is a brutal ballet of magic and might, each move calculated to overpower the other. Our fae onlookers do nothing to help.

But as the minutes drag on, I see the weariness in the shadow soul's

movements. The way he stumbles a fraction of a second slower than before.

Seizing the opportunity, I use my magic to create a whirlwind around the creature, catching him off guard and pinning him down.

He snarls and tries to push himself up off the ground.

But in one swift movement, I leap forward, all but flying through the air, and plunge my dagger into his chest.

He releases another ear-splitting howl and dissolves into the grass.

I roll to the side before I land in the sticky residue left in the ground.

He's gone. Vanquished.

Pleased with the result of the fight, I jump back onto my feet, slide my dagger back into its sheath, and scan the area for the fae.

They emerge from the shadows behind a tree. Two women, their sparkling eyes wide in fear as they look back and forth between me and the place where the shadow soul dissolved.

"That was a shadow soul," I inform them, as if it's perfectly normal for a vampire to stroll into their realm and vanquish a creature of the Underworld on their lawn. "I assume from your expressions that it's the first one either of you have ever seen."

They exchange a glance before nodding at me.

"Yes," one of them, a brunette wearing a halo of flowers, speaks up. "The tales of these creatures are whispered among us, but never confirmed."

Her companion, a blonde with feathers woven into her hair, eyes me with recognition.

"You've been here before," she states.

"I have."

She presses her lips together, and I'm positive she knows who I am.

"You didn't have to follow the shadow soul into our realm and destroy it," she eventually says. "Yet, you did. However, I can't help but wonder—how did it get here in the first place?"

Her wording in the beginning is precise, and I know why. She appreciates my killing the shadow soul. But fae can't thank anyone for anything—lest they end up owing them a favor—so she was showing her appreciation without using those exact two words.

"I don't know," I admit. "This is the first time I've seen or heard of a shadow soul leaving the city's underground tunnel system. Given that he entered your realm, this is no longer just a problem for the supernaturals of the city, but for the fae as well. Which is why I need the two of you to take

me to the queen and bear witness to the events that just occurred here.”

Thus why I waited to spot witnesses before making my presence known to the shadow soul.

The fae exchange another glance. It’s shorter this time, more decisive.

“It’s the queen’s responsibility to handle this—not ours,” the blonde says. “We’ll take you to her and bear witness to the event that just occurred.”

“A smart decision that will help your realm immensely in the challenging times to come.” I make sure to word my statement in a way that doesn’t involve me thanking them. “Please, lead the way.”

# *Damien*



AS WE WALK the winding paths to the castle—a back route I remember from my previous times in this realm—each petal and leaf shimmers with magic.

We're met with cautious stares along the way, but are bothered by no one.

Soon, the castle comes into view. It exists parallel to Belvedere Castle in Central Park, but it radiates with magic that mortals can only dream about. Stone walls with luminescent ivy rise into intricately carved towers, like tendrils of silver mist. Every stone pulses with life, and I marvel the sight of it, even though this is hardly the first time I've seen it.

My escorts—the brunette named Iris and the blonde named Hestia—notice my pause and glance back at me.

“It hasn't lost its charm,” I say, breaking the silence.

Hestia smirks, her eyes playful. “It never does. The castle is alive, after all.”

We reach the gates, where two fae guards stand watch. I know one of them from my previous times in the realm—Gareth—and his eyes widen at the sight of me.

“King Damien,” he says. “I trust you're here to see the queen?”

“I am,” I confirm. “It's imperative that we speak with her immediately.”

He eyes the two girls—I'm unsure of their places in court, but I don't think they're ones of importance—then nods in concession. “Queen Lysandra is in the royal gardens,” he says. “I'll bring you to her.”

I'm unsurprised. Lysandra's favorite time to garden has always been at night, when she can enjoy the view of the aurora dancing in the sky.

We make our way through the halls, step through the garden gates, and she's there, as ethereal as ever. Her silver hair cascades in loose waves down

her back, and her hands are deep in the soil, tending to a patch of herbs and flowers. Among them, the delicate leaves of the duskberry.

Beside her, a teenage girl with ash brown hair trims the leaves of a fiery rose bush. Her eyes meet mine, then quickly shift away.

“Damien.” Lysandra rises and wipes her hands on her silk gown. “It’s been some time.”

“That it has.”

With that, the guards take their leave, apparently viewing their job here as done.

“This is my daughter, Freesia.” Lysandra gestures to the girl beside her. “Freesia, this is the ruler of the mortal realm’s vampires, King Damien. An old acquaintance of mine, and an ally to our kind.”

Two decades is hardly considered “old” for those of us who have lived for centuries, but I suppose the explanation will suffice.

Freesia smiles politely and gives me a small curtsy. “Nice to meet you, Your Highness.”

“You as well,” I reply, but my eyes never leave Lysandra. “You’ve raised a lovely daughter.”

“A human,” she explains. “Her parents abandoned her in the park when she was a baby. I stumbled upon her and felt compelled to take her in as my own.”

Freesia lowers her eyes, as if ashamed of her heritage.

“Motherhood suits you,” I tell Lysandra, and surprise mixed with something I can’t quite place flickers across her features. Only for a moment, but enough for me to tell it was there.

At that, she straightens. “Enough pleasantries,” she says. “What brings you here? And who are your companions?”

I glance at Iris and Hestia, who’ve been standing quietly off to the side, almost blending into the enchanted garden.

“This is Iris and Hestia. Witnesses to the reason of my visit,” I say, and then I explain what happened with the shadow soul, from the moment he slipped into the park until I ran my dagger through his chest.

Lysandra listens patiently, saying nothing until I’m finished.

“This is true?” she asks the girls, since as fae, they’re unable to lie.

Iris steps forward first. “I saw it, Your Highness,” she says. “A creature so dark it seemed to consume the light around it.”

“King Damien vanquished it, just as he said,” Hestia chimes in.



Lysandra looks deep into my eyes, as if assessing what to do from here.

“Damien and I will speak alone,” she decides, turning her attention to Iris, Hestia, and Freesia. “Be on your ways.”

They hurry out of the garden, and now it’s just me and Lysandra, standing under the soft lights of the aurora.

“So,” she says, walking over to a wrought iron table covered with an assortment of gardening tools. “You lured a shadow soul into my realm to have an excuse to see me. Isn’t that a bit melodramatic, even for you?”

Many would find her tone accusatory. I, however, recognize it for what it is.

Teasing.

“I wish you and your court no harm,” I tell her, refusing to give into her flirtations. “You, of all people, should know that.”

“I do.” Her gaze wanders to the vines of duskberry, and I know she’s thinking about how we used it to gain each other’s trust all those years ago. But when her eyes return to mine, they’re sharp and full of determination—the eyes of a queen. “More of these shadow creatures will follow.”

“They’ll try,” I say carefully, knowing this is the prime opportunity to move forward with the other thought that crossed my mind when I saw that shadow soul entering the park. “However, I believe my people and I can help you.”

She raises an eyebrow. “I’m listening.”

I take a deep breath before making my proposal. “My warriors will secure the perimeter of the park each night, making sure no more shadow souls pass through its gates. In exchange, you’ll provide me with one magical object of my choosing from the Blockhouse when I come to you in the future requesting it.”

She allows her fingers to trail over the sharp edges of a pair of gardening shears, considering my offer.

When her eyes meet mine again, there’s a wicked glint in them that causes me to tense.

“You know, you’re not the first vampire to tread this way as of late,” she says, and a pit forms in my stomach at where she might be heading. “A few weeks ago, the leader of one of the downtown clans—Lucas—came to me with information about your star touched bride.”

The bitterness lacing her tone when she says the final word is stronger than her most poisonous potion.

“You know about Amber.” I keep my voice steady, despite my urge to warn her—to *threaten* her—to stay away from the girl who burned her way into my heart with the brightness of a thousand suns.

And then there’s Lucas...

I suppose I now know why he and his clan were slithering around the park that night. They were waiting to enter the fae realm.

I’ll handle them later. Right now, I need to see this deal through with Lysandra, no matter how hard she tries to turn my focus elsewhere.

“Lucas wanted a necklace in my possession that would make your betrothed fall in love with him,” she continues. “He told me how Amber seems less than enthralled about your engagement. He believes that with the necklace, he can steal her heart.”

From the way she’s watching me, I can tell she’s enjoying her attempt to make me squirm.

It takes every ounce of willpower to not summon a gust of air and smack her with it.

I don’t, of course. It would hardly help my cause.

“Did you give it to him?” I ask, my voice as sharp and deadly as one of her shears.

“I didn’t,” she says, and at once, I can breathe again. “But I can’t help being curious. Is this necklace the magical object you’re seeking as well?”

“It’s not,” I tell her. “When Amber and I marry, it will be because it’s what she wants—not because of a magical trinket controlling her emotions.”

Lysandra’s lips turn down into a soft, simpering frown. “It’s unbecoming of you to chase this girl the way you are,” she says. “But very well. When the time comes—and let’s make that time no earlier than a month from now, so you don’t stroll back in here tomorrow asking for it—you’ll receive a magical object of your choosing from the Blockhouse, given that not a single shadow soul more enters the fae realm.”

Relief washes through my veins.

She agreed.

Not without lobbing an insult my way when she did, but what matters is that she agreed.

“Are the terms to your satisfaction?” she asks.

“Almost,” I say, and she watches me with those calculating eyes of hers, waiting. “First, I need to add one more clarification.”

“And what might that be?”

“This arrangement applies only to shadow souls who attempt to enter the fae realm through any entrance located in Central Park,” I tell her, refusing to let the potential loophole go unaddressed. “There are other doors to other courts of the fae realm around the world. I can only vouch for the security of the ones in my territory.”

Her eyes narrow, a subtle indication of respect. “Sharp as ever, Damien.”

“So, do we have a deal?” I ask. “My vampires guard the Central Park entrances, ensuring no shadow souls cross through them into your realm. In return, I’ll receive one magical object of my choosing from the Blockhouse, no earlier than a month from now, provided no more shadow souls enter from the gates of Central Park.”

“We have a deal.” She pauses, then adds, “might we seal it with a kiss?” She flutters her lashes in a way that once charmed me, but stopped having that effect once I realized she would never respect me as a true equal.

Such is the nature of the fae.

“A handshake,” I say, making it clear that I’m not giving in to her attempts of seduction. They might have worked once, but we’re not venturing down that path again.

She slowly extends her hand, her fingernails painted in shades of the aurora above us—green, purple, and a touch of pink.

As we shake, streams of water from a nearby fountain make their way toward us like ribbons in the wind, wrapping themselves around our clasped hands. Lysandra’s water magic. They circle around for a few moments like a vortex, then spread up our arms and sink into our skin, embedding the terms of our agreement into the essence of our beings.

Lysandra hesitates for a moment, then withdraws her hand.

“I hope for both our sakes that this partnership is beneficial,” she says.

“As do I.” I clench my fingers a few times, and the buzz of the magic subsides. “Thank you for your cooperation.”

She offers me a nod—not a smile—and I take it for what it is. Lysandra may be playful, but when it comes to her realm, she’s all business.

“We’ll speak soon,” she says. “Make yourself at home until you can return to your realm in the morning. And please give my regards to your star touched bride.”

A prick of annoyance jabs me, but I hide it well. “I will. Good night, Lysandra.”

“Good night, Damien. I’ll see you soon.”

“Soon,” I repeat, and then I leave the garden and make my way through the forest, where I wait in solitude until the clock strikes six and the world transforms around me to bring me back home—to the city I’ve vowed to protect, and to the star touched girl I pray will soon be fighting by my side.

# Amber



I *SWEAR* that in the month I've been at the Fairmont, I've been spending more time in the gym than in my own room. The vampire warriors, who initially made me feel like I was some sort of circus performer during training, don't pay me as much attention as they did when I first got here.

I'm not one of them. I never will be.

But at least I no longer feel like all eyes are on me during every second of training.

As the only other non-vampire in the Fairmont, Morgan has been my best ally. She's the only one who understands what it's like to be different around here. She even bought me a dagger to make sure I never feel too outnumbered in this place, and she's been teaching me how to use it.

Now, I'm facing her on one of the training mats, digging inside of myself to search for any semblance of elemental witch magic.

*Fire* magic.

Due to my witch heritage, Morgan thinks it's possible I'll be able to learn to wield the element that witches control—fire. If I can, it would be incredibly useful, for more than just physical battles.

Because witches can use flames to compel both humans and supernaturals. I might even be able to use fire to teleport, like Morgan can do.

Unfortunately, while most witches can wield fire, not all of them can. My family hasn't been able to for generations. And judging by my lack of progress, I'm no different than they are.

A *cinder*. Meaning, a witch unable to produce flames. Which, honestly, makes sense. I've never known my dad—my mom met him at the beach when she was with her friends celebrating their high school graduation, and

he ghosted her at the end of the week. He never replied to any of her texts, not even when she told him she was pregnant, and he had no social media. Eventually, she gave up trying to find him.

I've accepted the fact that I'll never know him. And I'm fine with that, because he sounds like a horrible person. But given the fact that there are far, *far* more humans than supernaturals in the world, the percentage chance that my dad has supernatural heritage is slim-to-none.

Having one human parent and the other a witch who can't wield fire doesn't make it seem likely that *I'll* be able to use fire.

Still, I'm trying. Have been for the past few days.

Now, sweat beads along my forehead as I concentrate. But no matter how hard I focus, fire refuses to spark.

"It's pointless." I drop my hands to my sides in frustration.

I reach for my sun magic instead and let it flow over my skin, lighting me up like a beacon.

This, of course, gets some stares from others nearby. Including Viktor, who strides over and looks me over with obvious disapproval.

"Still no progress with the fire?" he asks, mainly to Morgan instead of to me.

She shrugs, and I can tell she feels bad about it.

"It's not her fault," I tell Viktor. "I might just not have fire magic. No amount of training is going to make me able to harness a type of magic I don't have. So, how about we focus on what I *can* do, instead of what I can't?"

"No goddess would star touch a supernatural who was worthless to start with," he says, and I clench my fists, a second away from releasing a solar flare into his face. Or, better yet, right below the belt. "Try again."

I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and dig for the magic inside me.

Heat rushes through me.

But when I open my eyes to see what I created in my palms, it's only orbs of sun magic. As radiant as ever but as fireless as before.

I scream in frustration and throw them down onto the mat.

Which, luckily, is fire and heat proof.

Morgan steps closer, her eyes filled with concern. "Maybe we should take a break."

"No break," Viktor says. "Keep going."

Before I can reply, a door swings open at the far end of the gym, and

Damien walks in. His blond hair is in that perfect, artfully tousled state, and his suit is as tailored as ever.

I haven't seen him much over the last month, apart from the sporadic check-ins that are more duty than anything else. But the less I see of him, the more I think about the almost-kiss in the park, wondering what would have happened if I hadn't pulled away.

It's infuriating.

"Progress report?" he asks Viktor, not bothering to glance over at me.

Viktor doesn't hesitate. "She's proficient with sun magic but shows no capability in wielding fire."

I step forward, annoyance flaring inside me at how they're talking about me like I'm not here. "I've been excelling in sun magic and hand-to-hand combat," I cut in. "I've been giving it everything I've got."

Damien gives me a look of approval. "Well then, would you care to demonstrate?"

That's more like it.

"Happy to."

"Thought so," he says. "You'll spar with Viktor. A proper spar—hand to hand, magic against magic, until one of you is knocked out of the ring."

Murmurs ripple through the other vampires in the gym, and I can almost hear the gears turning in their minds as they calculate odds and make bets.

I'm going to make sure the ones who aren't betting on me are sorry about it.

Which, from what I catch, are most of them.

"You sure about that?" Viktor asks Damien. "You know I won't hold back."

"I didn't ask for your opinion," Damien says, and Viktor's expression hardens. "Get ready. Both of you."

I don't need to be told twice.

The gym's atmosphere tenses as Viktor and I make our way to the boxing ring at the back of the gym, which exists for these sorts of spars. The vampires follow us, forming a circle around the ring, their eyes gleaming with a mix of excitement and skepticism.

Viktor hops in with zero hesitation, and I climb in after him, the mat yielding slightly underfoot.

He rolls his shoulders back in a relaxed manner, his stance casual but ready. "Don't go easy," he says. "I certainly won't."

“Don’t worry,” I reply. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Damien’s presence looms at the ring’s edge. His eyes, cool and discerning, flicker with interest as they appraise the scene.

Morgan’s face is a beacon in the crowd, and while her nod is subtle, it’s all the encouragement I need.

With a deep, steadying breath, I summon my sun magic. The warmth that floods my veins is a comforting embrace that readies me for battle.

“Begin,” Damien says, and Viktor lunges at me, fast as lightning, fists clenched.

But after that first day when he tackled me with no warning, I’m prepared enough to dodge out of the way, narrowly avoiding his punch.

My fist crackles with sun magic as I throw a haphazard solar flare at his side. It skims his skin, sizzling where it struck.

And then he growls and dives at my feet, grabbing hold of my ankle and flipping me over to my stomach before I can blink.



# Amber



ALL THE AIR leaves my lungs at once. I gasp, each breath a blade slicing through my chest, sharper than any heat I've ever summoned.

I'm too vulnerable down here.

But before Viktor can launch another attack, I zero in on my magic and create a shield of heat around myself. It's my own cocoon of hot air, threatening to burn him if he gets too close.

As I push myself up, wind swirls around me. Cold enough to eat its way through my heat.

Viktor's magic.

"Thought it might help you cool off a bit," he taunts, a wicked edge to his voice that's as cutting as the cold.

I circle him, ready to pounce. The burns on his side are gone—erased by his vampiric healing—just as the broken bones in my ribs mend themselves within me.

"And here I thought your talk was all hot air," I retort, my words sparking anger in his eyes.

It's enough to set him off, and we exchange blows and kicks, dodging and striking. Yes, he's strong, but the one big thing I've learned during training is that I'm *fast*. Morgan jokes that I "travel at lightspeed." So, I use that to my advantage as much as I can, and the air between us is electric, charged with the hiss of my sun magic clashing against the cool wind of his strength.

Eventually, he catches me and overpowers me, forcing me to the ground.

I reach into my boot for my dagger.

It's not there.

My heart hammers in panic, and my gaze snaps up to Viktor, who's

brandishing my weapon with an infuriating smirk.

I didn't even feel him take it.

"I thought you might try that," he says. "You're not very good at following the rules. This spar is hand to hand, magic against magic. No weapons allowed. Get up."

He tosses my dagger over the side of the ring, and it clatters to the ground.

Anger surges through me, and without rising, the heat of it releases out of my hands toward Viktor in a blast of solar flares.

He narrowly dodges, the light dazzling him enough to grant me precious seconds to rise to my feet.

I hurl another volley of bright flares, but this time, he's prepared.

His arms sweep through the air, summoning a vortex that scatters my orbs, snuffing them out before they can reach him.

A few vampires scream as they jump out of their way—some of them might have gotten hit—but I can't afford to be distracted. They're vampires. They'll survive.

Instead, I send flare after flare at Viktor. But he deflects each one, driving me back, step by step, to the edge of the ring.

He's going to win.

Of *course* he's going to win. He has decades of training on me. Yes, being star touched also gifted me good instincts, but it doesn't cancel out Viktor's experience. Plus, there's the huge fact that since he's been the one teaching me, he can basically predict all my moves before they come.

Just as I teeter on the brink of defeat, a sensation washes over me—a calmness that isn't mine.

Damien.

His emotions—calm and steady—trickle through the duskberry bond like a gentle stream.

I glance over at him to see if he's doing it on purpose. He's not looking at me, but I know this feeling. He's opened that window between us.

He's *helping* me in this fight.

I could reject his calm and try to muster my own. But as Viktor's next attack looms, I make a split-second decision.

I will not be bested today. Not here, in front of all these vampires thirsty for my failure.

So, I soak in Damien's calmness, letting it anchor me.

As it does, my magic begins to bend to my will with a precision I've never felt before. It's like the world is moving in slow motion, and I can shape the light in a delicate, controlled way that I didn't realize was possible.

Viktor sends another whirlwind in my direction, but this time, I'm ready.

I create a wave of heat so intense that shields me, dissolving his air magic into a wisp of harmless breeze.

He staggers, caught off guard, and that's all I need.

With pinpoint accuracy, I throw a massive solar flare straight at his chest. The impact sends him stumbling backward, arms flailing as he crashes over the ropes and out of the ring.

I lower my arms and stare at the place where he'd been standing, shocked.

The gym goes silent. Every vampire is looking at me in disbelief. Morgan, too.

My focus, however, is on Viktor. Watching, waiting, preparing for anything.

He stands up and steadies himself, his breathing so overly controlled that it's clear he's trying to keep himself from losing it.

I brace myself for his anger. Or his critiques. Or for him to claim I cheated, and to challenge me again.

He does none of those things.

Instead, he gathers himself back together and nods, a warrior acknowledging another. "Well done. Especially with the sun magic," he says. "As for this..." He retrieves my dagger, tossing it back to me. "Catch."

I move quickly enough to catch it, but my hand wraps around the blade—not the handle. I curse as it digs into my palm, dropping the dagger to the floor. It *hurts*, but thanks to my supernatural abilities, the gashes are nearly done healing by the time I've picked it back up and shoved it into my boot.

Once it's snugly in place, my eyes drift to Damien's.

He gives me a small smile, and it feels strangely intimate. Like he's whispering secrets through glances.

Why did he help me? Why not let Viktor win?

I'm trying to make sense of it when he jumps up into the ring with me—his air magic propelling his way—and gazes out at the crowd. Electricity buzzes between us, but he doesn't look back over at me.

"I came to observe for a reason," he says, and everyone is silent, waiting for him to continue. "The shadow souls are gaining strength and rising in

numbers. They pose a risk not just to us, but to the entire supernatural community.”

Murmurs fill the room again, although now, they’re tinged with tension.

“When the time is right, we’ll strike,” he continues, and there’s a deadly precision in his voice that makes me freeze, as if my instincts are reminding me of the predator he truly is. “In the meantime, keep up the good work. We need to be ready for what’s coming next.”

He turns back to me, and our eyes lock. There’s so much he’s not saying, but I feel the weight of his gaze, as if it’s filled with a thousand unspoken words.

“You did well today,” he says. “Thank you for putting your all into your training. Your light is going to be instrumental at keeping the shadows at bay.”

I have so many questions, but I can’t ask him. Not here, not now.

Not unless I want all these vampires to know I didn’t technically beat Viktor on my own.

“Thank you for your... support,” I say instead, and his expression hardens, warning me to not say more.

As if I’d be stupid enough to bring it up here and now. I might sometimes be impulsive, but I’m far from an idiot.

Instead, my eyes dart to Viktor, who’s rubbing his chest where my solar flare hit him. I doubt he’s still wounded physically, although I can’t say the same about emotionally. Next, I turn to Morgan, who gives me an approving nod. Finally, to the rest of the vampires, who are watching me with a deference they’ve never given me before.

The gym no longer feels like a circus with me as its star. Instead, it’s a battlefield where I’ve claimed my place.

I don’t fit in here. I never will.

But unlike the rest of them, I’ve been gifted the ability to change the outcome of this war.

And, despite everything I’ve been through since coming here, I refuse to let that power go to waste.

# Amber



THE ROOFTOP GARDEN of the Fairmont is about twenty floors up, and it has a perfect view of the sunset over Central Park.

Yes, the window in my room is great, but it's so high that I have no balcony. So, on the days when I don't feel like I'm going to pass out after training, this place has been my refuge where I can get some fresh air around here.

Where I can think about what's going to happen when the year is up and I'm out of this place.

But I still have eleven months to go. Not like I'm counting or anything.

In the meantime, my phone is pressed against my ear as I talk with my mom. As always since coming here, hearing from her fills me with a mix of comfort and guilt.

I have no idea how I'm going to justify not returning home to visit for an entire year. But I'll figure it out. She can always come here, to Manhattan, once the shadow souls are under control.

"Let's try to chat more?" she asks. "You were so excited about moving to New York, but now it's like you're a ghost."

*Wrong type of supernatural.*

"Sorry I've been so out of touch," I say instead. "Work's been hectic. And I've been making some friends here, too."

Lies. All lies.

I hate it.

But, as much as I hate it, it's necessary.

"Well, at least you're not alone there," she says. "Tell me more about this job of yours. I'm surprised you ended up at a plant shop instead of a bakery,

but I guess it doesn't hurt to learn new skills."

Before I can respond, someone approaches from behind and joins me at my perch overlooking the park.

Damien.

He's dressed casually again, and the way his eyes reflect the remaining sunlight takes my breath away.

"I have to go," I tell my mom. "Heading out with some friends. Sorry."

"Let's talk again soon?" she asks.

"Sure. Sounds good." I end the call, slide the phone into my back pocket, and turn to face Damien. "What was that about today?"

He raises an eyebrow. "You're going to have to be more specific."

He's goading me.

I ignore it.

"You helped me in the spar against Viktor. The spar that *you* wanted us to do."

A smirk creeps across his lips. "You sound irritated."

"I just don't understand," I say. "You asked for the spar, but then you interfered. Why?"

He studies my face, his expression softening. "Consider it a demonstration. The bond can be advantageous. And it did help you, did it not?"

I want to say no, just to annoy him.

But we'll both know I'm lying.

"Fine," I admit. "Viktor was making me mad. Your... interference helped. I guess."

"I suppose that's as much of a thank you as I'm going to get." He shakes his head and smiles. "You should have seen their faces when you knocked him out of the ring. They finally saw what I have all along."

"What *do* you see?" I ask, and he opens the bond, his emotions slamming into me at once.

Respect.

Admiration.

Care.

His eyes echo all of it, and suddenly, I can't breathe. Because his feelings are so pure, and the vulnerability he's showing me by sharing them makes my head spin.

I hate this.

He's the last person I want to understand me. The last person I want to find acceptance from. Yet, there it is, laid bare for me to not just see, or hear, but to *feel*.

"That's what I see," he says, and he reaches for my hand, his skin cold against mine.

Is it because he's a vampire? Or because of the warmth of the sun coursing through me?

I don't know. But, even though I shouldn't, I *like* it.

And then he closes the bond, leaving me alone with my feelings, without the influence of his. He waits, the intensity of his gaze never wavering, expecting rejection, perhaps even bracing for it.

I don't reject him. I don't say *anything*. Because there's an electricity in the air between us, the kind that precedes a storm, and we're standing right in the center of it. The type of storm that you can't help but watch, fascinated, even though you know you should stay inside, where it's safe.

Instead of pulling away, I step closer, drawn in by the curiosity I haven't been able to shake since that night in Central Park. And, with the duskberry bond closed, I know that whatever I'm feeling now belongs to me. Not to him. To *me*.

His eyes are intense, searching mine, and my heart pounds with anticipation. I'm sure he can hear it.

I stay where I am, watching, waiting.

"Are you sure?" he asks.

"Yes. I'm sure."

The second our lips meet, warmth flares to life inside me, fusing with the coldness of his skin. Sun and moon, day and night, existing in one perfect moment.

His kiss is gentle at first. Slow. Then his hand travels up to the back of my neck, his fingers tangling through my hair as his hunger for me surfaces, and I never want this moment to end.

As I lose myself in him, the unmistakable feeling of my magic buzzes through me. And then, before I realize what's happening, its warmth floods out of me, spreading outward with so much force that I see its brightness behind my lids.

It's like the world is on fire.

I pull away from Damien and look around.

The garden's glowing with light, as if the sun has come down to dance

among the flowers and shrubs. But it's not coming from the sky. It's radiating off me, like a million stars lighting up the space around us. And, for the first time, I feel really, truly star touched.

Damien's face lights up with a smile, but as my light dims out, he sobers up and looks at me earnestly.

"Is this your way of accepting my proposal to become my queen?" he asks, and reality crashes down in an instant.

"No." The word slices through the air like a dagger. "Absolutely not."

He frowns, crestfallen, but not entirely surprised. "I had to ask."

"We met a month ago," I remind him. "I'm not looking to get married now—or anytime soon. Especially not to—"

I cut myself off, unable to say the next word.

Especially not to *you*.

Because despite everything, it feels too mean. Too cruel.

He leans back, studying my face as though hoping to find something—anything—to sway my decision.

He doesn't.

One kiss—one born of curiosity—isn't going to make me want to marry him. Or *anyone*, for that matter.

"Time is a human construct," he finally says. "When you live for centuries, you realize that some short moments hold a lifetime of truth."

I blink for a second, his words reminding me of the world of differences between us. Almost three hundred years of them. Not to mention that he's a vampire and I'm... well, whatever I am.

"Maybe," I agree. "But I'm not just making a decision for this moment. I'm making it for a lifetime—however long or short that may be."

A long one for him. A comparatively short one for me.

Which is a pretty big issue between us as well. Not nearly as big as the others, but it's still there.

He nods, as if coming to a silent understanding. "Very well."

I watch him carefully, waiting for more.

It doesn't come.

Instead, he studies the horizon, where the last remnants of the sun have disappeared and left a canvas of blues and purples in its wake.

"There's another reason I wanted to talk to you today," he says, and I wait for him to continue, a bit jolted by the sudden change of subject. "Given the fact that the shadow souls are now venturing aboveground, I think you



should stay in until we get them under control.”

I take a moment to wrap my mind around what he’s saying.

“You mean not leave the Fairmont?” I ask. “At all?”

“It’s just temporarily. For your own safety.”

Again, he opens that door between our souls.

This time, I feel his concern. His worry. And even—while I have a feeling he wouldn’t admit it out loud—his fear.

Not just fear for me.

Fear for his kingdom, and for himself.

That’s what seals my decision. Not the worry, but the true, raw fear.

“Okay,” I say, and he closes off the connection between us, but not before I feel his relief.

“Thank you,” he says, his gaze wandering down to my lips.

My heart hammers more than it did before.

Is he going to kiss me again? And if he does, will I let him?

“We should head back inside.” He moves away, back to business now.

“You had an intense day of training, and I’m sure you need some rest.”

My heart drops, and I internally curse myself for *wishing* he tried to kiss me again.

I need to get ahold of myself. One hot kiss—literally, given the reaction of my magic—doesn’t change what he did the first night I was here.

“I’m going to stay for a bit longer,” I say, both because I want to, and because I’m not sure it would be wise to leave this garden with him right now.

“Understood,” he says, and before I can say anything more, he turns around and heads out of the garden.

My lips buzz with the electricity from the kiss, and there’s no denying that while marriage is the last thing on my mind, something between us has shifted.

For better or worse, my life here has grown roots as tangled as those in the garden, grounding me in this world of magic and darkness.

I just hope they’re strong enough to withstand whatever’s coming next.

# *Damien*



IN THE MONTH that Amber's been living in the Fairmont, I've veered away from discussing my vampiric nature with her.

She's been curious, of course. She's learned from the others about the lifestyle we give the humans who stay with us—how they're generously provided for in exchange for their services. How they're all here willingly.

We treat them as fairly as possible. But when vampires continuously feed on one specific human, a bond forms.

When clan members are in monogamous relationships, the human donors we choose are ones where the blood bond connection is more similar to the love one might feel for a beloved family member than a romantic one. The lines occasionally get messy, but we manage.

When we're not in monogamous relationships, we often choose humans who can satisfy needs of ours that go beyond our thirst for blood.

Two nights after the rooftop kiss with Amber, I find myself outside of Tory's door, preparing to enter. She knows I'm coming. As for what I'm coming for... she's not going to be pleased about it.

However, it's necessary. For both of us. I try my best to do right by people, and she will be no exception.

I knock, and as always, she smiles when she lets me in.

She's dressed in a red, silky number that hugs her curves, her warm eyes sparkling with anticipation. Her dark hair, cut in a stylish bob, has always reminded me of a human donor I was fond of a century ago, back in the nineteen twenties. It's why Tory caught my eyes at the charity event we both attended at her college three years ago.

"Damien." Her voice is husky with desire when she says my name, and

she rushes forward to kiss me.

I sidestep, avoiding the contact.

Her eyes flash with surprise. “What’s wrong? Aren’t you hungry?”

She inches closer toward me, pulling at her top so it falls lower on her chest.

Again, I step back, ensuring my eyes don’t wander. I have no intention of giving her the wrong idea regarding why I’m here tonight.

“I’m not here to feed from you,” I say, since it’s best to get this over with. “I’ve come to let you know that you’re no longer going to be serving as my donor.”

Silence.

Then her expression drops, and she shakes her head as she struggles to find the words.

I give her a few seconds to soak it in.

“What are you talking about?” She searches me for answers, trembling slightly, and I do feel bad for her. “What did I do?”

“You’ve done nothing wrong,” I assure her, watching as an array of emotions crosses her face. Confusion, anger, pain, denial, then back to confusion.

After so many centuries of being alive, I’ve become adept at reading faces. Especially of humans. Even the most centered of them aren’t as good as hiding their emotions as they think.

“It’s because of her, isn’t it?” Tory scowls. “Amber?”

“You were made aware of my intentions with her before she arrived,” I remind her, trying to be gentle, but firm.

“Yes. But she’s a supernatural.” She speaks faster now, growing frantic. “You can’t feed from her—not without breaking your laws. You still need me. Let me give you what she can’t. Please.”

She’s so desperate that I’m surprised she’s not getting on her knees and begging for it.

“I know this isn’t easy for you to hear, but you do have options,” I continue, unwilling to humor her. “You can be paired with another vampire in the kingdom. In time, you’ll come to care for them as you do for me. Or, if you’d rather forget all of this, we can arrange for your memory of the supernatural world to be wiped. You can leave the Fairmont and continue your life as it was before.”

“But I don’t *want* to do either of those things.” She pouts. “I want to be

with you. I love you, Damien. You love me, too. I know you do.”

Her confession, while I’m sure she believes it to be true, is unfounded.

“I’m fond of you,” I say, since we’re both aware that I’ve never told her I love her. “However, I’ve always been upfront with you about the transactional nature of this relationship. And while I know the blood bond makes this difficult, I’ve lived a long time. I’ve seen this happen before. You will move on, one way or the other, and it will happen faster than you think. I promise.”

She moves to sit on the edge of the bed, looking like a China doll about to break. But she’s stronger than she thinks. She’s going to be fine.

“This can’t be happening,” she says, blinking away tears.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “Truly. But if you choose to stay, I’ll pair you with someone who will make you happy. If you choose to leave, I’ll ensure you have everything you need to be comfortable for the rest of your life. This decision is yours. I’ll support you, no matter what.”

From the blankness of her expression, I’m not sure she heard me.

“Do you love her?” she finally asks, her eyes pleading with me to say no.

*Her.*

*Amber.*

Before I can form an answer, a piercing alarm slices through the tension in the room.

“Deadlock the door and stay put,” I tell her, and then I rush out of the room and close the door behind me, hoping she heeds my instructions but having no time to explain more.

As I sprint down the hall toward the stairs, joined by other warriors of the clan, my thoughts flit back to Tory’s last question.

*Do you love her?*

And, as if the universe has pulled a veil from my eyes, clarity hits me through the chaos.

Yes. I do love Amber.

I’ve loved her since seeing the determination cross her eyes when that shadow soul attacked her on the train. It wasn’t the demonstration of her magic that got me—although there’s no denying that her light was a sight to behold.

It was seeing her break through the terror and decide she was going to fight to stay alive until her very last breath.

I hope she’ll remain in her room to stay safe.

Somehow, I doubt she will.

But going up there to check on her isn't an option. I have a kingdom to protect.

I burst through the door that leads to the lobby, coming face to face with an onslaught of shadow souls. Dozens of them. They're pouring in like water through a broken dam, and when their hands wrap around the throats of my clan members, my heart breaks as I watch the life fade out of their eyes.

These are creatures unlike any they've faced before, and it shows.

I spot Viktor immediately, launching himself at two shadow souls with such brutal force that they dissolve under his dagger almost instantly. He fights with a feral intensity, every slash reactive, like a cornered animal prepared to either attack or die.

I, however, assess the situation as I dash into it, calculating the shadow souls' numbers and positions. My focus is on effective elimination with the least risk. Pinpointing vulnerabilities in our enemies to take them down quickly and cleanly.

Viktor notices me and grins, narrowly missing being taken down by a shadow soul. "Took you long enough, Damien!"

"Traffic was hell." I sidestep a lunging shadow soul with a rush of wind under my feet and sever its head from its body, not missing a single step.

As Viktor and I continue fighting side by side, I catch sight of Morgan. Dagger in one hand, fireballs shooting out of the other, she's a force to be reckoned with. It's like she knows which way they'll be coming from before they have a chance to strike.

It's possible she actually does.

However, we're not without losses.

A few feet away, a shadow soul has its elongated fingers wrapped around vampire from my clan's neck. Theo, who pilots my helicopter. His eyes are wide and empty as the creature consumes his life force. And when he falls to the ground and disintegrates to ash, the shadow soul seems to grow larger, Theo's energy adding to his strength.

A breeze stirs around him. Almost imperceptibly, but enough to move the ash on the floor.

"Damien, your left!" Viktor yells, and I move quickly, my blade cutting through the gruesome, shadowy form like it's made of mist.

We continue like this for minutes.

But more vampires fall. The shadow souls keep growing larger.

The longer this takes, the harder it's going to be to take them down.

"We're losing numbers," Viktor says. "We can't keep holding back."

"When have I ever held back?" I flash him a deadly smile and zero in on my air magic to send my dagger in a highly skilled, precise arc that slices another shadow soul into two.

It returns to me, its handle smacking back into my palm, and that's when I see her burst out of the elevator.

A flash of golden hair I'd recognize anywhere, and the most determined sky-blue eyes I've ever seen.

Amber.

# Amber



THE ALARM JOLTS me awake from a deep sleep, so loudly that it feels like my head's about to explode.

Hands clamped over my ears, I squint at the nightstand clock. It's well past midnight.

This isn't a drill. If it was, I'm pretty sure they would have told me. Which means something's happening. Something bad. And, given the fact that shadow souls are no longer confined to the subway system...

It's something to do with them. I *know* it is.

In situations like this, I'm supposed to bolt my door and remain safe from any threats.

Screw that.

I've been sweating through combat training, getting my hands dirty, and pushing my magic the hardest I possibly can. I'm not going to hide up here when the people I've come to care about might be in trouble. Morgan, Damien, Abigail, and even Viktor. In the month I've lived here, these people have come to matter to me.

If something awful is happening, I can help them. I know I can. My star touched magic is *why I'm here*. It's not just a gift—it's a weapon.

Grabbing my gear is second nature. Leather jacket on, boots laced up tight, and my trusty dagger in my hand. There's no time to think—all I can do is *move*.

Adrenaline pulses through me as I head for the elevator, fingers fumbling as I stab the L button. It's the same elevator where I had that brawl with the vampires all those weeks ago.

Now, it's good as new.

My heart pounds as the floor numbers tick down on the display. Nineteen, eighteen, seventeen... and then finally, I'm there.

The doors open, and it's pure chaos.

Vampires are locked in combat with shadow souls. Dark ichor pools on the floor, the remnants of vanquished shadow souls.

But there are piles of ashes, too.

Vampires. Not all of them have been making it through this alive.

Which ones are my friends—well, as close as I've come to making friends around here? Which ones have I sparred with before? And, most importantly...

I scan the lobby, searching for the people I've grown to care about the most.

Morgan's hands are bright with flames, focused as she hurls fireballs at the shadow souls.

Viktor's fighting the shadow souls like he's a feral animal, his teeth bared as if he's ready to suck out their life force instead of the opposite way around. Maybe he *did* hold back in that boxing ring.

And then, I see him. Damien, his ice blue eyes ablaze as he maneuvers through the air, commanding it to do his bidding. He's like an avenging angel, his features set in a grim line of determination, his blade a death sentence for any shadow soul dumb enough to take him on.

His eyes lock on mine, a whole conversation in one glare.

*You're not supposed to be here, they say.*

Well, it doesn't matter. I'm here now.

My magic flares inside me, its light making my skin glow.

Let's do this.

A shadow soul lunges at me.

*Wait for it.* I gather my magic, wanting him to be as close as possible. The closer he is, the more lethal the blow will be.

Once the creature's a foot away, his gnarled fingers inches from my throat, I push a large solar flare in his direction.

His features twist, his mouth unnaturally long as he lets out a screeching wail. Then the air stirs around him, and he dissolves to the floor.

My heart pounds as I stare at the place where he disappeared.

That was close.

Almost *too* close.

Luckily, a glance around the lobby shows me that we're gaining the upper



hand.

Morgan's made her way off to the side, using her fire magic to destroy the shadows before they can make it to the stairs.

Damien takes another one of them down, stopping another shadow soul from getting too close to me, and I give him a grateful smile. Sure, I likely could have taken him out on my own, but it feels nice to work as a team. Natural, almost.

Before I can mouth thank you in his direction, he rushes to help a group of vampires getting overpowered by a group of shadow souls. He moves in a blur, likely a combination of air magic and his natural vampire speed, and saves one of his clan members just before a shadow soul sucks the last drops of life out of him.

He's even more of a force to be reckoned with than he was in the subway. Then, something changes.

The already low temperature in the room plummets, a deep cold settling into my bones. The remaining shadow souls part, stopping any vampires who try throwing themselves into the path that now leads out from the main doors.

A new shadow soul makes his way down it. His aura is a vortex, a storm of magic that exudes a power as captivating as it is terrifying. The features of his face, while sharp and exaggerated, hold a strange symmetry. A dark beauty that fascinates even as it repels.

Viktor lunges forward, wind at his heels, dagger poised to come down straight at the giant shadow's chest.

He misses.

I don't know how, but he *misses* and tumbles down to the floor. He rolls into the fall, but he looks even more shocked than he was when I knocked him out of the fighting ring.

But the huge shadow soul pays no attention to Viktor.

Instead, his gaze fixates on me, a pair of dark pools swirling with an appetite that chills me to core. Yet, within that darkness, there's a glint of something else—a sharp intelligence, a knowingness unlike all the others we've seen so far. He's somehow terrifying and magnetic at the same time.

And then, before I can blink, he comes straight for me.

Panic rises in my chest, but I shut it down.

*I'm star touched. I've got this,* I tell myself, and then I raise my hands, palms out, reaching for my magic and forming a heat shield around me to keep him at bay.

He slows for a moment, our eyes locked. There's an acknowledgment there, a recognition of the battle of wills and the stark differences between us.

I check on Damien, who's still working with the vampires on the side of the room, taking out the remaining shadow souls that were trying to overpower them.

In that split second, the giant shadow presses forward. Slower than before, but I feel him pushing against my magic, forcing me back.

His strength is overwhelming. A force as ancient as it is potent.

I strain as I increase the heat of my shield. But then he's upon me, his fingers wrapped around my neck and a wicked, knowing smile on his lips as the magic surrounding my skin dims down to nothing.

I try to suck in a breath, but it doesn't come.

It's like he's pulling the marrow out of my bones and feasting on my soul.

The edges of my vision blur.

But no. I didn't let that shadow soul in the subway take me down, and I haven't been training and learning how to harness my magic just so I can lose my life to one now.

And so, with every last bit of strength I have, I dig up my magic from the depths of my soul—a place where the shadow hasn't touched yet—draw in a sharp breath, and scream as I release it in a final burst of light.

# Amber



THE TOWERING SHADOW SOUL RECOILS, but it's not a gesture of defeat. It's calculated, controlled. And as his grip loosens from my neck, it's with a deliberate slowness that sends a clear message—he's choosing to release me.

His inky eyes, deep and dark as a moonless night, flash with malice. But there's something else there, too. Admiration, or maybe amusement. Whatever it is, I don't like it.

Before anyone can react—before Damien or Viktor can launch another attack—the shadow soul turns, zipping past any vampires in his path with a fluid grace and disappearing out of the lobby doors.

The remaining ones follow, as if called back by their leader.

And, just like that, they're gone.

The room falls quiet, minus the heavy breathing of the living and the groans of the injured. Supernaturals might be able to rapidly heal any physical wounds, but it's going to take longer to regain the strength they lost to the shadow souls who tried to feast on their magic.

Suddenly, my legs feel like jelly, and I lower myself to the floor. I don't pass out like I did on the train—I have better control of myself now—but my head spins, and it's a relief to sit down.

Damien's at my side in a heartbeat, his face a mask of concern and barely veiled irritation.

"You were supposed to stay in your room," he says, but there's relief there, too, hidden beneath layers of command.

"Well, I didn't." I focus on steadying myself as Morgan comes over to join us, then slowly stand.

As I do, my fingers drift to my neck, tracing the ghostly imprint of the

shadow's grasp. I can still feel his touch, as if he left frostbite on my soul.

"That one was different from the others," I tell them. "Stronger. Darker. Colder."

Those starless eyes, piercing and intense, will be forever ingrained into my mind.

Viktor's suddenly by our sides, holding up a corked, teardrop shaped object that looks like a flask. From its iridescent, silver glow, I don't have to ask to know that it's forged from magic.

"Swiped this from that ogre of a shadow soul." He smirks far more arrogantly than he should, given that the shadow soul in question sent him rolling onto his ass earlier, and that he was hardly an ogre. "Needless to say, I don't think it's his emergency stash of whiskey."

This earns chuckles from some of the vampires who aren't kneeling before the ashes on the floor, mourning their fallen comrades. Abigail and her husband Xavier are okay, but as for the rest of them... there's no saying how many made it.

Damien snatches the flask out of Viktor's hand, ushers the three of us into a hallway nook, and holds it up to inspect it.

"This is the Wraithmist Flask," he says, as if we should know what that is.

I exchange a confused look with Viktor, who simply shrugs in response.

From the serious way Morgan looks at the flask, I can tell she's as familiar with it as Damien.

"The last I heard, this belonged to a witch coven in Italy," he continues. "It's an incredibly rare artifact, forged centuries ago. It makes the user—and whoever they want to share the magic with in their vicinity—invisible when they open it. That must be how the shadow souls broke through our guards and security system."

"So why not stay invisible?" I ask, shaking away the memory of the fight and focusing on the object in discussion. "Wouldn't that have made it easier for them to attack?"

"Invisibility from the Wraithmist Flask also makes them intangible," he replies. "They wouldn't have been able to attack until saying the word that removes the enchantment."

"*Claritas*," Morgan says, sounding haunted as she speaks the word.

The three of us look to her, waiting for her to elaborate.

She doesn't.

Morgan's a generally warm person. But occasionally there are times like this, when her eyes go distant, and she sounds almost eerie. Whenever I mention it, she brushes it off, and I've accepted that whatever it is, she doesn't want to talk about it.

Viktor uncorks the flask, swirls it around, and glances inside.

"Empty," he says with a disappointed frown.

Damien shakes his head in exasperation, then turns back to Morgan. "It requires a witch's blood to work, correct?" he asks, and she nods in confirmation. "So, given the power of *your* blood..."

"To turn blood inside the flask to wraithmist, a witch has to cast a spell over it and let it bathe overnight in the light of the full moon," she says quickly. "Tonight is the night of the full moon, but it's past midnight, so I'm afraid we're too late. We're going to have to wait until the next lunar cycle."

"Very well." Damien nods. "In the meantime, you'll hold onto it, since you're the only one here who can activate it."

"You'll trust me with something so precious?"

"Absolutely."

He hands the flask to her, and she takes it, placing it in her jacket pocket.

Throughout this entire conversation, Damien hasn't so much as looked at me. It's like I'm more invisible than someone under the spell of wraithmist.

His icy blue eyes finally meet mine—perhaps feeling the weight of my gaze on him—and I can feel the questions he's not asking, the worries he's not voicing.

"I need to rejoin the others, secure the premises, and take note of who made it and who didn't," he says, and there's a hollowness to him as he speaks, like he's separating his emotions from the tragedy that just occurred. "We'll regroup tomorrow and figure out our next steps."

With that, he turns around and makes his way into the main area of the lobby.

And, as I watch him disappear, I have a sinking feeling that while we might have won this battle, the war has only just begun.

# Amber



THE FOURTH of July at the Fairmont is supposed to be a night of celebration.

Some of the humans set up the terrace garden a few days early, obviously not knowing that the building would be attacked the night before the party.

Now, the golden hue of the setting sun bathes the terrace in a glow that makes the party decorations feel surreal. Streamers that should have danced in a festive breeze hang limp, and the laughter that should have filled the air is instead a suffocating silence for those we lost.

I stand off to the side with Morgan, sipping from my cup of soda, watching the vampires gather in groups and mourn the fallen. Being here feels even more out of place for me than training at the gym. Because I'm not one of them, and I never will be. I'm a mere spectator as they mourn the ones they lost.

Even Abigail and Xavier only had a short exchange with us when we arrived, quickly returning their attention to their vampire comrades.

"Maybe we should go," I eventually say to Morgan.

"No," she says firmly. "We need to be here."

She's so determined that I know not to argue. "Okay."

We stand there for the next few minutes, silent observers overlooking the scene. My skin feels too tight, itchy with the need to do something other than just stand here.

Damien's making his rounds, and I try a few times to meet his eyes, but I feel more invisible to him than ever.

When he finally turns his gaze toward me, I'm greeted with a curt nod that's almost clinical in its detachment.

Should I open the duskberry bond between us? Try to share the warmth

inside me, just like he shared his calmness with me in my spar against Viktor?

No. Because firstly, despite the rightness I feel when we fight together against the shadow souls—and the kiss we shared on this same terrace—I don't forgive him for the trick with the duskberry. I'm not sure I ever will. It was a violation unlike anything anyone's ever done to me before.

Although, I suppose it's not quite as bad as a shadow soul trying to steal my life out of me.

Secondly, I don't think Damien would welcome my help right now. And, unlike him, I like to think I'm capable of respecting those sorts of boundaries.

Eventually, Viktor approaches me and Morgan at our perch near the balcony.

"You did well last night," he says simply. "All of that training paid off."

"I have a good teacher." I give him a smile, although it feels half-hearted. "Thank you. For everything."

"Only doing my job. I'll make sure to not go so easy on you in our next sparring session."

Before I can give a snarky comment in return—which, honestly, wouldn't be appropriate given the somberness of the current atmosphere—a brilliant ray of sunlight descends from the sky. It beams onto the ground as if we're in some sort of alien invasion movie.

When the light recedes, Sunneva stands in its place. Her golden hair shimmers in the sunset, and her eyes—a blend of amber and gold—scan the gathering.

Finally, they settle on me.

I stare at her in wonderment. Because the Eva I met my first day in the city was a watered-down version of the sun goddess standing before me now.

"Amber," she says warmly, as if barely any time has passed between us. "It's good to see you again. Although I must say, the circumstances are... less than ideal."

My head's spinning, but aware that all the vampires on the terrace are staring at me, I get control over myself.

"What are you doing here?" I ask the first thing that pops into my mind. It's probably not the proper way to speak to a goddess, but given that she gifted me with her magic and then disappeared on me until right now, I assume I can take some liberties with her.

She gives me a small smile, thankfully unoffended by my directness.

“I’ve come to help,” she explains, not just to me, but to everyone standing around her. “To make sure the Fairmont is protected from any attacks moving forward.”

Murmurs echo throughout the groups of vampires on the terrace, and I can’t tell if they’re pleased or insulted by Sunneva’s offer.

Damien moves forward until he’s right in front of her. His coldness contrasts her warmth in a way that makes it look like they’re not just different supernatural species, but from separate universes entirely.

“Damien Fairmont,” he introduces himself, and if he’s intimidated by standing before a goddess, he doesn’t show it. Probably because he’s not intimidated. “King of the Uptown Clan. Welcome to our home.”

“Thank you.” She nods in acknowledgment. “And thank you for welcoming Amber with such open arms.”

“It’s been my pleasure,” he says, although he still doesn’t look at me. “Feel free to help yourself to food and drink.”

“I appreciate the offer,” she says. “However, I’m here to bless the Fairmont with my protection—not to socialize.”

“Then we happily accept your blessing.”

At his approval, she raises her arms, and the crowd falls silent.

“With the setting sun, I offer a barrier of protection,” she begins, and her voice turns into a melodious chant as she starts murmuring words in an ancient language, her arms drawing intricate symbols in the air.

A web of golden light emanates from her, stretching over the Fairmont like an invisible shield. When she lowers her arms, the light fades, but I can still sense the residual warmth of her magic. It’s soaked into the building, absorbed deep into its foundation.

“May the light of the sun keep the darkness away, and the shadows at bay,” she finishes. “Blessed be.”

“Blessed be,” Morgan repeats, and then a handful of vampires echo the phrase, looking visibly uncomfortable as they do.

“Thank you for welcoming me to your space,” Sunneva continues. “This spell isn’t as strong as the protection I could offer with the aid of my celestial sisters, but for now, it will keep the shadow souls from invading your home.”

“Your generosity is deeply appreciated,” Damien says, maintaining his steely demeanor.

“May this barrier serve you well.”

With a final, radiant smile, she dissolves into a stream of sunlight, leaving



as quickly as she arrived.

Seconds after she's gone, the top bit of the sun sinks below the horizon.

For a moment, the terrace is silent as we take in what just happened. As for me, I stare at the place where she stood in frustration. I would have liked to talk to her more—to learn about why she chose me to star touch, and to ask her advice on how to improve my use of the magic. But clearly, that's not going to happen. At least, not right now.

Soon, the conversations resume, still tinged with the somber undertones of the night's true purpose.

Eventually, Damien glances in my direction. Our eyes only meet for a split second, but it's enough to send a jolt through my body. The wall between us seems to thin, but then his eyes shift away, and I'm reminded of how I've been feeling this entire night.

I'm out of place here.

However, Morgan's hand finds my elbow, a silent but insistent gesture as she guides me away from the mournful crowd. We weave through the clusters of vampires until the murmur of their conversations becomes a distant hum.

"Let's hang out over here for now," she says as we come to a secluded corner of the terrace, bathed in the last orange wisps of the day.

"Maybe we should leave?" I ask.

"No," she says. "We're part of this clan now. We were instrumental in fighting the shadow souls last night and getting them to retreat. We stay."

She's so insistent that I don't argue with her. Plus, she's right. The vampires might not be including us, but they're not being cruel to us, either. They're simply mourning those they care about, with the *people* they care about. It doesn't mean they don't value us. It just means that right now, they're hurting and in need of support from others who truly feel and understand their pain.

With that settled, Morgan tells me stories of her sisters—Zara and Willow—from when they were young and new to their magic. She rarely speaks of them, but I'm more than happy to listen. I think she's trying to distract me from everything going on.

"Wait here," she eventually says, and when she returns a few minutes later, Damien and Viktor are by her side.

And from the looks in their eyes, I have a gut feeling that whatever it is she brought them over to talk about isn't going to be good.

# Amber



“WHATEVER’S GOING ON, please be out with it,” Damien says, to Morgan and not to me. “I have clan members to attend to.”

Morgan locks eyes with him, serious but calm. “Sunneva’s protection spell is helpful, but it’s defensive—not offensive,” she says. “We need to take control of this war with the shadow souls, so we can fight them on our terms and not on theirs.”

Damien’s expression hardens as she speaks.

“As intrigued as I am, I’m not sure this is the right time and place for this conversation,” he says.

“It is,” she says, and remarkably, he doesn’t argue with her.

Morgan tends to have that effect on people. When she talks, they listen. Damien more so than anyone.

He and Viktor share a look like warriors acknowledging the next battle, and when he returns his focus to Morgan, he’s ready to hear what she has to say.

“What do you have in mind?” He watches her carefully, waiting.

I do the same.

“There’s a potion,” she begins, looking from Damien, to me, to Viktor, then back to Damien. “We can merge it with a powerful magical source and use that source to connect with the shadow souls.”

Wow. That went from somber to witchy in less than a second.

“Where, exactly, will we find this potion?” Damien asks.

“That’s the part that’s going to be challenging,” she says, jumping right into it. “Because the Minotaur is keeping the potion in his lair.”

“The what now?” I ask, already not liking the sound of this.

“The Minotaur,” Damien repeats, speaking directly to me for the first time this evening. “It’s an ancient beast. Part man, part bull.”

“And full fury,” Viktor adds.

“Just a normal Friday night around here,” I mutter.

“It lives in the subway system,” Morgan continues, ignoring me. “Well, more like a subway system in a realm parallel to ours. There’s a key to the entrance—which I have, by the way—and from there, we’ll navigate the subway’s Labyrinth to the Minotaur’s lair.”

“Then we’ll say hi to the Minotaur, let him know what we’re trying to do, and he’ll happily hand over this potion?” I laugh a little, because that’s clearly not how this is going to go down.

Viktor gives a wholehearted laugh, loud enough to draw some glances from the vampires mingling on the main part of the terrace. “You excelled in the face of danger last night. Don’t tell me you’re not ready to put more of your training to good use?” he asks.

Suddenly, my mind’s yanked back to when the powerful shadow soul got his hands on me. His cold touch, as hypnotic as it was horrifying, and his dark pull that was almost as striking as the fear he inspired. It was like being ensnared by winter itself, trapped by a frost that was both beautiful and lethal.

My lungs constrict at the memory, and it feels hard to breathe.

I reach for the balcony railing to steady myself.

Damien moves his hand forward a bit, like he wants to reach for me. However, he quickly pulls back, and I’m an unsettling mix of relieved and disappointed.

“You went through a lot last night. If you don’t feel ready, it’s okay,” he says gently. “My clan and I have been handling the shadow souls in the city for the past few weeks, and the Fairmont is now protected with Sunneva’s blessing. Viktor, Morgan, and I can defeat the Minotaur and get that potion ourselves.”

The gentleness in his words—like I’m a piece of porcelain that can easily break—pisses me off.

Even though we didn’t slay all the shadow souls last night, I remember how my magic surged through me, and how my actions made a difference. I went down there because I wanted to help, and I *did* help. There wouldn’t be nearly as many vampires up here on the terrace right now—*alive*—if not for me.

The thought of sitting this out—of being the damsel in distress while the

people I care about put themselves in danger—hurts more than having the life sucked out of me by that shadow soul ever could.

“No.” I step away from the rail, standing strong. “I can do this.”

Damien’s eyes search mine, as if seeking out any hesitation, and he gives me a small nod. “You won’t be harmed,” he says. “I’ll make sure of it.”

I’m frozen, unsure what to say. Mainly because I believe him. At least, I believe he intends on doing everything in his power to keep me safe—maybe even more so than himself.

Viktor claps his hands together, snapping me out of it. “Excellent,” he says, turning to Morgan. “When do we leave?”

“A few days,” she says, and just like that, the moment between me and Damien is broken. “First, we have to fully recharge from our encounter last night with the shadow souls.”

Given that none of them almost had their life force sucked out of them by the most powerful shadow soul ever seen, I assume she means *I* have to recharge.

I don’t argue, since she’s right.

“And secondly?” I ask.

“Like I mentioned, the potion needs to be combined with a powerful magical source for it to work,” she continues. “How it works depends on the magic it’s infused with. I have a particular artifact in mind—the Astral Compass. It was designed to be calibrated by the user’s intent to direct them toward the place they seek. When combined with the potion, it will serve as a tracker for supernaturals—including the shadow souls. Plus, it can help us navigate the Minotaur’s Labyrinth. So, it’ll give us two things in one.”

“The Astral Compass,” Damien repeats slowly. “I believe I know where that is.”

“Yes. You do,” Morgan confirms.

A silent understanding passes between them, and I wait for them to elaborate, but they don’t.

“How do you know all of this?” I finally ask Morgan. The question has been on the back of my mind for this entire conversation, but it didn’t fully surface until now.

“I come from an ancient line of witches,” she says. “And I study. A lot. Plus...” She shifts on her feet, hesitant to say more.

“Plus, what?” I press, since this is a *lot* of information she just hit us with about the potion, the Minotaur, and the compass.

“I... know things. Things most people don't. I can see them.” She barely meets my eyes, as if she's embarrassed about it.

“Oh.” I pause, thinking, and what she's hinting at falls into place. I've always noticed she has good instincts. And, given how often Damien and Viktor concede to her, they must already be aware of what she can do. “You're a prophet.”

I suppose it's not any crazier than everything else I've learned this past month.

“Not quite like that,” she says, rushing to explain. “I'm able to scry for information, but I don't get much, and what I do get is always fragmented. Sometimes things come up so blurry that it's basically blank. But the potion and the compass came to me nearly clear as day. We need to get them. Both of them. I *know* we do.”

“Wow.” I watch her, waiting to see if she's going to add more, but she doesn't. “Why didn't you say anything until now?”

“I keep it on a need-to-know basis,” she says. “I get too many questions otherwise. It gets overwhelming, to say the least.”

There's a vulnerability in her eyes that makes me want to give her a giant hug.

“I understand,” I say, since I've grown to like and trust Morgan enough that I accept her explanation at face value. “Thank you for telling me now.”

“No problem.” She gives me a relieved smile—apparently, she didn't “see” how I'd react to this conversation before it happened. “Like I said—I keep it on a need-to-know basis. And this is definitely need-to-know.”

After she says it, the gravity of what we're discussing going up against hits me all over again.

The Minotaur.

A dangerous Labyrinth. In *another realm*.

An artifact—two of them—that will allow us to actively hunt down shadow souls.

What on Earth am I getting myself into?

“So...” Viktor says, breaking the tension. “Where are we going to get this compass?”

“There's no ‘we,’” Damien says. “I'll be going. Alone.”

“No. We're in this together,” I tell him, the words coming out before I can think them through. “We can help you. You saw what I did last night. *I* can help you.”

He stands tall, unwavering, a marble statue in the approaching night.

“In this situation, anyone joining would be a hindrance, not a help,” he says firmly, and while it stings, it’s clear from the sharpness in his eyes that this isn’t up for debate. “Because I have a debt to settle with the fae queen.”

# Damien



I WASTE NO TIME.

After the gathering, I make my way through Central Park, to Belvedere castle, which exists parallel to Lysandra's home. I wait in the garden, my mind racing with the thoughts of everything that's happened and everything to come.

The moment the hands on my watch hit one a.m., the transformation begins. The trees shimmer, the flowers seem to sing, and the aurora dances in the night sky.

When the world finishes shifting around me, I'm sitting in Lysandra's garden, watching her gather herbs with her teenage human daughter.

*Freesia*, I remember her name.

Lysandra startles when she sees me, although she quickly regains composure. There are wards around the castle—otherwise, anyone would be able to enter through the mortal realm like I did—but I'm relieved she reinstated the allowance for me to not be deposited outside the castle's walls before arrival.

I wonder if she ever removed it.

"Damien." She stands and smiles, as if no time has passed since the nights when it was completely normal for me to pop by her garden unannounced. "Back so soon?"

I waste no time with pleasantries, instead getting straight to business. "I trust my vampires have kept your realm free of shadow souls?"

"Yes." She nods slowly, then gives *Freesia* a look—one that apparently communicates to the girl that it's time for her to take her leave.

*Freesia* gives me a small curtsy, then makes her way out of the garden

into the castle.

The air hums with energy now that Lysandra and I are alone.

“Let me guess.” She walks in a slow circle, her eyes not leaving mine. “You’ve missed me dearly this past month and couldn’t bring yourself to stay away for a moment longer?”

I don’t deign her with an answer, since we both know that isn’t true.

“I’ve made my choice,” I say instead.

She stills, the central fountain bubbling louder than before. “Do tell.”

“The Astral Compass.” I hold her gaze, daring her to refuse.

“An interesting choice.” She waits for more, and when it doesn’t come, she adds, “How did you pick it?”

“Our agreement didn’t require me to give you a reason behind my decision.”

“True.” She still doesn’t move, and even though I can tell she’s holding on to hope that I’ll elaborate, I don’t.

The fae are bound to their deals, after all.

Disappointment flutters across her delicate features, but thankfully, she doesn’t continue to push. She must be able to tell that I have no patience for it right now.

“Follow me,” she says. “The Blockhouse awaits.”

We leave the castle and tread across water-lined paths that seem to manifest under our feet, leading us toward a secluded corner of her magical terrain. I don’t bother with small talk, and much to my relief, neither does she.

We reach a clearing, and there it stands on the top of a hill—the Blockhouse.

A simple structure built of ageless stones, laced with vines that glow with magic. Colorful flowers grow around its base, and a sparkling waterfall flows down the place where in the mortal realm, there’s only a door.

“Nereida,” Lysandra calls, her voice a twinkling melody in the night.

A woman emerges through the waterfall, her hair cascading to her waist, her dress appearing like soft waves under the moonlight.

The sprite who guards the Blockhouse.

She bows her head at the sight of Lysandra. “Your Highness.”

“Nereida,” Lysandra repeats her name, and the sprite looks back up again. Her ocean blue eyes linger on mine, and I see questions in them, although she dares not speak her mind with the queen overseeing our interaction.



“What brings you here?” She speaks to Lysandra—not to me.

“Our guest requires the Astral Compass,” Lysandra says. “Fetch it and give it to him.”

Nereida doesn’t hesitate. “Of course, my queen,” she says, and then she steps back into the Blockhouse, merging with the water as she disappears into the maze of artifacts and enchanted objects inside.

Moments later, she reemerges, holding a compass that gleams with an otherworldly light. However, she makes no move to walk down the steps to hand it to me.

*Can she even leave the perimeter of the Blockhouse?*

Taking my cue, I start up the steps, one at a time, until I’m close enough to receive the compass. Our fingers touch, and a chill runs up my arm—like dipping my hand in a frozen lake.

“May it guide you well,” the sprite says, and then she retreats into the Blockhouse, the watery portal closing behind her like the door to a vault.

I turn the compass over in my hands, its celestial designs shimmering in response to my touch. Its silvery sheen reflects the aurora dancing above, with tiny amethysts twinkling like starry constellations in the center. A thin milky needle sits in the middle to act as a guide.

I look up to see Lysandra giving me a mysterious smile.

“Quite the artifact you’ve chosen,” she says, and again, I can tell she’s searching for an explanation behind my decision.

Again, I won’t give her one.

“I think it will prove useful in the war to come,” I say instead, making my way down the steps to rejoin her on the ground.

She moves closer, her eyes brimming with what seems like a mixture of amusement and bitterness. “You’ve always been drawn to powerful things, haven’t you?”

I don’t flinch at her obvious attempt to provoke me. “I wouldn’t have made it this far if I wasn’t.”

She moves closer until there’s only a foot of space between us, pausing to gaze up at me through her long lashes.

Decades ago, I would have been entranced.

Now, I’m simply irritated by her desperation.

I clear my throat and take a step back. “I should be going.”

She frowns, but quickly recovers. “As you wish. But as a warning—this area of the woods is enchanted. It won’t transform back to the mortal realm

when the clock strikes six. So, I advise you hurry.”

Then, with a mysterious smile and a flourish of her hand, her form dissipates into a whirl of water droplets that rise and scatter, leaving me standing alone in the clearing.

As I stare at the place where she just stood, it becomes clear.

She followed through on our deal. She gave me the Astral Compass, as promised.

But she never assured me of safe passageway out of the fae realm.

I glare at the place where she disappeared. Because keeping me here won't help our fight against the shadow souls. In fact, quite the opposite.

If she thinks this will win her back my affections, then she's highly mistaken. She'll never have those back. Not because of Amber, but because I moved on from our relationship years ago.

However, none of that matters right now. All that matters is getting back home. So, I snap myself back into focus and look around.

As I do, the air grows heavier, the smell of wet moss and earth filling my senses.

The forest releases a low groan.

And then, the trees begin to move. Slowly at first, their roots rearranging themselves in the dirt, then with clear intent as they close the paths around me until only one remains. It's dark, haunted, and my stomach drops at the thought of what might be waiting inside.

I glance down at the Astral Compass.

It reacts to intent.

So, it's time to share my intent.

*What's the best way out of here?*

This has to be more of a test than simply navigating the woods. After all, Lysandra knows I have the compass, and that it can get me wherever I desire.

But it doesn't hurt to check.

The artifact buzzes with energy, and the needle begins to spin erratically. Then, just as quickly as it started spinning, it stops and points straight ahead, toward the sole path in front of me.

As I suspected.

But apparently the compass isn't done yet. Because the amethysts in the center pulse, as if communicating with an ancient rhythm of the universe.

Then, a shimmering line of lilac light sears through the ground, directing me into the dark corridor between the trees.

Message received—loud and clear.

With a deep breath, I pocket the compass and start down the path. Coldness seeps into my bones the moment I'm through, and while it's not quite as icy as the feeling of shadow souls nearby, it's close. It's certainly the coldest the air has ever felt in the fae Summer Court.

I'm treading cautiously when another groan sounds from behind me.

I glance over my shoulder just in time to see the path close, the tree trunks so near each other that they might as well be a steel wall.

It's creepy, but I've seen worse. At least, I think I have.

Either way, there's no turning back now.

The compass hums in my hand, as if in agreement of going forward, and I focus straight ahead, beginning to make my way down the cold, dark path.

I'm ready for whatever might come my way.

For the city, for Amber, and ultimately, to protect the entire supernatural world as I know it.

# *Damien*



CURSING LYSANDRA WITH EVERY BREATH, I keep the compass steady as I move through the woods.

Navigating with it proves easy enough. Every time the path diverges, the needle points me in the correct direction.

But I don't let my guard down. Because the forest is alive in a way I've never felt before. The moisture in the air thickens to the point where it weighs upon my magic, and shadows flicker and dance in the corners of my eyes.

And then, laughter.

Eerie snickers that bounce through the trees, creating an unnerving chorus that presses down on my skin as much as the wetness in the air. It's enough to set me on edge. Especially because every time I try to see who's there, they flash out of sight before I can.

However, I know enough about the fae realm that I'm pretty sure what these creatures are.

Hobgoblins.

Tricksters, like most of the fae.

I make no move to attack them, and so far, they seem to be doing me the same courtesy.

Good. It'll be easier for all of us that way.

"Damien," a soft voice eventually calls through the wind.

It's followed by another from the opposite direction, and then another from behind me.

Instead of paying them any attention, I remain focused on the compass. I've never been in these woods before in the fae realm, but I know their counterpart in the human realm well enough. The North Woods. I'm making

good enough headway that it shouldn't be long until I'm out of here.

"Do you think you're worthy of her?" one of the voices slithers into my ears, low and venomous.

*Her.*

Which one?

Amber? Or Lysandra? They likely know about my past relationship with their queen, but I have no idea how they'd know about Amber. Unless Lysandra told them, which wouldn't be implausible.

I feel the hobgoblins' eyes on me, waiting, hungry for my reaction. But I give them nothing. My silence is my shield.

Getting into arguments with hobgoblins never got anyone anywhere.

Still, they continue.

"How could a mortal touched with magic from the sun goddess ever love a soulless creature of the night?" another adds.

Amber's face flashes before my eyes—the warmth of her smile, the light in her gaze—and my heart clenches.

Snickers echo throughout the forest again.

"Even if you get out of here, she'll never be yours," the hobgoblin continues, its voice closer now.

Pain twists in my chest. I hate how close the creature's words hit to home.

*She'll never be yours.*

That was my mistake. From the moment I met Amber, I tried claiming her. But Amber isn't an object to be claimed. I can't *make* her mine. All I can do is prove that I can offer her the protection, power, and love she deserves.

She'll make her decision within a year.

I'll accept whatever she chooses.

Until then, I'll keep her safe. I'll help her become the strongest she can be. Because if she chooses to leave, she's going to need as much control over her magic as possible to survive out there.

The hobgoblins continue whispering various taunts, but I don't respond. These creatures are like children. Any reaction will be like adding fuel to the fire, and I don't have time for that.

I can't shake off their words entirely, but soon they become a murmur, lost in the maze of towering trees and swirling mists. The compass is unwavering, and I know in my gut that it's following my will and leading me out of here.

Soon, the mist starts to thin. The weight in the air lightens. And then, as

sudden as a snapped twig, I'm at the edge of the woods.

The canopy of trees parts, and I step out of the cold, dense forest and into a warm, clear night. The stars twinkle overhead, woven together with the purple and green threads of aurora, made even brighter by the reflection of the smooth lake beneath them.

It's as if the heavens themselves are celebrating my emergence.

I should feel triumph.

Yet, I only feel the lingering cold of the hobgoblins' taunts.

I shake it off and glance back, smirking despite myself. They thought they could use my doubts and fears against me. And yes, they did get under my skin. But my desire to get back home is stronger than their verbal assaults could ever be.

Now, all I have to do is wait in this clearing until six am, when the world will transform and bring me back to the mortal realm. I'll make use of the time by studying the compass and learning as much about it as I can.

I'm deciding where to situate myself when the compass's needle starts spinning like crazy.

I give it a shake, but it continues whirling in its manic circle.

Is it defective? Sabotaged? Did the hobgoblins—or something else in the fae realm—somehow mess with it?

I'm still trying to figure it out when the water in the lake ripples and slowly begins to bulge upward. As I watch, half in awe and half in dread, the shape becomes a person.

No, not a person.

A water wraith. A type of fae that lives in the lakes of this realm, made of the element itself.

Her form is fluid, a mesmerizing blend of solid and liquid, possesses a haunting, delicate beauty. Yet, it's her face that commands attention. Elegant, with high cheekbones and expressive eyes that glint with the mysteries of the deep, she gazes out with an intensity that feels both captivating and chilling.

And then, she speaks, her voice like waves against the shore.

“Did you really think the spineless hobgoblins were all you'd have to face for the queen to let you out of here?”

She smiles wickedly and lunges at me before I can answer, arms extended as if to engulf me whole.

I quickly pocket the compass, channel my air magic, and blast her with a gust of wind.

Surprise flashes across her face, and she howls, shattering into a spray of sparkling droplets.

That was easy.

*Too easy.*

I remain on guard, and sure enough, the droplets reform. This time, they're smaller wraiths. Nine of them, each with their teeth bared, seething in anger.

"You don't belong in this realm," they chorus, their voices echoing hauntingly in the air. "The woods might not have been able to sink its fingers into your heart, but you will drown in the depths of our water."

I step forward and smile, wind gathering around me like a tornado gaining strength.

"It seems you've forgotten that air guides the water," I say calmly, but before I can blast the wraiths with hurricane force wind, they release a piercing scream that feels like ice picks jabbing into my eardrums and stabbing my brain.

Everything's suddenly too bright—too intense.

I wince and clutch my head, stumbling back a few steps.

But the buzz isn't only in my head. It's from my pocket, too.

The compass.

I reach down and grab it. It's an immediate jolt to my senses, like smelling salts clearing my head.

I need to focus and get back into the game—before this thing kills me.

Two of the mini wraiths lunge at me, their forms elongating so their feet remain in the water. But I dodge out of one of their ways at the same time as I use my air magic to dispel the other.

Its water droplets break apart and rain back into the lake.

This time, they don't reform.

However, my momentary pause gives the wraith in the center enough time to shoot out at me, arms reaching out as if she wants to strangle me.

I move out of the way, but I'm not quite fast enough.

Her fingers skim my bicep.

Ice rushes through my arm like frost over my flesh, and the compass slips from my fingers to the ground.

"What a pretty little trinket," one of the other wraiths coos, zooming in for it.

*No.*

I scream and blast her with wind from my other hand—the one that doesn't feel frozen solid. Her features twist into shock, and then she dissipates into droplets that fall to the grass like rain.

Two down, seven to go.

I pick the compass back up, and it buzzes again. This time, the needle points toward the two wraiths all the way on the left. My injured arm is already returning to normal temperature—thank you, supernatural healing—and I channel my power to create a vortex of wind around myself.

The two wraiths are caught in the cyclone, spiraling uncontrollably. They try to break free, but the pull is too strong. As the wind speed increases, they're forced away from me and flung into the distance, disintegrating into mist before they even touch the ground.

I smirk as I realize what's going on.

The compass is helping me fight this thing.

Five left.

“Looks like you underestimated me,” I taunt, hoping to goad them into making mistakes.

“Your pride will be your downfall,” one of the remaining wraiths hisses.

Instead of answering, I take the offensive. Pushing my power outwards, I focus on the air around the wraiths, compressing it and turning it into invisible barriers.

One of them collides with the barriers, caught off guard. Using this momentary advantage, I create sharp gusts of wind and shatter her into droplets, which fall back into the lake.

The four remaining wraiths reconfigure and regroup, their forms ever-changing. But with the compass in hand, I begin predicting their moves, dancing around the wraiths and using my magic to block their strikes. With each blast, I diminish their numbers, drawing from the power of the air to send them back to their liquid state.

It's like the compass is part of me. We work together seamlessly, and soon, there's only one wraith left.

She roars in frustration, and there's something else in her eyes—fear.

“You think this will save you?” she asks, although she doesn't sound nearly as confident as I think she hopes she does.

“It has so far.” I smirk and launch a gust of wind at her, scattering her into a spray of droplets that glimmer like stars on the night's canvas.

And then, silence.



The compass stills.

All seems calm.

I take a deep breath, not letting my guard down as I examine my surroundings. The early morning light filters through the trees, casting a soft glow over the now peaceful lake. Leaves whisper in the wind. Birds begin their dawn chorus, filling the silence that the water wraiths left behind.

I glance at my watch. Five thirty am.

I was in that forest for longer than I realized.

The good news is that there's only thirty minutes to go until I can get out of here. Not long at all.

A soft rustle in the bushes catches my attention, and I turn, half expecting another enemy.

Instead, a rabbit hops out, sniffing the air and twitching its nose.

"Seems like you and me both had a rough night," I say, chuckling softly.

He makes a sound as if he agrees. And while he makes no move to attack, I keep him in my line of sight.

"So," I say, glancing down at the compass, "are there any other creatures lingering nearby that want to kill me?"

It doesn't move.

"Is that a no?"

It hums in my hand, which feels inexplicably like a confirmation that it's saying no. And, given that it didn't let me down while fighting the wraith, I believe it.

Relaxing slightly, I settle down next to the rabbit. It doesn't jump away, and even more surprisingly, it lets me pet its head.

Normally, I'd wonder if he was some horrible fae creature ready to bite. Now, with the compass, I know he's just a regular rabbit.

Then his fur starts to shimmer, as if he's correcting me.

*Not* a regular rabbit.

But he's a peaceful one, and that's all the information I need.

Still, I don't let my guard down. There's no saying what else might be out here.

However, much to my relief, there are no more attacks.

And before I know it, the world around me transforms back to the mortal realm, and I rise to my feet with the compass in hand, readier than ever to return home.

# Amber



TONIGHT'S THE NIGHT.

Damien, Viktor, Morgan, and I are in our fighting gear, prepared to venture into the Minotaur's Labyrinth. I've trained hard these past few days, but it still doesn't feel like enough.

The entrance to the Labyrinth is right here, in Manhattan. Grand Central Station, specifically. One of the largest and most iconic train stations in the world, with dozens of tracks leading out in all different directions.

The soft hum of chatter surrounds me as we enter the main concourse, and I stop walking to gaze around in awe. The building is unlike anything I've ever seen. It feels like stepping back in time, with its gleaming four-faced clock in the center, marble walls and floors, two grand staircases on opposite ends leading up to mezzanines, and huge windows framed by ornate arches.

My gaze is drawn upward to the magnificent mural on the impossibly high ceiling. It has a deep turquoise background, with gold stars traced by images of people and animals painted across it.

Damien steps closer, and the air hums between us, a reminder of the thread of tension always present when we're around each other. Especially since that kiss on the terrace.

The kiss that I haven't been able to stop thinking about, even though there are other, far more important things that should be on the forefront of my mind.

"Constellations," he explains, following my gaze. He and I haven't spoken much since he returned from the fae realm a few days ago with the compass, but he continues, as if the two of us are as close as ever. "They're

the signs of the zodiac. And that one..." He trails off, pointing at one of the animals traced on the ceiling.

It has hooves. And horns.

It's a bull. And, from the looks of it, it's seconds away from being smashed over the head by an avenging angel holding a wooden bat.

"The Minotaur," I realize, and it's as if the beast is a shared secret between us, a private legend unfolding in the stars.

"Yes. The bull is the symbol of one of the signs of the zodiac—Taurus," he explains, although he remains focused on the ceiling—not on me. "In Greek mythology, Taurus represents the Minotaur."

Before I can reply, Viktor moves to stand in front of us.

"This isn't a class field trip," he says, and while the spell is broken, the electric charge between me and Damien lingers in the air.

I glance over at him, but he still won't meet my gaze.

Morgan steps up next to me before I have a chance to reply to Viktor—or to say something to Damien.

"See the clock in the center?" She asks, although she continues before I can answer, since the golden clock is impossible to miss. "That's the entrance to the Labyrinth."

"How are we supposed to get up there?" I scan my eyes over it, searching for something I'm missing. "It's on top of an information kiosk."

Her eyes sparkle with laughter. "I'm going to take a running jump from the mezzanine. I'll fly through the air, land on top of the information booth, and jam the key into the center of the clock before anyone in this place can blink."

"Really?" I study the space between the mezzanine and the clock, trying to calculate just how far of a jump that will be. Thirty feet? More?

It seems impossible, even for a supernatural.

"No." She smiles wider, apparently amused that I believed her. "I'll use the key to unlock the door to the information booth, and we'll walk through one by one."

"Oh." I frown, feeling beyond gullible. "I suppose that makes more sense."

"It does," she says. "But the other way would have been more fun."

We walk over to the marble information booth, where sure enough, there's a door on the other side. All the people making their ways through the station are so busy doing their own things that they pay us no attention.

The door is pretty, but there's nothing about it to signify that it leads to a parallel dimension. However, I trust Morgan. She wouldn't steer us wrong.

Especially since she can "see things other people can't."

I tried asking her more about it these past few days, but she refused to share any more about how it works. She's protective about the nature of her magic, and while I don't want to push her, I can't help but wonder why. Especially given how much trust we're putting in her.

Without saying a word, she reaches into the inside pocket of her jacket and pulls out a bronze key about six inches long. Its head depicts the Minotaur, curved horns and all, its eyes inset with tiny, shimmering sapphires.

"The Labyrinthian Key was crafted by Daedalus himself," Morgan explains, tracing its design with her thumb. "He was the architect of the original Labyrinth that imprisoned the Minotaur in Greece. It's been lost for ages, until I went there a few weeks ago and unearthed it in a hidden temple."

"How did you locate it?" I ask.

"Easy. I used scrying." She shrugs, clearly unwilling to share more.

"Is this a history class, or are we on a mission?" Viktor interrupts, moving to stand next to the door.

"Considering we're in a place full of history, a bit of both wouldn't hurt, would it?" I ask, and from the way he glares at me, I wonder if he's about to try knocking me to the ground like he did that first day of training.

"Morgan," Damien says, stopping Viktor before he can turn this into a fight. "Would you like to do the honors?"

"I was planning on it." She gives Viktor a triumphant smile, takes the key, and uses it to unlock the door. The sapphires glow as she turns it, and the world around us slows, the chattering of people in the station becoming a low hum.

Inside the "kiosk" is a cold, dark void that seems to lead to nowhere. I freeze as I gaze inside it, and every bone in my body wants to resist going in there.

"I'll go first," Viktor says, and he steps through before any of us can argue.

Morgan's next, exhaling deeply and stepping into the unknown.

Now, it's only me and Damien, his gaze lingering on mine with an intensity that sends a shiver down my spine.

"You go," he says, low and steady. "I'll make sure no one follows us

inside.”

“You think they will?” I look hesitantly around the station, but it’s as normal as ever.

“Better safe than sorry,” he replies, but his eyes never leave mine. It’s a simple phrase, yet from him right now, it sounds like a vow.

*Vow.*

A word I don’t want to think about right now.

Trying to shake thoughts of it from my mind, I step up to the doorway, hesitating as I glance into the void beyond. It offers no clues, no hints of what awaits us. It’s just an expanse of shadows that pulses with ancient secrets, a warning to turn back while we still have the chance.

But that’s not an option I intend to take. So, centering myself, I reach inward to feel for my sun magic. It warms me, as if Sunneva herself is cheering me on, her strength a beacon in the darkness.

With a final glance at Damien, I search for any sign of the bond we’ve formed, for the connection that’s grown between us. And there it is—a softening around his eyes, a tension in his jaw that speaks of words unspoken and feelings unexplored.

He has my back. In more ways than one.

And so, I take my turn, stepping forward and crossing into the unknown.

When I do, it’s not the darkness that wraps around me. It’s the memory of Damien’s touch, the gravity of his gaze, and the unspoken promise that whatever happens, we’re in this together.

# Amber



THE TRANSITION IS SURREAL. It's like I'm walking through a thick, cold mist, the sensation fleeting yet chilling to the bone.

It's not long until I emerge on the other side. Morgan and Viktor stand there waiting for me, and even though the sight of them should provide relief, unease claws up my throat as I look around.

We're still in Grand Central Station, but at the same time, we're *not*.

It's a darker, distorted version of the building we just left. Shadows play tricks on the cobwebbed walls, and the previously vibrant murals on the ceiling are now murky and grim, the constellations twisted into grotesque, eerie shapes. The air is dense with a foreboding silence, completely opposite of the bustling station, and I can't swallow the feeling that we don't belong here.

Then there's the clock.

Its once golden exterior is now tarnished steel, each of the four faces cracked, with mist seeping through the openings.

I can't pull my eyes away from it.

That is, not until Damien steps through the door.

It closes behind him, and he looks around, momentarily disoriented by the eeriness of the altered Grand Central. But he quickly regains his composure and reaches into his pocket, pulling out the Astral Compass. It glows softly, its pale light a beacon in this dark, distorted realm.

"So," Viktor says, gazing around at all the halls leading out of the concourse. "Which way first?"

Damien doesn't reply. Instead, he focuses on the compass, which glows as the needle spins in the center.

We hold our breath as we wait.

Purple light reflects across Damien's eyes, and he blinks, as if he's seeing something we don't.

Finally, the compass settles on a hall next to one of the grand staircases.

"Follow me," he says, and we make our way under the mezzanine, turning at a sign reading "42<sup>nd</sup> Street Passage, Subway 4·5·6·7·S," with an arrow pointing right.

I've learned enough during my few weeks in New York to know that those are all different subway lines.

I haven't, however, ventured into the subway since that night with the shadow souls.

But we had a pretty good feeling that the subway was going to be the first place we headed from the station. The main question is: what line are we going to have to take first?

I don't see how anyone could know without the compass. The New York subway system is huge. The amount of wandering someone would have to do to navigate it on their own is unfathomable.

Which, I suppose, is why it's called a *labyrinth*.

Luckily, we're prepared.

Still, anxiety buzzes through my chest when we make our way down the stairs. Glass artwork hangs overhead, with tormented souls trapped inside it, their faces barely there among the chaotic swirls.

"I bet that's not what it looks like in our world," I say, trying to break the tension.

"Correct." Damien's so focused on the compass that he doesn't glance over his shoulder at me as he speaks.

As we pass under the artwork, a soft chanting fills the air. The voices sound mournful, echoing from an unknown distance, sending every part of my body on edge.

"What's that?" I glance around to locate the source, but it's coming from everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

"The souls of the lost," Morgan answers softly from where she's walking behind me. "The souls of those who have failed to navigate the Labyrinth's twists and turns are said to be trapped here forever, lamenting their fate."

I give the artwork one final look and shudder. "We won't be one of them," I say. "We have the compass."

I refuse to accept anything else.

We get down the stairs and make our way through the tunnel, and I can't shake off the feeling of dread. The walls feel like they're closing in on us, and every shadow feels like it's reaching out, trying to pull us into the darkness.

Morgan creates a small flame to help guide our way, although not so large that it drains too much of her magic. I'm supposed to be conserving as much of my magic as possible, so I let her handle the light, since she has a lifetime of practice over controlling her powers than I do.

"It's taking us toward the S train," Damien says. "Not much farther now."

"The shuttle to Times Square." Morgan huffs. "Not surprising."

"Why's it not surprising?" I ask.

"The Times Square station is the busiest in the city," she explains. "It's huge. Tons of different trains leave from it."

"Good thing you're with two vampires who've been in this city since before the subway opened," Viktor says proudly. "I know these tracks better than the lines on my own hands."

"Those hands have gotten you far down here," Damien says, in that way that people do when they tease their friends they've known for years. "How many people have you stolen from in these tunnels?"

Viktor stills—as if Damien's comment actually hurt his feelings—but then he's back to his familiar, conceited self once again.

"You don't want to know," he says, and we're quiet after that, following Damien as he continues leading our way down the hall.

I'm contemplating saying something to break the silence when a soft rustling sound reaches my ears, followed by a crawling sensation of something moving in the distance.

"What's that?" I whisper, and I glance up at the same time as Morgan increases the reach of her flames.

That's when we see them.

Bats.

Tons and tons of bats hanging down from the ceiling ahead, their beady eyes gleaming with an unnatural light that I swear looks like *hunger* as they all focus their attention straight at us.



# Amber



THE BATS EMIT a series of high-pitched calls, spread their wings, drop from the ceiling, and fly at us.

“Brace yourselves!” Damien sweeps his arm in a rapid arc, forcing the bats back with a burst of wind.

With no time to think, I call upon my magic and create an orb of light in each hand, ready to throw them at any bats that try attacking again.

It isn't long until they do just that.

Just as I'm about to release a solar flare, Viktor screams and runs toward them, dagger held high. He wields it with precision, slashing down any bat that dares flying at him. Within seconds, dozens of dead bats litter the floor... although that's only a fraction of the number of them in the tunnel, still coming to attack.

I've never seen an actual bat, but these are twice the size of what I've ever pictured.

Damien's quickly by Viktor's side, channeling his magic to create protective currents around us. The air pulses and swirls, lifting several bats off their course and throwing them against the walls with enough force to shatter their bones and send them sliding to the ground.

As it is, I rein in my magic. With Damien and Viktor up ahead moving in near blurs as they attack the bats, throwing around beams of light is too risky. The last thing I want to do is accidentally hit one of them.

At the same time, I'm not going to stand here doing nothing.

I glance over at Morgan, give her a look, and the two of us run forward to join the fight. As I do, I reach for the warmth of my magic and harness its power.

Morgan starts using her flame, elongating it into thin streams of fire that dance around her, forming fiery barriers.

I reach the others and hold out my palm, releasing a solar flare that illuminates the tunnel. For a moment, the bats are disoriented, their shadows dancing on the walls as they fly in confused circles. More of them crash into the walls.

Then, they shriek.

It's so piercing that it feels like knives slicing my brain. I lose my grip on my magic, and Morgan's flames are the only things stopping it from being pitch dark in here.

"Amber, watch your left!" Damien shouts over the shrieks.

I pivot, and just in time. Two bats are diving straight at me, their claws outstretched.

Snapping back into focus, I hurl one of my flares at the first bat, disintegrating it in a flash of light.

The second bat, however, is too close.

Its claws graze my arm, sending a burst of pain through my body.

Then, a dagger appears in what seems to be thin air and stabs through the bat.

Damien.

He flings the bat off his dagger, and some of its blood flies through the air before it falls to the ground.

"Thanks," I say, fending off another group of bats with my sunbeams before they can get too close.

"Always." He doesn't have time to say anything else, because his attention is quickly diverted by more bats flying at us.

He takes them down in seconds.

Morgan screams from off to the side as a group of bats swoops down on her. Their claws catch her face and leave red gashes, and they're too close for her to blast them with fire magic, so she retaliates with her dagger.

But more take their place. She's outnumbered.

I'm figuring out how to help when she disappears in a burst of flames, turning all the bats near her to ash.

A second later, there's another burst of flames ahead, and she's hurling fire at the bats from the opposite end of the hall.

Go, Morgan.

With her having teleported to the other end of the tunnel, we've got the

bats surrounded now.

Newly energized—the gashes in my arm have already healed—I hurl more solar flares at any bat that comes close. Soon, I’m on autopilot, taking them down before they can get within a few feet of me.

I hear Damien and Viktor as they also fight off the bats, but I can’t afford to pause to see how they’re doing. A second of losing my focus could be the difference between getting my eyes clawed out or being able to see the next attack.

Eventually, the bats stop coming.

The smell of singed fur and metallic blood fills the air.

“Is that the last of them?” I glance down at their bodies on the ground, bracing myself for the chance that they’ll come back to life.

All remains still.

Morgan hurries back down the tunnel to join us.

“Is everyone okay?” she asks.

“We’re fine,” Viktor says, although Damien looks at me for confirmation.

“All good,” I say, despite my ears still ringing from the aftermath of those horrible shrieks.

Damien gives me a single nod, sheathes his dagger, and brings out the compass. I wonder if he’s going to say or do anything more—maybe open the window between our souls to double check how I’m doing—but he doesn’t.

“This way,” he says instead, leading us forward to the S train platform.

As we walk, I keep one eye on the ground, making sure no bat is still alive and just playing dead to attempt a surprise attack.

The tunnel remains quiet. It feels surreal after the fight we just had, and while we all stay on guard, nothing else comes at us.

We reach the platform and are greeted by the sound of the train approaching the station.

Dread forms in my stomach as it comes to a stop. Because it isn’t the normal silver color of the typical subway car. Instead, it’s a corroded, dark metal, with windows so dark that I can’t see inside. They reflect a warped version of myself back at me, as if I’m staring into a funhouse mirror.

“Not ominous in the slightest,” Viktor says, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Damien chuckles. “When in a haunted realm, expect a haunted subway.”

The doors slide open, fog crawling out of them as they do. The interior is about as welcoming as you’d expect. It’s dimly lit, with a greenish cast, and

the insides of the windows are covered in cobwebs. Dread curls in my stomach as I look in.

Damien checks the compass again, as if making sure it hasn't changed its mind about sending us here, but he says nothing.

"Let's get on," Morgan says brightly, and she strolls inside the creepy train car as if this is her daily commute.

Viktor follows, dagger in hand.

"You go first," Damien tells me. "I'll make sure—"

"That nothing follows us on board," I complete his sentence. "Got it."

He gives me a small smile, and my heart warms at his protective nature. Yes, I can fight for myself—as proven with the bats—but it feels nice to know that he has my back.

No, not just "nice."

It makes me feel *safe*.

Feeling safe with the man who tricked me into eating the duskberry. Who connected me unwillingly to his soul and trapped me on the island of Manhattan.

I've *got* to get control over these emotions.

"Are you coming?" Viktor pulls me out of my thoughts, and I step in and glance around, half-expecting some creature to jump out at us.

All remains still.

*Creepily* still.

There are no seats in the shuttle. But if this is anything like the trains in our realm, it'll give a jolt when it starts moving, so I wrap my hand around one of the center poles to hang on.

Damien steps inside, and the doors close behind him, sealing us in.

A lump of anxiety forms in my throat. But the others seem relatively calm, so I steady myself.

Whatever comes next, we've got this.

The train lurches forward, and I tighten my grip around the pole, only relaxing a bit when it hits a steady speed. None of us speak. We just hold on and look around, preparing for anything.

Suddenly, the PA system crackles to life, and we all jump, trying to locate the speaker. It's nowhere to be found.

"Welcome to the Labyrinth," a woman's voice says, her tone hauntingly melodic. "As a reward for surviving the tunnel of shadows and wings, you've earned a whisper of guidance. Listen well, as it will not be repeated."

Damien and I share a nod, and the woman continues. Not with a regular announcement, but with a riddle.

*“As your journey unfolds, with its turns and its bends,  
Recall the colors, the numbers, where each line ends.  
With digits and letters, a secret’s concealed,  
Only by memory will the answer reveal.”*

My mind spins as I try to commit it to memory.

Colors. Numbers. Letters. Secrets.

Riddles have never been a strong suit of mine, and I have no idea what this lady’s talking about.

“Beware, and remember,” she concludes. “Most all who wander these halls end up lost.”

Feedback blares through the train, and all’s quiet once again.

A dark, foreboding feeling seeps into my skin.

“Did you all get that?” I ask, praying at least one of them has a better memory than I do.

“Every word,” Damien says.

“Better question then—do you know what it means?”

“I’ve got a decent idea. Because the subway lines are color coded,” he begins. “The 4, 5, and 6 trains are all green, for instance. Others have letters. The A, C, and E trains are all blue.”

He lays out the rest of them, and by the time he’s finished, the train comes to a stop.

We’re at the next station. The tiles on the wall spell out exactly what we expected—Times Square.

At least, whatever creepy version of Times Square the Labyrinth has in store for us.

# Amber



DAMIEN STEPS out of the train first, his eyes scanning for unseen threats, followed by Morgan, then me, and finally, Viktor watching our backs.

Like everything else in this haunted world, the station is darker and different. The long fluorescent lights on the ceiling dim and flicker. The tiles under our feet are misaligned. The billboards that would usually advertise Broadway shows and products are blank, save for ghostly images that shift and disappear before you can get a solid look at them.

The signs overhead provide directions, and the subway lines are color-coded circles, like they are in our realm. But there's a disturbing blurriness to the text and numbers, like I'm seeing them through moving water.

"The Times Square station," Viktor murmurs, surveying the surroundings with an analytical gaze. "Or at least, the spooky funhouse version of it."

The light above him flickers even more, as if in agreement with his statement.

But we don't pay it much attention, because immediately to our left, the tunnel leading to the BDFM lines emits an eerie, glowing orange light. Sand swirls and shifts inside it, creating a violent storm, and my heart pounds at the unmistakable, agonized screams cutting through the wind.

"Are those... people?" I ask, squinting to try making out the shadowy figures trapped inside.

"Lost souls," Morgan says. "We can't save them."

"Why not?"

"Because if we put ourselves at unnecessary risk and end up dead, it won't just be those people in the tunnel who are lost, but the entire population of New York City."

I bite my lip, not liking it, but also not able to refute it.

Damien's hand remains steady on the compass. "It doesn't matter, because we're not going that way," he says. "We head right."

As we turn our backs on the howling sandstorm and make our way right, the cries of the people in there get softer. But I can't push them from my mind. How is anyone supposed to survive in there? Surely, they'd breathe in sand and suffocate.

At least then, they wouldn't be suffering for all eternity.

I do my best to shake it from my mind as we approach a larger platform, where immediately to the left, a huge staircase leads down to the yellow NQRW lines.

The hair on my arms rises as the rumble of thunder echoes upward, followed by flashes of lightning that illuminate the depths before plunging the stairwell back into darkness.

Luckily, there are no screams coming from within.

Still, as more thunder cracks from down the stairs, it doesn't do much to calm my nerves.

"Well?" I look to Damien for the verdict. The lightning seems even less survivable than the sandstorm, given that he and Viktor could potentially control the winds of the storm with their magic enough to get us through.

"We go right, up there." He points at a few steps with signs overhead for the red 123 lines, the purple 7 line, and the blue ACE lines.

He's all business now that our lives are on the line, and I am, too.

I gaze around as we walk, doubting any of the potential paths forward are going to be more welcoming than the sandstorm in the orange lines and the lightning in the yellow lines.

Sure enough, when we get to the top of the steps to another, more expansive platform, heat emanates out of the staircase on the left leading down to the red 123 lines. The sharp tang of smoke prickles at the back of my throat, and violent, crackling flames dance from within the depths of the staircase.

"Fire in the subway. That's just great," Viktor says, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Is it bringing back fond memories of when you used to scream 'fire' to create enough chaos to relieve travelers of the valuables in their pockets?" Damien gives his friend an amused, knowing look.

Viktor stiffens, then shakes it off. "Hey. Whatever works."

“Remember the story of the phoenix,” Morgan says calmly, focused on the flickering fire below. “Born from ashes. Maybe there’s rebirth down there for the lost souls. Or maybe just a lot of fire.”

She creates a small ball of fire with her hand, her eyes reflecting the flames, then smiles and calls them back inside herself.

She says the strangest things sometimes. But I suppose that’s simply the nature of people who have answers to things that others don’t.

Damien, however, is already looking in the opposite direction. “As much as your magic could help in the oven down there, we’re heading this way,” he says, pointing further down the platform where the signs for the blue ACE and purple 7 hang overhead.

As we move, the sprawling expanse of the station unfolds around us.

“This place truly is huge,” I say. “Like an entire city under the city.”

“A *maze* under the city,” Morgan corrects me.

“A *labyrinth* under the city,” I say right back, and the tension in the air eases as the two of us laugh a little about it. But the moment is fleeting, and the lights flicker above, a stark reminder of what lies ahead.

Soon, we come across stairs off to the side of the tunnel that lead down to the purple 7 line.

This one’s less violent than the others, but somehow, creepier.

Fog’s floating up from it, a few inches high, thick enough that it blankets the floor. It’s even heavier down below, creating a veil over the entrance. Unlike the yellow, orange, and red lines, the steps leading down to the 7 are quiet. Eerily so. Like the fog is soaking in every possible sound, leaving a void in its wake.

Whispers begin to weave through the air, one voice rising with a clarity that strikes like ice through my veins.

“Amber. Help me.”

My mom’s voice.

My heart stutters, and I freeze in place, all the air sucked out of my lungs at once.

“I’m trapped,” she continues, chilling me to the core. “It’s cold down here... so cold. Please, find me.”

My eyes dart to Damien, searching for answers. But before I can say anything, the whispers return, more urgent than before.

“They’re coming for me, Amber. I don’t know how much time I have. Please, hurry. I need you.”



That's it.

I have to go down there.

I have to help her.

I barely make it a few steps before Damien wraps his fingers around my wrist with an urgency that's both a restraint and a lifeline.

"Don't listen." His voice is sharp, like a slap, and it snaps me out of the daze.

But no, it's more than that. He's opened the duskberry bond. His calmness—his focus—is radiating off him and flowing into me.

In that moment, he's my anchor, his strength seeping into my soul and silencing the call of the shadows.

The whispers fade, retreating into the nothingness from which they came.

They're not real. They never were.

My mom is safe, back home in Vermont. I talked to her this morning. There's no way she can be here, in this realm, so far from home.

"Thanks," I manage, not knowing what might have happened if he hadn't used the bond to ground me in reality. "That helped."

"Anytime," he replies, and the briefest of smiles flickers across his face—a shared moment of understanding in the midst of chaos. Then he closes the bond, and this time, I'm prepared to block out the whispers floating up the stairs.

"Do we have to go in there?" I ask, already dreading the answer.

"The compass isn't leading us that way," he says, and I breathe out in relief. "We continue forward."

His hand lingers on my wrist a moment longer before he lets go, and the loss of contact is an emptiness that spreads over my skin and into my soul.

I want to reach for him again, but I don't. Instead, I turn my attention to Morgan, whose eyes are distant, her face pale.

"Did you hear it, too?" I ask her gently, trying to offer her even a fraction of the comfort that Damien just gave me.

She nods, biting her lip. "My sisters. I haven't heard their voices in so long..."

She gazes back over at the stairs, and I know I have to distract her.

"What did they say?"

"Nothing." She shrugs it off, centering herself. "They weren't actually there. It wasn't important."

It's a lie. But it doesn't really matter what they said. Because none of this

is real. It's a trick of the Labyrinth, designed to draw us in and get us lost in its depths with the rest of the souls who are trapped here for all eternity.

I give her a nod of understanding and look to Viktor to see how he's faring from this.

His jaw is set in anger, his hands clenched into fists. "I heard nothing," he growls when he catches me looking at him, but his voice betrays the lie.

Only Damien seems unaffected. Or at least, he hides it better than the rest of us. Because there's a slight pain in his eyes, a shadow that wasn't there before.

"Are you okay?" I ask him, even though I know he'll say he's fine even if he isn't.

"We have to stay focused." He glances down at the compass, as if it's grounding him to reality. And, given that he seems the least affected by the fog out of all of us, maybe it is. "The spirits down there—the voices—they're tricks. Distractions. We can't let them pull us off the right path."

But there's a tension in his stance that wasn't there before, a testament to the effect this place has on even the most experienced of all of us.

I swallow hard, pushing the sound of my mom's desperate voice out of my mind.

"Right," I say, my voice shaky as I force myself to look away from the fog and down the tunnel looming ahead. "Let's keep moving."

# Amber



AS WE PROGRESS, we pass by more signs pointing to the yellow, orange, and red lines. The rumbling thunder, the howls of the sandstorm, and the crackling flames. So many paths—so many choices to make.

But we pay them no mind. Instead, we trust the compass's guidance as it leads us down a wide staircase that feels like it's going deeper and deeper into the heart of the Labyrinth.

When we finally reach the bottom, it's more of the same thing as before—halls branching out in all directions, each marked by the now-familiar colors of the subway lines and the supernatural threats inside of them.

"This station really is endless," I say. "Are we sure we're not going in circles...?"

"We're not actually in the Times Square station anymore," Morgan says, continuing on to explain, "Some of the stations are connected by underground tunnels. We're heading toward one of those tunnels now."

"Toward the ACE lines in the Port Authority station," Viktor adds. "Bets on if that's the one we'll be taking?"

"Seems like it," Damien says, although he remains focused on the compass, transfixed by it.

As we continue, we come across another entrance down to the 7 line, with the fog rolling out of it.

It's thicker now than earlier. And even though I brace myself for it, ready to block them out, the whispers start again.

I expect to hear my mom's voice. But it's not her this time. It's my best friends from home—Lucy and Max.

"Come back home. We miss you here," Lucy's voice floats through the

fog. “You don’t belong in the supernatural world.”

“We won’t tell anyone the truth about what you are,” Max adds. “You can be normal again. We’ll keep your secret.”

I know they’re not real.

Still, is that what I want deep down? To be normal again? Are they seeing a part of myself that I’ve been trying to lock away, since I know it’s impossible to go back to what I was before all of this?

My heart aches at the memory of how simple my life was before coming here.

Sort of.

Because didn’t I come to the city to get away from simplicity? To discover who I truly am, and who I want to become?

Yes. That’s exactly why I’m here. And it’s exactly what I’m doing, and what I’ll continue to do for as long as I live. Because we never stop growing. We’re all works in progress, and the moment we stop trying to learn more about who we are and how that relates to the world around us is the moment we turn stagnant.

When water turns stagnant, it becomes murky and clouded. The life that once flourished in its depths begins to suffocate and fade.

I won’t let that happen—not to me. So, I’ll embrace the complexity, the chaos, and even the danger that this new life offers. Every single part of it.

Even the ones I might have hated when I first arrived.

The voices coming from the fog quiet, and I smile slightly, proud of myself for pushing through its tricks without Damien’s help. I might be strong with him supporting me, but that doesn’t mean I’m also not strong on my own.

I catch Morgan wiping away a tear, but she’s staying put instead of wandering toward the fog.

“Still heading straight?” I ask Damien, praying that we are.

“Yes.”

We share a look of understanding—of what I think is respect from him about how I resisted the call of the fog—and continue forward.

The walls glisten with condensation as we make our way deeper into the long, dark tunnel toward the ACE lines.

The temperature drops each step of the way.

Morgan expands her fire, but even it’s not warm enough to ward off the cold, which is so intense now that the condensation is turning to ice. Tendrils

of it creep along the tile walls, as if it's reaching out, pulling us into its frozen clutches. And it's no longer just a little chilly—it's bone-aching, teeth-chattering cold.

Before long, the floor turns slick, each step treacherous.

We're supposed to be conserving our magic. Me, specifically, since I'm relatively new at all of this.

But Morgan needs help. Especially since we can't defeat the Minotaur if we turn to popsicles before getting to his lair.

Decision made, I call on my sun magic. It's like drawing a warm bath in a frozen tundra. It flows out of me, needing to be released, brightening the entire tunnel with its radiance and heat.

The layer of ice on the walls retreats, sizzling and turning into water droplets.

"Careful," Damien warns. "You have to conserve."

"Easy for you to say," I tell him. "Vampires don't feel cold like the rest of us."

At least, I'm pretty sure they don't.

"It doesn't matter what we feel or don't feel," he says. "You have to keep your strength up."

"I also have to make sure we don't freeze to death before we reach the Minotaur."

He takes a deep breath, like he's preparing to say something, but decides against it.

"Brace yourselves!" Viktor shouts, a second before a wall of snow and wind slams into us like a tidal wave.

The blizzard happens in an instant, with winds so intense that they blow through my magic. Snowflakes whip around us, like thousands of icy needles prickling my skin, each one laced with a deep, unyielding cold that seeps into my bones.

It's too much at once.

All I hear is the howling wind.

All I see is the whiteout of snow.

When I breathe, the frozen air burns my lungs.

I'm drowning, and I can't keep my head above water, no matter how hard I try.

I try to call on my sun magic again, but the storm's too strong. It snuffs out every orb I try to create. It has me surrounded, its icy grip tightening

around me until I fall to my knees in the snow, unable to remain standing for a second longer.

My entire body *hurts*.

Then, just when I think I'm going to shiver myself to death, the wind eases.

Instead of hurtling toward us like glass, the flakes now dance around us like we're caught in a snow globe, their icy onslaught held at bay.

Damien and Viktor stand ahead of me and Morgan, the air rippling with their combined power, carving out a haven in the blizzard's wrath. It's like they're gods holding off the storm, and I can't help but stare at them for a few seconds in awe.

Morgan immediately calls upon her fire, and while it's not enough to erase the cold from my bones, it'll do for now.

"Took you guys long enough," she says between shivers.

"Just keeping things interesting," Viktor says, although from the way he doesn't look back at us, it's taking all his effort to hold the storm at bay.

"We have to keep going forward," Damien says, speaking loudly enough to be heard above the wind. "Are you doing okay?"

He directs the final part to me, somehow managing to look over at me while holding off the wind.

I stand up, brush the snow off my knees, and reach for my magic. "All good," I say, relishing in the light of the sun as it starts to warm me from the inside out. "Just wishing I'd packed my skis."

Damien gives me a curious look. "You ski?"

"Vermont isn't just syrup and dairy farms." I grin, finally feeling the heat of my magic thawing my fingers and toes. "There's plenty of snow to carve through."

Viktor grunts against the wind, forcing more magic against it. "Sounds like the two of you have something nice to chat about over your next candlelit dinner," he yells over the storm. "For now, let's get ourselves out of this snowy hellhole."

"It's more of a hell *hallway*," I shoot back, hoping he thinks my cheeks are turning red because of the cold, and not because of the thought of a candlelit dinner with Damien.

"If we don't get through this hell hallway soon, we're going to be weaker against the Minotaur," Morgan says. "Let's go."

Luckily, there's only one way down the hallway—straight—so Damien

doesn't have to consult the compass for now. We just continue on, Morgan and I keeping everything warm and bright with our magic, and Damien and Viktor using theirs to hold off the onslaught of snow.

Finally, after what feels like forever, we near the top of the stairs that lead down to the ACE platform.

The blizzard stops.

We're in the clear.

At least I think we are—until I look up and see the razor-sharp icicles hanging over our heads.

“Watch out!” I say, the words barely leaving my mouth when the first one drops like a dagger from the ceiling.

Morgan holds out her hand, and a burst of flame melts the icy projectile before it can become a death sentence.

“Nice aim,” Viktor says, his eyes not leaving the ceiling.

More icicles start to shake.

Damien lifts his hand, and a gust of air sends them flying sideways, embedding them into the wall instead of us.

In seconds, more of them grow in their place.

Luckily, the adrenaline coursing through my body erases my fear—for now.

“Looks like we're going to have to dodge them,” Damien says, locking eyes with each of us. “Morgan, you'll target the largest icicles with your fire. Melt them down before they even think about falling. Viktor, you're in charge of directional wind, pushing any icicles away that manage to evade Morgan's fire. Amber, your sun magic will provide us with light and target the smaller icicles, making them evaporate before they become a threat. I'll add my wind magic to Viktor's for extra force. If we're coordinated, we can get through this without wasting too much energy. Are we clear?”

Morgan smirks and sends a burst of fire down the stairs to melt the ice coating their surfaces. “Already on it.”

“Then let's do this. On my count. Three, two, one—go.”

Before he says ‘one,’ I let my sun magic expand outward, lighting the entire ceiling so we can clearly see what we're doing.

Morgan pushes her flames up, turning the larger icicles into hissing steam.

Viktor conjures a swirling wind around us, forcing any straying shards into the walls while Damien amplifies the strength of the gusts that keep the

ice at bay.

It's go-time.

As we head down the stairwell, it feels like we're in a rhythm, and I start to relax a little—until I see it.

An icicle, thicker and longer than the rest, trembles on the ceiling directly above Viktor. It's too late for Morgan's flames to reach it, especially since she's currently melting another group of icicles off to the side.

"Viktor!" I shout, but my voice is drowned by the wind he and Damien are conjuring.

In a blink, the monster icicle breaks free and shoots down like a deadly arrow.

But before it can strike, Damien releases a concentrated burst of wind so powerful that it knocks the icicle off its path.

It slams into the wall just inches away from Viktor and shatters into pieces.

He looks more startled than I've ever seen him. Even more than when I knocked him out of the ring during our spar.

"We need to get to the bottom, now!" Damien says, and we follow, ducking and dodging, trusting his reflexes are strong enough to allow him to see dangers we can't.

My heart races, but finally, after what feels like hours and seconds all at once, we reach the bottom.

"Everyone okay?" I ask, even though it's clear we've all made it down in one piece.

Well, barely, in Viktor's case. Even though we have accelerated healing, there are still things that can kill us.

An icicle through the brain, for instance.

"I had it under control," he says simply, and it's clear from his body language that there's no more discussion to be had here.

Not like we have a chance. Because the train is arriving.

The E train.

The same one I took that fateful night back from the show, when I hopped into the car with Damien, Viktor, and all the shadow souls.

I gaze upon it in horror as it slows down. It's even creepier than the shuttle that took us to Times Square. Its surface isn't just corroded dark metal—it actively absorbs light, a blackness so deep it's almost a void. And the windows are bottomless pits, like portals to oblivion.



Every bone in my body urges me to *run*.

“Still our ride?” I ask Damien.

“That’s the one.”

The train screeches to a halt in front of us, the sound making my skin crawl, and only one door opens.

The one in the middle. The only one where it’s a pretty safe bet that someone will already be inside.

The conductor’s car.

# Amber



INSTEAD OF JUMPING ON BOARD, Damien focuses on the compass, as if waiting for something to change.

“Still unwavering?” I ask him, my eyes locked on the void-like darkness coming from the train’s only open door.

“As a lodestone to iron,” he answers.

“What does that mean?”

“It means yes.”

“Figured.” I release a defeated breath, and the four of us make our way to the entrance to the car and peer inside.

It’s creepier than the S train.

Shadows play tricks on the walls, the flickering lights cast an eerie glow on the corroded metal poles, and the floor is littered with discarded objects I can’t quite make out. Everything feels unsettlingly off, like the car is a reflection in a distorted mirror. It makes me want to run as far away as possible.

Viktor, however, strides inside like he gets on haunted train cars every day.

The rest of us follow.

The hair on my arms rises as I step in. Unlike the S train, there are seats inside, but they’re worn and covered in dust, as if they haven’t been sat on in years.

Damien enters last, and the doors let out a hiss, closing behind him.

I reach for one of the poles, praying the rusted metal won’t give me tetanus, and brace myself for the train to start moving.

It doesn’t.

“That door should be closed,” Viktor says, motioning to the open door at the end of the train. The one that leads to the conductor’s booth. “It’s always closed in the mortal world.”

“Why?” I ask.

“To protect the conductor from vampires like myself.” He grins. “Clearly.”

Damien pushes ahead of us without a word, compass in hand, marching to the open door.

The rest of us hurry after him and look inside the booth.

There’s no conductor. No eerie figure waiting to challenge or guide us.

Instead, an ancient, boxy computer monitor sits atop a control panel, complete with a keyboard that seems straight out of the last century.

“Did I miss the part where this train is actually a time machine to the nineties?” Viktor asks with a short laugh.

“I always did prefer trains to Deloreans,” Damien says.

I look back and forth between them in confusion. “What are you guys talking about?”

“The Delorean? Back to the Future?” Damien raises an eyebrow, waiting for some sort of realization to hit me.

“Never seen it.”

He shakes his head slowly in disapproval. “When we get back, that’s going to have to change.”

Tension hums in the air between us. Because now Damien and I are apparently going to be watching a movie after our candlelit dinner.

One that ideally won’t end with another misguided proposal.

Before I can reply, the computer screen flickers, and a prompt appears, glowing green against the black screen:

Input Command.

The rectangular cursor blinks, waiting, and I pull my gaze away from Damien’s to focus.

“I’m no tech wizard, but I doubt ‘take us to the Minotaur’s lair’ is going to cut it,” I say.

More text appears below.

Name the creature which you seek.

“Seems like you have more wizard in you than you think,” Viktor says, and without bothering to consult any of us, he types in *Minotaur* and presses enter.

The door to the conductor’s booth slams shut so hard that I nearly jump out of my skin.

Suddenly, I’m aware of just how small this space is. The four of us fit inside, but just barely. And the only thing giving light in the darkness is the glow of the computer screen.

“Viktor,” Damien all but growls.

“What?”

“I trust your instincts, but you forget your place.”

Viktor meets his gaze, firm and steady. “Apologies,” he says, and then he adds, “Your Highness.”

Damien narrows his eyes at him, then nods. “Accepted.”

My heart pounds as I wait for someone to break the silence. But before any of us have a chance, the train whirs to life, jolts so hard that I nearly fall into the wall, and starts to head out of the station.

“Guys?” Morgan points at the computer screen, which is typing out another message. “Look.”

We all lean over, watching as new text appears.

Six keys fuel this train’s chase,  
Straight to the Minotaur’s hidden base.

In hearth’s embrace where embers grow,  
Take the first to let us go.

In desert’s dance where winds are free,  
The second shall your compass be.

For the shortest path, you needn’t guess,  
Choose the shuttle, and not the rest.

Where cold winds howl, a snowy spin,  
In the midst must enter in.

In twilight’s hue, where night blends day,  
The loneliest shall guide the way.

With booming clap and lightning bend,  
The final one is your last friend.

It pauses, and then, two lines down, continues:

Enter the code in this time to spend,  
Or else this train will meet its end.

A large digital countdown flashes to life on the dark window in front of us.

2:00  
1:59  
1:58...

“Well,” Damien says. “We now know why we needed to remember the details of the stations.”

I’m so focused on those last two lines that I barely hear him.

“Or else this train will meet its end,” I repeat. “We have two minutes to solve this thing, or else we’re going to crash?”

My heart catches in my throat.

Getting crushed inside a train doesn’t seem like something on the list of things we can survive with our supernatural healing.

“Sounds like it.” Damien doesn’t look over at me—he’s too focused on reading the riddle.

My head spins as I try making sense of it.

Apparently, I’m going to have to add “quickly decoding mysterious riddles” to my supernatural training schedule.

Morgan steps closer to the screen, her eyes scanning it with sharp intelligence. “We need to focus,” she says. “Each clue is about one of the six subway lines we’ve seen. If we decode it properly, this train will take us straight to the Minotaur’s lair.”

“Your foresight is telling you that?” Viktor asks.

“No,” she says. “Logic is telling me that.”

He glares at her, then quickly turns his gaze back to the screen.

Damien’s already on it, and I can practically hear the gears whirring in his mind as he sorts through the riddle.

“The first one—in hearth’s embrace where embers grow—is the 123 lines

with the fire,” he says, breaking the tension between Morgan and Viktor. “And it says to ‘take the first.’ It wants the first digit of those three numbers. So, the first answer in the puzzle is 1.”

“Makes sense,” Morgan says, although Damien’s talking so fast that I’m barely keeping up.

“And ‘in desert’s dance where winds are free’ is the orange BDFM,” Viktor chimes in. “The sandstorm.”

“And then it says, ‘the second will your compass be.’ So, it wants the second of the letters,” Damien says, the two of them bouncing off each other seamlessly. “D.”

1:29

1:28

1:27...

“The next one is easy,” I chime in. “The shortest path was the shuttle. S.”

“Correct.” Damien agrees, and we move on quickly.

“Cold winds and snowy spin,” Viktor reads off the next line. “As if we could forget the ACE.”

“And we’re on the E train right now,” I say.

“But the riddle doesn’t say to enter the letter for the train we’re on right now,” Damien says, miraculously relaxed given that we have a giant timer in front of us counting down the seconds to our possible violent deaths. “It wants the letter that’s ‘in the midst.’ The middle one. C.”

1:01

1:00

59...

“Is it just me, or is the train moving faster?” I ask, panic rising in my throat as I glance around.

“Not just you,” Damien murmurs, although he remains perfectly calm, laser focused on the computer screen.

That makes one of us. Because the faster we go, the deadlier the crash.

Not wanting to think any more than necessary about us becoming supernatural pancakes, I refocus on the riddle.

In twilight’s hue, where night blends day,

The loneliest shall guide the way.

“Twilight’s hue,” Morgan says softly, her eyes going distant. “Purple. The 7 train. The loneliest one, because there are no other lines on it but the 7.”

I almost point out that the S line also didn’t have any others on it, but it was pretty obvious that the clue about the shuttle was referring to the S train, so I say nothing. Also, that part of the riddle could mean something else—like how lonely it would feel to get lost in that haunted fog.

So, I continue to the next clue, the train picking up speed with every passing second.

“With booming clap and lightning bend,” I say quickly, my heart pounding so hard that it feels like it’s trying to force its way out of my chest. “That’s the yellow line with the lightning storms. And it says it wants the last one. So, we pick the last letter in...”

I wrack my mind to remember what letters were on the yellow line, since I haven’t lived in the city for nearly long enough to have these sorts of details memorized.

“That’s the NQRW,” Damien says. “So, the W.”

31  
29  
28...

“We have our code: 1 D S C 7 W,” Damien says, already moving to the keyboard. “Are we in agreement?”

“Yes,” we all say at the same time.

19  
18  
17...

He types in our answer, presses enter, and I hold my breath, praying we’ve gotten it right and that we’re not speeding toward what’s most likely our certain deaths.

# Amber



FOR A MOMENT, the only sound is the incessant ticking of the timer's countdown.

I watch it, unable to breathe, continuing to pray to any god out there that we didn't mess this up. In that long, agonizing second, I brace myself for the sort of crash that will likely be the end of us.

Hopefully a quick, painless end.

Finally, the screen blinks, then displays:

Access Granted.

The digital timer freezes at fifteen seconds, and the tension in the car eases so suddenly I feel like I could collapse.

The door to the conductor's booth unlocks and swings open.

"We did it," Morgan says, her eyes meeting mine in a moment of shared relief.

"We did," I say, although now that the riddle is solved and the timer has stopped, where we're heading next becomes all that more real.

Just as I'm thinking it, the train starts to slow, and a voice crackles over the intercom. The same female voice that welcomed us and gave us the first clue about the subway colors, numbers, and letters.

"Next station, Chambers Street," she says, as if it's another day, another commute. "Exit to the Minotaur's lair."

Good news: there are apparently no more challenges to complete to get closer to the end of the Labyrinth.

Bad news: we're about to step into a mythological monster's lair.



I swallow the fear that's threatening to choke me.

"You okay?" Damien asks.

"Oh, yeah," I say, my palms flat against the desk as I try to center myself.  
"All good."

He must not believe me—which makes sense, given that *I* don't believe me—because he opens the window of the duskberry bond again.

As per usual recently, his calmness flows through the bond and into me. It's the sort of calm in the face of danger that someone can only have after centuries of being alive and facing all kinds of evil, and I'm suddenly more grateful for the bond than ever.

"Better?" he asks, his eyes searching mine.

"Yes." I straighten and take a deep breath, finally able to breathe without it feeling like there's a belt tightening around my lungs. "Much. Thank you."

"Always."

The crazy thing is—I know he means it. *Always*. As in: forever. And, given that he's immortal, that means a long, long time.

Which is an entirely different can of worms to deal with, since I'm *not* immortal.

At least, I don't think I'm immortal. Not much is known about the star touched. So, anything is possible.

Do I even *want* to be immortal?

I don't know. Right now, the only thing I want is to get out of this creepy realm alive.

However, I'm yanked out of my thoughts by gears grinding and metal screeching as the train comes to a sudden halt.

The doors slide open with a hiss, revealing a station that's much smaller than the others, but somehow even creepier. The walls aren't tiles or concrete—instead, they're a dark, shimmering substance that pulses like a heart. The pillars are dead, gnarled trees with branches like hands reaching up into the ceiling, and faces seem to twist in the wood, their features stretched in horror. It's like they're warning us to turn back now, before it's too late.

Instinctively, I glance over at Damien, who's holding out the compass.

Its needle points out the train's doors and into the haunted station.

Feedback echoes from the PA system.

"This is the end of the line," the voice crackles overhead, and the few lights in the car flicker out.

In the sudden darkness, the compass glows brighter, casting eerie

shadows on the walls of the train.

“Stay close,” Damien says, and he leads the way out into the station, the rest of us following behind.

The air here is colder, filled with an electric tension that makes the hairs on my arm stand on end. I reach for my magic, wanting to feel its warmth, then remember we’re supposed to be saving as much energy as possible.

So, never mind that.

The compass points to the right. So, we walk, past the faces on the trees that wail when we’re near them, and strolling by staircases that stretch upward into dark abysses that can’t lead anywhere good.

I might not be able to call on my magic right now, but I *can* reach for the dagger in my boot. And so, needing something to protect myself if anything jumps out at us from the darkness, I do just that.

“This place is one mind trip after another,” Morgan murmurs as we pass a stairwell that almost feels like it’s breathing as we walk by.

Finally, we reach the last staircase—the one with a sign above it that says World Trade Center.

Damien stops and gazes up into the darkness.

“Let me guess,” I say. “We go up that way?”

“You have good instincts,” he says. “Although, I’ve known that since the night we met.”

Trying to push down the stupid way my heart leaps from his compliment, I think back to the first moment I saw him in the subway and smile. Never would I have thought that the train we’d been on that night would seem *normal* compared to the ones we were on just now.

“Feels like ages ago,” I say, although he doesn’t reply, instead keeping all his attention ahead as he tests the first step up.

It doesn’t so much as creak.

Instead, a lantern overhead turns on.

It feels too convenient to be true. Like it’s calling us forward, luring us into a trap.

“Safe enough,” he says exactly what I *wasn’t* thinking, and then he takes the next step up, and the next.

We all follow suit, and more lanterns flicker to life, like sensors guiding our way.

I hold onto the cold iron railing with one hand, keeping my dagger steady in the other. Hopefully, anything that tries jumping out at us is ready to get

stabbed. Or burned. Or any other deadly arsenals we have at our disposal. Which, thankfully, are a lot.

Finally, we emerge onto the upper platform, and I stop dead in my tracks, my attention drawn to the huge mosaic on the floor.

It's mesmerizing—a labyrinth of intricate patterns and winding pathways, so lifelike it seems to move under my gaze. The outermost layer consists of tiles in shades of blue, as if mirroring the sky at various times of day, from the lightness of dawn to the dark of midnight. The paths twist and turn unpredictably, some leading to dead ends, others to mythological creatures captured mid-action.

Then there's the nest in the center. It shimmers with an ethereal, golden glow, and there are three objects inside it.

A pendant, an apple slice, and a vial of pink potion.

*The potion.*

We've found it.

However, there's one big thing missing from the lair.

"Where's the Minotaur?" Viktor asks, also posed and ready with his dagger.

"Who cares?" I ask, even though we all clearly care. "Let's just—"

A roar cuts me off, my blood turning to ice from the sound so deep it vibrates in my bones.

The Minotaur.

He lands beside the nest with a ground-shaking impact and snarls at us, raising his double-headed axe with blades that gleam even in the low light overhead.

He must be ten feet tall, at the least. He's an abomination of man and beast, his hulking body covered in thick, matted fur. Massive horns curl out from his skull, veins snake through his muscular arms, and his snout curls back to reveal enormous, razor-sharp teeth.

Time slows as I meet his furious gaze, and in that moment, all my worries about immortality, choices, and even the potion vanish.

All that's left is my dagger, my magic, and the primal need to do anything possible to get out of this twisted Labyrinth alive.

# Amber



DAMIEN AND VIKTOR EXCHANGE GLANCES, and powerful gusts of wind erupt from their palms, forcing the Minotaur back a few paces.

The monster's eyes narrow with fury. But he fights against the wind and grips his axe tighter, pushing against it, not going down.

I call upon my own magic, ready to join in with Damien and Viktor and blast it at the monster.

But with a bellowing roar, the Minotaur stomps his hoof into the floor. A ripple of earth-shaking force rolls out from the impact, traveling toward us like a tidal wave.

I lose my footing and tumble to the ground.

My dagger clatters to the floor next to me. But, remembering how vulnerable I felt in the fighting ring when Viktor stole my weapon out from under my nose, I snatch it back, unwilling to go without it.

"Morgan, we need a barrier!" Damien yells, already back on his feet and pushing more wind toward the Minotaur.

She raises her hands, and a wall of fire erupts in the space between us and the monster.

He hesitates, snorting and pulling back.

It's working.

As I watch them jump into action, every ounce of my magic aches to be released.

"I've got this." I stare at the flames, ready, and move toward Morgan to take the Minotaur down by her side. "Create a gap in the wall."

She nods in understanding, parts the fire, and I aim a solar beam through the opening, right at the Minotaur's head.

As I do, his gaze locks with mine.

It's like his eyes are tendrils wrapping around my soul, and the world's closing in on me, pulling me into a dark pit where I'll drown for all eternity. The emptiness that crashes into me makes it hard to breathe, and I lower my hand and take a few steps back, desperate for air.

But this emptiness... I know it.

It's how I felt before being star touched. Before I found meaning in every day that I pushed myself to become better, stronger, more resilient. Before I realized that even though I'm just one person, I *matter*.

I won't let this monster take that from me.

So, I focus my magic, letting the energy build within me, flooding me with a renewed sense of meaning and purpose.

*Time to blast him.*

"You can't break me," I say, more to myself than to him, and then I release a blinding solar beam from my palm, directing it straight into his eyes.

But those seconds when he stopped me in my tracks must have been enough for him to reorient himself, because he dodges out of the way with less than a second to spare.

The beam of light hits his shoulder instead of his head.

He roars in pain, his eyes glow yellow, and ancient symbols light up on the walls. They pulse like a heartbeat, like the lair is coming to life, ready to take us down with the Minotaur.

The ceiling groans above.

"Watch out!" Damien calls out, and before I realize what's happening, a gust of wind pushes me to the side and onto the floor.

As it does, a stone grazes my arm, leaving behind a burning line of pain.

Sitting there, taking in what happened, I realize: Damien used his magic on me. It's what knocked me down.

If he hadn't, that stone would have crashed into my skull instead of slicing through my arm.

Which means Damien saved my life.

My arm's already starting to heal. But the Minotaur, still angry from the blast of my solar beam, shakes its massive head, regaining focus. He snarls at us again. And, from the rage burning in his eyes, he's more furious than ever.

Then he charges, the symbols on the ground igniting in his wake, like a fuse to an ancient spell.

Viktor stands his ground, his hands moving in a swift pattern. “I’ll hold the building!” he says, on it in a second.

“Better yet...” Determination flashes across Damien’s eyes, and he summons a whirlwind, lifting the debris from the floor.

It floats around him as if he’s some sort of god.

Then, he hurls them toward the Minotaur like missiles.

I watch without breathing, as if I can use my eyes to help him hit his target. But the Minotaur barrels through the debris, all muscle and fury. He’s shrugging off the impacts like they’re mere annoyances. Even more—he swats them out of his way like bugs.

Huge bugs made of metal and stone.

And then, as if in slow motion, one of them comes flying at me.

I raise my dagger—which, thankfully, I’m holding with my arm that hadn’t just been sliced nearly to the bone with rock—and use the flat end to deflect anything thrown my way. The pings of the stones colliding with the metal is insanely satisfying. One after the other, clashing so hard that sparks ignite on the edges of my blade.

It’s not how I originally intended on using the dagger, but hey, it works.

Damien and Viktor continue keeping the crumbling ceiling above our heads, and as the pain subsides from my arm, I reach for my sun magic, ready to help end this.

Morgan extends her hand before I can, and the fire around her shifts into the form of a serpent. It emerges from the inferno, scales made of flickering flames, eyes like molten coals burning with an ancient, dark intensity.

With a hiss that sounds like the cracking of embers, it strikes, wrapping around the Minotaur in a scorching, fiery embrace.

He roars and swings his axe wildly, trying to break free. But Morgan’s fire serpent tightens its hold. Its flaming body bites and sears against the Minotaur’s muscles and fur, and he howls in a bone-chilling mix of pain and fury.

Then, to my disbelief, he steps out of the flames, skin charred but still very much alive.

“Go for his heart, Amber!” Morgan shouts over the wind that Damien and Viktor are still using to hold off the stones threatening to break from the ceiling.

They’re all watching me, waiting for me... *believing* in me.

This is my chance. It’s what I’ve been training to do for weeks.

I've got this.

With a deep breath and a silent prayer to Sunneva, I center myself and unleash a solar beam in a spear of light. It's a focused attack of pure, radiant energy. A blast of sunlight that bursts out of me and flies through the darkness to pierce the Minotaur's chest straight through his heart.

But there's no time to celebrate.

Instead, Damien and Viktor use the opening to send more stones flying at the beast's head. They're relentless—a storm to my sun—and I'm proud to be here, fighting beside them.

The Minotaur stumbles, his axe clattering to the ground, his roars becoming pitiful groans. He's dying, slowly, and it's clear from the sounds he's making that he knows it.

Finally, he stills.

Morgan's fire serpent gives one last constricting squeeze, then dies down into flickering sparks.

It's over.

At least, I think it is.

For extra measure—just to be sure—I stride forward, the wind blowing through my hair, and shoot a few more solar flares through the hole in his heart.

With a final, pained groan, the Minotaur disintegrates into ash and smoke, leaving nothing but charred residue in his wake.

The stones stop falling. The station quiets. The only sounds are our own movements and the occasional soft rumble from the walls, as if the lair is settling back to sleep.

The Minotaur is gone. We killed him.

The four of us are okay.

As the realization that we're not going to die at the hands of a mythological beast sets in, the expenditure of my magic since entering the Labyrinth hits me all at once.

My vision blurs, the jagged edges of the station walls melding together into a haze. I crouch down for a moment, pressing my palms against the floor, taking a few deep breaths to steady myself.

The others rush toward me, but I hold them off. In time, and with practice, I'll gain the endurance I need to hold onto my magic for as long as they can. They have years—or decades—of experience with this than I do, but I'll get there. I know I will.

For now, I dig deeper into myself, into the light gifted to me by Sunneva, and then to the strength I had before being star touched. The strength of the girl who packed up everything she owned from her childhood home in Vermont and moved to New York City.

My power comes from within. Not from the magic gifted to me from Sunneva, or from the duskberry bond with Damien. Those things are helpful, but they don't matter if I can't be the pillar holding them up.

With that final thought, I pull myself back to my feet.

The air all but lightens around me—an actual weight lifted from my shoulders.

“What are we waiting for?” I brush the dirt from my hands and smile at the others to let them know I'm okay. “We came here to steal that potion. So, let's steal it, get out of this hellhole, and combine it with the compass so we can stay one step ahead of the shadow souls and stop them from taking over our city.”



## Amber



“AN EXCELLENT PLAN,” Damien says, and we hurry to the shiny nest, gazing down at the three objects inside it.

A slice of a golden apple.

A pendant with a staff carved into it, with snakes winding around the staff and wings coming out of its top.

And, lastly, a vial of potion. The pink liquid inside it glows faintly, pulsing like a heartbeat.

Viktor reaches forward, but he grabs the pendant—not the potion.

“It’s infused with Hermes’s magic,” he explains, before we have a chance to ask. “The Greek messenger god. It allows its wielder to send telepathic messages over a distance. It’ll be a useful tool to work into training sessions. Could also give us a heads up in our fights against the shadow souls.”

“Good plan.” Damien reaches forward, and while I expect him to go for the potion, he picks up the apple instead.

He turns it in his hand, examining it, and passes it to me.

I don’t take it.

“It’s a slice of a golden apple from the Garden of the Hesperides,” he explains. “Eating it will help you replenish your energy.”

I eye the apple, then refocus on Damien, trying to figure out if he’s serious. “You’re not asking me to eat it, right?” I finally ask. “Because last time I checked, enchanted fruit is a tricky business.”

Instead of answering, he opens the duskberry bond, and I gasp as his emotions flood inside me. Concern. Care. And crazily enough—given that he’s never said it out loud—*love*.

Impossible.

He can't love me. We only met a few weeks ago.

But the emotions pouring through the bond are real.

I'm speechless, completely unsure what to think, or what to feel.

"Do you trust me?" he asks, searching my face for answers.

"I do," I say, and much to my own surprise, I mean it. "But I think I'll agree to that candlelit dinner before I'm ready to eat magical fruit without having time to do my own research about what's inside it."

I brace myself for his frustration. Or disappointment. Or both.

Instead, he nods in what looks like *approval*.

"So, what'll it be?" he asks with the hint of a smile. "Steak, or salmon?"

"Can I say no to both, and ask for the best pizza the city has to offer?"

"I think I can manage that," he says, and then, before I realize what's happening, he kisses me. It's slow, and passionate, and somehow more intense than what I normally feel when the duskberry bond is open.

Because it isn't just open from his side, but from mine, too. It's like our souls are bare to each other, intertwining around themselves like they're trying to hold onto each other and never let go.

It's a promise, a slip of fate knotted with the threads of destiny. It's the whisper of adventure and the roar of the battles yet to come. It's all the things I can't put into words but can feel as solidly as the earth beneath my feet.

When we finally break apart, he's gazing down at me as if he's seeing me for the first time.

"You feel it, too," he says, and it's a statement, not a question.

I nod, unable to find words.

How do you speak when your world has shifted on its axis?

It turns out I don't have to, because Viktor clears his throat, reminding me we have an audience.

I pull away, surprised to find Morgan holding the potion out to me. "Take it," she says, as confident as ever.

I blink, my lips still tingling from Damien's kiss. "Why me?"

"Because I have the key between realms. Damien has the compass and the apple. Viktor has the pendant. It makes sense for you to have the potion."

Damien nods in agreement. Even though he's back to being as stoic as ever—the duskberry bond closed between us again—I can still make out an ember of passion lingering from the kiss.

"She's right. We can't afford to put all our eggs in one basket," he says. "If we're separated, we each should have something to help the group."

It makes sense.

“All right,” I say, and I take the potion from Morgan, tucking it into the inside pocket of my jacket for safekeeping.

She watches me with approval. “Now, how about we get out of here?”

“There’s nothing I want more.”

If I never see the inside of this Labyrinth again, I won’t be sorry about it.

She moves the nest aside and presses the end of the key to the tile in the center of the mosaic. A keyhole opens for it, and she rotates the key to unlock the door.

The mosaic trembles beneath our feet, the sensation like the rumble of a distant storm. Then, it swirls like a whirlpool, and we’re staring at another version of the mosaic through the surface.

Instead of the Labyrinth, it’s a rendition of the world, with a huge blue eye in the center.

“A portal,” Morgan explains, looking pleased with herself.

“What do we do now?” I ask.

“Easy.” She smiles. “We jump.”

Without hesitation, she leaps into the swirling portal and vanishes before our eyes.

Viktor glances at Damien and me, giving a brisk nod. “Keep safe,” he says, and with that, he’s gone, jumping through the vortex after Morgan.

Silence settles between me and Damien, the distant echo of the portal’s hum the only sound in the ruined station. He turns to me, and there’s so much question in his eyes, as if he’s searching for answers.

I know exactly how he feels.

I also know we can’t keep standing here in the Minotaur’s lair, staring longingly at each other while a portal that may or may not close at any moment swirls by our feet.

“Go on,” he says, motioning at the shimmering vortex.

I shake my head, my hand finding his. “No. We go together.”

His fingers squeeze mine, sending a jolt of electricity through my body.

“Together,” he says, and then he counts down to three, and we jump.

It’s different than when we walked through the door in Grand Central station. It’s like jumping into a lake, except it’s not wet.

We float downward, our hands clasped together the entire time, and it’s only a few seconds until our feet hit the floor.

We’re in the Chambers Street station. The *real* one. The one in the mortal

realm.

It's uncomfortably hot. The ceiling is cracked and in need of repair. The rotting smell of garbage wafts from the cans near the blue steel columns, which could definitely benefit from a fresh paint job. I'm pretty sure I see a rat running along the wall.

It's dirty. It's grungy.

It's perfect.

Because despite all its faults, it's a welcome relief from the dark, distorted realm of the Labyrinth. Especially because while I'm not sure exactly how, traveling through the portal replenished my energy. Not completely, but enough to make me feel much better than I did on the other side.

A couple walks by, but they don't pay us any attention. Other than them, it's so late that there isn't anyone else here.

Morgan's gaze drifts to where my hand is still intertwined with Damien's, and I quickly pull away.

If he's affected, he doesn't show it.

"You still have the potion?" he asks me.

I reach inside my jacket and feel the vial, relieved it didn't fall out while we were floating through the portal.

"Yep. Still there."

"Perfect," he says, and the appreciation in his eyes seems like it's for more than my successfully holding onto the potion during the jump. "Let's head back to the Fairmont. Once we're there, we can combine the potion and the compass, so we can start tracking down the shadow souls."

Tired, but victorious, we head back down the stairs and to the platform.

When the unmistakable sound of an approaching train rumbles through the station, I brace myself for anything. Bats, a blizzard, shadow souls, an ogre... I don't know. After the night we just had—no, after the past few weeks I've had—nothing would seem overly crazy anymore.

Luckily, when the train comes to a stop, everything looks normal.

The doors open with a hiss, and we step inside the car, our entrance as unremarkable as any other late-night traveler. And there are no shadow souls lurking in the train. Only three humans, each absorbed in their own world of thought, each carrying their own secrets.

"What time is it?" I ask Damien.

He glances at his watch. "Four am."

"That explains why it's so empty."

I take a seat next to Morgan, and Damien and Viktor sit across from us.

We say nothing as the train makes its way out of the station. I'm pretty sure we're all too mentally exhausted for words right now.

"Job well done," Viktor finally breaks the silence. He leans forward, his hand finding Damien's arm in a firm, congratulatory grip.

"The four of us worked well together," Damien says, and Viktor leans back in his seat, seeming to relax a bit.

We *all* relax. It's nice to take a breather and let our energy further replenish.

After a few minutes, the train comes to a stop at the Columbus Street station—the one closest to the Fairmont. When we get out, the station is just as normal, and as empty, as the one at Chambers Street.

The first flight of steps leads up to a larger platform, this one with a circular hole in the center with rails to look down below. One more flight, and we'll finally be aboveground and walking back home.

But before we get to the final stairwell, figures emerge from the shadows of a nearby hall.

Ones I remember from when Damien and I first encountered them in Central Park.

Lucas steps forward, a wry smile playing on his lips, his clan fanning out behind him. And it's not just his clan. There are more with them. Eight total. Likely all downtown vampires.

They're surrounding us, their eyes glinting with the thrill of the hunt.

This is uptown territory. Any attack would be a breach of supernatural law in the city.

Still, I swallow and brace myself for anything.

The few humans nearby—only three of them—quickly scatter. Smart. I'm sure their instincts told them to get the hell out of here.

"So, you successfully got the potion," Lucas says, his eyes locked on mine.

I still, caught majorly off guard. Because as far as I'm aware, none of us told *anyone* about where we were going tonight and why.

"How do you know about the potion?" I ask, my hand instantly going to my jacket to protect the vial.

The moment it does, I realize my mistake.

Lucas now knows exactly where I'm keeping it.

"Let's just say a little winged messenger told me," he says, smirking as if

he just cracked an inside joke with himself. “Now, I guess you aren’t just going to hand it over like a good little girl?”

The potion in my jacket suddenly feels like a lead weight. “What makes you think that?” I ask, trying to determine the distance between us and the stairwell. Yes, the four of us are outnumbered. But if we get out of the subway and to the Fairmont, we’ll be inside its protective barrier, and the downtown vampires won’t be able to touch us.

Lucas’s smile doesn’t waver, but there’s a coldness in his eyes now, and he pushes his sleeves up, revealing the broken chain tattoos around his wrists. “Pity,” he says. “Although I must say—I’d be disappointed if you made this easy for us.”

And then he and the downtown vampires surge forward as one, and everything erupts into chaos.

# Amber



SNAPPING INTO FOCUS, I sidestep one of the women from Lucas's clan. The air slices by me as she passes, her fingers grazing the sleeve of my jacket.

Not so fast. I slayed a Minotaur less than an hour ago—I can sure as hell handle a vengeful vampire.

Holding out my hand, I release a solar flare from my palm, straight into her face.

She screams, a hand clutched over her eyes, cursing with a hiss.

Lucas steps in, and his gaze rakes over my body, my spine prickling at the desire swirling in his eyes. “You’re quite the little warrior, aren’t you, Amber?” he says, the sounds of battle clashing around us as the others continue defending themselves against his followers. “But it’s not too late to make a smarter choice. To stand by true power, instead of a ‘king’ so used to his luxuries that he’s forgotten the harshness of reality.”

He has to be kidding himself.

“Do you really think I’d prefer a beast like you to a strategic leader like Damien?”

He snarls, his predatory gaze sharpening even more. “You would if you knew what’s good for you. If you wanted to get out of this war alive.”

The corner of his mouth twitches, and he lunges, his knife in hand.

His strikes are precise, but I dodge them, calling upon every move I’ve practiced.

Unfortunately, Lucas has decades of training on me. His blade slices my arm, then my leg, and then my side.

I can’t out-fight him.

But he’s underestimated the strength of my magic.

I reach for it, more energized than ever given that the way he's looking at me—as if he wants to stake claim on me on the spot—is really pissing me off.

A concentrated beam of light sears out of my fingertips, and Lucas recoils, hissing. I send another blast at him, and then another, eventually sending him crashing into the wall and knocking him unconscious, his knife clattering to the floor beside him.

He either prefers weapons to magic, or his magic simply isn't as strong as the most powerful vampires. Given the exchange between us, I'm going with the latter. Although I must give it to him—he's talented at hand-to-hand combat.

I take the moment of calm to check on the others.

Damien's a whirlwind as he battles two downtown vampires, summoning the air to his command. Papers and debris rise in a cyclone around him, and he's like a god on a rampage.

The vampires try to use their own air magic in retaliation, but their strength might as well be a breeze against Damien's storm. In a second, he's on one of the vampires, his dagger raised, plunging it through his chest and turning the vampire to ash.

As for Morgan, she's magnificent as she fights two vampires of her own, a dance of flames and fury. With a flick of her wrist, a barrier of fire roars to life around her, taking them by surprise and pushing them back. The heat's intense even from where I stand.

In their moment of surprise, she lets down her guard and launches a fireball at one of them, disintegrating him on the spot.

Two more vampires run at her.

Fear flashes in her eyes as she realizes she has to fight all three of them at once.

Before I can go help her, another one of Lucas's clan mates launches himself at me.

I jump out of the way and surround myself with a heat shield, stopping him from getting any closer.

Unfortunately, he has more magic than Lucas. He pushes wind against me, although I'm able to keep up my shield and push him right back. It's a battle of wills, and I'm determined to win.

I'm trying to figure out the best time to lower my shield and blast him with a solar flare when I catch sight of Viktor from the corner of my eye.



He's not going up against *anyone*.

He's just standing there, watching me, as if he's analyzing my moves in a gym and not standing in the middle of a real battle.

"Viktor! Help Morgan!" I shout, since he needs to get it together and *do something*.

He doesn't listen.

Instead, he strides over to me, his voice cold as he speaks to the downtown vampire going up against me. "Go help with Damien," he says. "I have this handled."

I freeze at the same time as the vampire I'm facing pulls in his attack.

*Handled?*

No.

Impossible...

Before I can process the meaning behind Viktor's words, he grabs my arm and we're tumbling over the railing, down to the platform below.

The floor rushes up to meet us with an alarming speed.

We land heavily, and my feet stumble to find balance on the solid ground. I manage to remain standing—thanks to the training I've had for how to properly handle a fall—but the force of the landing sends a jolt through my bones.

There's no one else down here. Probably a combination of the late hour, and the fact that any human who got close enough to hear the fighting likely ran away as fast as they could.

I straighten and face Viktor.

My stomach drops.

Because his eyes, once filled with solidarity, are now cold and calculating.

"What are you doing?" I ask, although I'm getting a pretty good idea about what's going on here.

He betrayed us.

I reach for my magic, creating a heat shield around myself to stop him from getting too close.

"Amber, you need to understand." His voice is measured, betraying none of the chaos on the floor above us. "Damien's time is over. He's grown weak, softened by luxuries and... emotions."

His voice strains as he says the final word.

"What are you talking about?" I ask, although I suspect what he's going

to say before he says it.

“I’m talking about the duskberry bond,” he says, circling me. “His feelings toward you. I don’t care how much power you have. You’re a distraction to him, keeping him from focusing on what really matters—stopping the shadow souls from overtaking this city.”

“That’s not true.” I glance up at the balcony, hearing the fighting but unable to see it.

Damien and Morgan better be holding up okay.

“You have no idea what’s true or not,” Viktor snaps, bringing my attention away from worrying about the others, and back to him. “You’ve only been here for a few weeks. I’ve known Damien for over a century. Ever since meeting you, he’s changed.”

As much as I wish I could say otherwise, he does have a point. I have no idea what Damien was like before we met.

“Damien cares about this city,” I say instead, trying to keep talking to hold him off. “He put his life on the line with us in the Labyrinth, and when we fought the shadow souls at the Fairmont.”

“No, Amber,” he continues, and I hate how condescending he sounds when he says my name. “His duskberry bond with you—his feelings for you—they’re distractions. The downtown vampires recognize the need for a new leader. One who won’t hesitate to embrace our true nature and do what must be done.”

He pushes more wind against my heat shield, but I continue to stand strong.

“So what?” I say, my grip tightening on the magic pulsing through me. “You’re going to lead them in a coup? Overthrow Damien?”

“Exactly.”

I suck in a sharp breath, not having expected my guess to be right.

“You led Lucas and the others here,” I realize. “You told them where we’d be.”

“You didn’t think it was strange that I reached for the pendant instead of the potion when we were in the Minotaur’s lair?” he asks. “For the object that can be used to send telepathic messages over a distance?”

“I didn’t,” I say. “Because I trusted you.”

“Your mistake.” His eyes gleam with amusement as he blasts me with a gust of icy wind that surrounds me like a cyclone trying to suck the life out of me.

My heat shield flickers and wanes as the cold air eats its way through my magic.

He wastes no time, closing the distance between us in the blink of an eye. And then his hand snakes out, aiming not for me, but for the pocket of my jacket where I'm keeping the vial of potion.

# Amber



“No!” I reach inside my jacket, grasping the vial just as Viktor’s fingers graze the fabric.

His other hand grabs a fistful of my jacket, pulling me toward him. But I twist around, trying to use his momentum against him, just as we practiced in training.

I press my palm against his face and char him. His flesh sizzles, and he steps back, screaming as he begins to heal.

With a snarl, he pulls out his dagger and attacks.

I’m ready with mine as well.

I remember every move he taught me, each feint and counter.

But knowing Viktor’s style is a double-edged sword. He knows mine just as well.

“Lesson one,” he growls, his blade tearing through the top of my arm. “Always anticipate betrayal.”

I knee him in the groin before he can reach for the potion again.

“Lesson two,” I say as he hunches over, his body wracked with pain. “Never underestimate your opponent.”

I glance up at the balcony Viktor pulled me through, waiting for Damien or Morgan to jump down and help. But I can still hear the cries of battle up there—the crackling of flames, the clashing of blades, and the roar of the wind.

They’re not coming.

Not only do they need to defend themselves against the downtown vampires, but they don’t know about Viktor’s betrayal. They have no reason to think he’s down here fighting me instead of helping me.

Viktor recovers quicker than expected, his eyes now ablaze with a ruthless determination. Using my moment of distraction, he launches at me again.

I curse myself for my mistake.

Because the first thing Viktor taught me?

Always be on guard.

We clash again, steel ringing against steel. I feint to the left and strike from the right, but he's already moving, reading my intentions like they're scrawled in the air between us. I try keeping a layer of heat around myself to stop him from reaching into my jacket again, but it's too hard to focus on dodging his physical attacks and using my magic at the same time.

With each slice of his blade through my skin, he's backing me into a wall.

If he succeeds, then this is done. It'll be too easy for him to overpower me.

But I refuse to let him win. I don't know what he and the downtown vampires have in mind to do with the potion, and I have no intention of finding out.

I need distance—space to let my magic work.

So, with a burst of energy, I dodge a thrust of his dagger that would have skewered my side, rolling under his arm and coming up on the balls of my feet.

With a sweep of my arms, I draw the heat from around my body and unleash a solar flare outward, straight toward him.

He shields his face, moving to the side quickly enough that my attack only grazes his sleeve. It chars the fabric, missing his skin, and with a fluid motion, he draws upon his own magic. The air around him solidifies into a shield of his own, a mirror to my wall of heat.

Air meets light, and for a moment, there's a balance. An equilibrium in our powers.

"You can't beat me," he growls. "I trained you."

I ground myself, preparing to push more force into my defense. "Did I fry your short-term memory and make you forget how I threw you out of the ring when we sparred?"

With a surge of effort, I funnel more power into my heat wall, and it brightens, the air crackling me. Viktor's shield wavers, then shatters, exploding outward in a rush that knocks us both back.

He jumps back onto his feet and charges at me with his dagger.

I can't let him get near me again. If he does, he'll have too much of an upper hand.

He gets closer, fury in his eyes, dagger poised to strike.

But I'm a force of the sun itself. I will not be extinguished.

I sidestep his attack, put space between us, and spin to face him as I reach for the magic coursing through my veins. I cast my hand forward, not just once but in a rapid succession. Each movement sends out a solar flare of blinding light and searing heat.

They arc through the air, each one a miniature sun, and Viktor struggles under the relentless assault.

He attempts to deflect them with bursts of wind, but there are too many. They strike him one after another, and he buckles under the force, his healing magic struggling to keep up.

As he ducks under a larger flare, his eyes burn with a mix of rage and fear. "You won't do it," he growls. "You can't kill me, Amber. You don't have it in you."

"I can. And I will," I say, although I know it's a lie.

Viktor isn't a monster. He's not a shadow soul, or a Minotaur. He's someone I trusted for weeks. He's Damien's closest friend. Every vampire in the clan looks up to him.

In *our* clan.

Because like it or not, the Fairmont has become my home.

How can I go back there knowing I killed their head warrior?

"You can't," he says, and then he lunges again. Not with his blade, but with his free hand, reaching for my jacket once more.

My hand tightens around the vial just as his fingers brush mine. He tries to force it out of my grip, but I jerk back, holding it out of reach.

"Lesson three," I say, remembering the way he'd taunted me with my dagger after swiping it from me in our sparring session. "Never fall for the same trick twice."

With a roar of frustration, Viktor gathers his strength and releases a massive wave of air that hits me with the force of a hurricane, lifting me off my feet and throwing me down into the subway tracks.

My elbow takes the brunt of the fall.

Pain sears up my arm, soon accompanied by the strange sensation of the bone starting to heal.

As it does, the ground vibrates beneath me.

The screech of metal-on-metal pierces the air.

Headlights slice through the darkness, the train barreling toward me like a bullet from a gun.

And, right in front of me, the vial. I dropped it in my fall.

Time slows as I stare at the lights of the oncoming train. My heart stutters, and every muscle freezes. I can't breathe, can't think.

I need to get out of here. Now.

Snapping back into focus, I snatch the vial and hurl myself out of the tracks, my body colliding with the platform just as the train roars into the station.

My heart's racing at a million miles a minute, and I want to curl up in a ball and cry in relief. But I don't have time to be shaken.

Instead, I jump back onto my feet, looking around as I brace myself for another attack from Viktor.

It doesn't come.

He's gone.

# Amber



THE TRAIN DOORS SLIDE OPEN, and two people step out. Humans.

They throw me wary looks and hurry away, eager to escape whatever trouble they see written all over me.

I'm sure there's a lot of it.

"Thanks for the help," I mutter, although I can't really blame them. It's past four in the morning, and I probably look like a rabid animal about to attack.

Ignoring the throb in my arm as the final bit of bone heals, I inspect the vial, and my stomach drops.

A fine, hairline fracture spirals down it. Wetness coats my palm as the pink liquid seeps out, and wrapping my hand around the glass to stop it is no use. The potion continues to leak, each droplet evaporating into nothingness when it hits the floor, disappearing before my eyes.

It's slipping through my fingers, and there's nothing I can do to stop it.

Footsteps hurry down the steps, and I look up to find Damien and Morgan running down to find me.

"The compass," I say before they can reach me. "We have to combine the potion with the compass. Now."

Damien's hand plunges into his jacket pocket, and his face pales. He pats down his other pockets in a frenzied search, his movements becoming more frantic as he continues to come up with nothing.

My blood turns to ice in my veins as I wait.

"It's gone. The apple, too," he finally says, and realization crosses his face like a punch to the gut. "Viktor. He left with Lucas and the others. He must've taken them when—"



“When he congratulated you for a job well done on the train,” I say, recalling how Viktor moved closer to Damien and squeezed his arm in what I assumed was brotherly affection.

Damien’s jaw clenches. “That slippery—“

“We don’t have time.” I turn my attention back to the potion seeping through my fingers, my mind moving quickly as I try to figure this out.

The compass was the preferred magical source to combine with the potion, since its inherent ability could easily direct us straight to the shadow souls.

But it’s not our *only* option.

“We need to combine the potion with a powerful magical source,” I say, since we have no time to waste. “Morgan—give me the key.”

“I can’t.” She turns her gaze to the floor, her cheeks heating in shame.

“What do you mean?”

“The vampires took it from me in the fight. They knew it was there, and they came after it.” She meets my eyes again, her expression grim. “I’m sorry.”

I don’t respond. Instead, I watch helplessly as more of the liquid lands on the ground, evaporating into the air.

We’ve been through too much to lose the potion now. There has to be a solution. Because I won’t let the shadow souls continue to get an upper hand on us. Not after two of them almost succeeded in sucking my life—and my magic—away.

They’re not going to stop coming after me. I saw it in the darker, more powerful shadow soul’s eyes when I fought him off at the Fairmont. They thrive off magic. They *want* magic. And, thanks to being star touched, I’m basically magic incarnated.

Wait—that’s it.

*Me.*

*I’m* magic. Technically, so are Damien and Morgan, but we don’t have time to talk about it or debate it. Every second wasted is more potion that slips out of the cracks and disappears into the night.

Without any more hesitation, I uncap the vial, bring it to my lips, and drink what’s left inside.

It tastes like fire and stardust, burning down my throat and igniting every cell in my body. Its energy merges with my own magic, amplifying it, transforming me into something *else*. It reminds me of when Sunneva star

touched me. When she *changed* me.

Except this time, I'm ready.

The lights flicker overhead, and I close my eyes, trying to find the eye of the storm within myself. The potion is not my enemy. It's a part of me now, like my sun magic, and like the duskberry bond that draws me and Damien together.

And so, I don't fight it. Instead, I steady the winds and control the heat, welcoming the power that's sinking into my soul.

A beat passes. Two.

Then, I open my eyes.

The lights are stable again. Just like the potion's magic.

I did it.

I improvised, and it worked.

Damien and Morgan are staring at me, awe and fear etched into their faces. They're looking at me like I'm something else. Like I'm something *other*.

Like they're not quite sure what to say to me or do with me.

"I can locate shadow souls now?" I ask, standing up and praying for one of them to say something. "Like the compass would have been able to do?"

"No," Morgan says slowly, carefully. "If the potion had been combined with the compass, the compass could have located shadow souls. But you're not the compass."

"Okay..." I keep my eyes on her, bracing myself for anything.

Damien moves closer and pulls me close, although his focus is on Morgan. "What did she do?"

*Way to talk about me like I'm not here.*

"I saved the potion." I move away from him, anger flaring inside me. "It would have all been gone right now otherwise."

I motion to the spot on the floor where the potion had fallen to show what I mean.

"You were impulsive," he snaps. "Just like you've always been with your magic. It's why you need..."

He stops himself, but what he was about to say is clear.

It's why I need the duskberry bond to help me center myself.

Fury washes over me like a wave.

And then, lights flicker from a hall in the distance.

I glance over as they flicker again. I'd wonder if I was doing it, but the

pattern isn't the same as the rage of my magic.

"That's not me," I say, swallowing down my fear. Because if it's not me—which I know it isn't—then there's one big thing that it likely is.

The temperature drops, as if backing up my suspicion.

"We have to get out of here and go to safety," Morgan says quickly. "Then I can scry for more information, and we can figure this out."

Safety.

The Fairmont.

Which, thankfully, isn't too far.

Damien and I exchange a quick look—a silent agreement.

Without a word, the three of us turn on our heels and dash towards the stairs, the echoes of our footsteps bouncing off the tiles. I can feel the magic coursing through me, urging me to move faster, to escape the creeping darkness.

We take the stairs two at a time. The wind's behind us, pushing us forward, and I know without question that it's Damien's magic.

I don't pause to examine the scene on the platform where we fought the downtown vampires. Any bit of hesitation can cost us our lives.

Finally, we burst out of the subway and emerge to the surface of bright city lights. From there, we keep running. It reminds me of one of the many lessons I learned in training—know when it's time to retreat. Strategy is more important than fearlessness. After all, you can't win if you're dead.

There's bravery in knowing when to withdraw. Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes, it's the quiet voice whispering, *we will try again tomorrow. We will claim victory on our own terms. We will live to fight another day.*

We don't stop until we've pushed through the revolving doors and into the ornate lobby of the Fairmont.

I lean against a marble pillar to catch my breath, trying to steady the magic still buzzing under my skin. Damien and Morgan are just as shaken.

The vampire on the night shift at the front desk eyes us warily, but she doesn't say a word.

Morgan stares out the front door, her face white as a sheet.

Damien and I follow her gaze.

There he stands outside the hotel's gate—the shadow soul that left his mark on me right here in this lobby. He's surrounded by an aura of darkness so pure it swallows the glow of the city lights, and those deep voids of his eyes burn with an intelligence and resolve that sends a shiver through my

core.

His gaze locks onto mine, and I'm frozen, a deer caught in the headlights.

A breath catches in my throat as I remember the cold touch of his essence against mine. The way he nearly unraveled the very threads of my soul. His cruel, twisted grin as he reached deep inside me to inhale my life force for himself.

Damien's hand finds mine, his grip grounding, a silent promise that he won't let this shadow soul touch me ever again.

I squeeze his hand in return, believing him. Because while what he said about my impulsivity and needing the bond to keep me in check is *not* going to be brushed aside anytime soon, the Fairmont is my home now. And I will defend my home until there's nothing more left in me to give.

The shadow soul remains beyond the gate, barred by Sunneva's spell. Yet, his stare pierces through, a silent duel of wills.

This is a game to him, and I'm his favorite pawn.

But no: I'm not a pawn. I'm star touched. I have the magic of the sun inside me. I have the power to defeat the darkness.

It's what I was chosen to do. And it's what I *will* do, until every shadow soul in the city is nothing more than sticky residue on the ground.

Our eyes remain locked, a battle of intent and resolve.

Finally, with a smirk that holds both promise and peril, he turns away.

His departure is slow. Deliberate. A chess player stepping back, confident in his next devastating move.

He fades into the night, but the echo of his presence lingers. He's out there, waiting.

But no matter what it takes, we're not going down without a fight.

"Your dagger," Morgan says to me, drawing me out of my thoughts.

"What?"

"I need your dagger." Her golden flecked eyes are more intense than ever, and something about them makes me reach down into my boot and hand my weapon to her.

Then, without warning, she draws the blade over her palm and lets her blood fall to the floor.

"*Morgan,*" Damien chides. "The marble."

"There was literally a battle fought in this lobby a few nights ago," she says, although her focus remains on where her blood's making a tiny pool on the floor—one that's spiraling out into patterns she somehow seems to

understand. “It can handle a little blood magic.”

“Blood magic,” I repeat. “What are you talking ab—”

She shushes me before I can say the rest of the word.

“Be quiet,” she says. “I’m focusing. We don’t have much time.”

I press my lips together and say nothing, watching her. Her eyes are unfocused as she stares down at the swirling blood, and it’s clear she’s seeing something that I’m not. Something in the blood—a message. A *vision*.

Whatever it is she does when she sries.

Minutes pass in silence. Damien’s presence is firm beside me, but I can’t focus on him. All I see is Morgan, searching for answers in her spilled blood.

Then, finally, she stands. And, as she does, she looks at me as if I’m basically dead.

“What?” I ask, dreading what she’s going to say next. “What did you see?”

“You’re not like the compass,” she says slowly, steadily. “Like I told you, the potion would have allowed the compass to direct us to the shadow souls. But the potion reacts differently to every magical source. And you’re a light. A beacon.”

Damien gasps so hard that I can feel the horror washing through him. “No,” he says, and as they both look at me as if I just signed my own death warrant, Morgan’s implication becomes clear.

I drank the potion.

Minutes later, the shadow souls sought us down. As if they knew exactly where to find us.

All my blood feels like it rushes out of me at once.

“I’m not able to find the shadow souls, like the compass would have done,” I say, barely feeling like I’m speaking as the words escape my lips. “It’s the opposite. The potion makes it so they’re able to find *me*.”

“They will come for you now,” Morgan says, as if she’s a grim reaper instead of the person who’s been my closest friend and ally these past few weeks. “Drawn to your magic like moths to a flame.”

The new magic pulses within me, and I’m not sure if it’s a gift or a curse. But I’m veering toward the latter.

Horror crashes through me.

What did I do?

Damien steps toward me, and something I never expected to see from him flashes in his eyes—fear. “You have to get it out,” he says. “Or maybe I

can...”

His gaze lowers to my neck, and I know what he’s thinking.

He wants to bite me and try to suck the potion out of me.

I step back and reach for my neck, as if my hand is a shield. “It’s not like poison from a snakebite,” I say, ready to fight him if he tries anything. “It bonded with my magic. It’s part of me now.”

“It is a poison. We need to extract it.” He turns to Morgan, searching for answers. “There has to be something we can do. Some sort of counter potion. An antidote. A spell.”

Morgan glances down at her blood drying on the floor and shakes her head in defeat. “I didn’t see anything about that when I just looked. I can search again later—once my magic replenishes—but I don’t know. I can’t make any promises.”

“You’ll find another way,” I tell her—*beg* her. “Right?”

“I’ll do what I can.” When she looks back up at me, her eyes are scared. Haunted. As if she doesn’t even know me anymore. “In the meantime, you have to do everything in your power to stay away from the Shadow Lord.”

# Morgan



“YOU’RE TALKING about the shadow soul outside the gate.” Amber looks to me with those big blue eyes that are the same color as a cloudless sky, question swirling within them. “The one who tried to...”

Her focus goes to the place in the lobby where the Shadow Lord got his hands on her and realized exactly how much power he was facing.

How he became hungry for it.

For *her*.

“He’s not just any shadow soul,” I confirm. “He’s their leader. They call him the Shadow Lord.”

Damien straightens, his guard going up. “How long have you known this?”

The truth is, I know more than I’m telling them. A *lot* more.

But what happened tonight was necessary. Viktor was going to betray us no matter what.

The question is—would it have happened before we combined the potion’s magic with the compass, or after?

If it happened after, then he would have gotten away with both the compass and the potion. Damien’s clan would have lost any upper hand they were trying to get.

If it happened before, then...

Well, Amber’s current state of being a beacon for shadow souls speaks for that.

But when it comes to my visions, I share as little as I possibly can. Anything else complicates things too much.

People don’t want to know too many details about the future. They think

they do, but they don't. The future is constantly shifting, and when they know too much, they tend to become so focused on trying to change things that they end up making everything worse.

There are certain things that are unchangeable. The question always is: how will we get there? How many will get hurt along the way?

Plus, given that my visions oftentimes aren't clear, it tends to make my head spin as much as theirs.

But there's one thing I know for sure—what happened tonight was the best possible outcome. Amber and Damien don't know it now, but they will in time.

"I've been scrying for information since the night of the attack," I tell them. "I couldn't say for sure until seeing him for myself—I didn't get a good glimpse of him in the ambush here—but that was the Shadow Lord outside the gate."

"What do you know about him?" Amber's eyes glint with the light of the sun, as if she's gathering the magic she needs to destroy the Shadow Lord from where she stands.

"Not much more than that," I say, and she frowns, clearly dissatisfied with my answer.

"What else do you know?" Damien asks. "Did you know about Viktor?"

"No."

I feel horrible about the lie. I can barely look at him when I say the word.

But all that matters is that I'm trying to help. And I won't be able to do that if I lose their trust.

"I'm going to find a way to help you, Amber," I say, changing the subject to something that matters more to them right now than Viktor's betrayal. "But I can't stay here to do it."

Damien crosses his arms, a mixture of concern and skepticism etching his features. "Where will you go?"

"I can't say. But I need you both to trust me. I'm going to do everything I can to help."

Amber nods, quick and trusting.

Damien, however, scrutinizes me a moment longer. "We trust you, Morgan," he finally says. "But be careful."

"Always." I focus on the magic brewing inside me, the flames licking at my core, and without another word, my fire engulfs me completely.

For a split second, I'm nothing. Just smoke in the air, traveling with the



direction of the wind.

Then, my feet are nestled in the ground again.

The flames die out, and I'm no longer in the Fairmont's elegant lobby. Instead, I'm in a dark, dank, abandoned cathedral.

The one my sisters now call home, along with the four others who've joined up with our coven.

The Blood Coven.

My flames fully recede, and I'm standing in their midst, the heat of my arrival drawing stunned gasps from where they're sleeping in their makeshift beds on the floor.

They sit up in shock, their eyes wide at the sight of me. The sister they thought had been lost to the flames months ago.

It's like they're seeing a ghost.

"Morgan?" Zara's eyes narrow, as if she doesn't believe I'm actually me.

She's always been so annoyingly *cynical*. And really, she's one to talk. The dress she's wearing is fraying along the edges, her nails are ragged, and her hair looks like it hasn't been washed in days.

If her past self saw her current self, she'd be appalled.

"Hi," I say, and my eyes find Willow, stretched out beside the altar where Ambrogio lies.

Ambrogio, the original vampire who was banished to the Underworld centuries ago. His thwarted lover, Gwen—a vampire who's now a member of our coven—was determined to bring him back to life. She allied with my sisters and I on promises of power and immortality.

Together, they tried to resurrect him.

They started, but were unable to finish.

And now the arrow—the one Ruby shot through Ambrogio's heart—still protrudes from his chest.

When I saw the vision of Ambrogio with the arrow through his chest, I thought it meant he was going to be dead.

But that's the tricky thing about visions.

They're not always what they seem. There are always loopholes, and secrets lurking in the shadows.

"You're alive." Willow's voice is weak, strained, as though every word is a battle. She looks even worse than Zara. Her skin is sallow and pale, but her eyes are full of unwavering resolve, despite the dark circles beneath them.

Tristan—one of the vampires in our coven—is next to her. He's hovering

close, like he's trying to protect her.

Gwen is at the front of the altar, near Ambrogio's head. The vampire she's adopted as her son—Benjamin—is off to the side. His girlfriend Hazel, a young, powerful witch from a neighboring coven, is next to him. Hazel has her share of issues, but I sort of like her.

I approach Willow at the altar, and the others make no move to get close to me.

"You have to stop." I motion to Ambrogio's pale body before her. "Trying to heal him with your magic is killing you."

She gives me a half smile, looking like a ghost of the sister I left behind. "It's weakening me, yes," she says. "But once he's returned, I'll be stronger than ever. You, of all people, should know that."

I frown, hating that she's right.

It was through my scrying that we confirmed the ancient, whispered rumors Gwen brought to us were true. Any supernatural Ambrogio turns will retain the magic they had before becoming a vampire, thus becoming something the world has never seen.

*A Revenant.*

Zara joins Willow at the altar, watching me like a cat ready to defend herself. Her nails might be ragged, but she apparently still has her claws. "Where have you been?" she asks. "We thought you were dead."

"There was something I needed to do," I say simply.

"And have you done it?"

"I'm working on it."

She purses her lips, sizing me up. It might seem like a cold way to greet the sister you thought was dead, but I know Zara. She probably thinks another supernatural figured out how to do a shapeshifting spell, and that I'm not who I say I am. Or that Ruby—who has illusion magic—is disguising herself as me to infiltrate their lair.

Because that's what this creepy cathedral is. Not a home, but a *lair*.

Complete with a dead—well, mostly dead—vampire corpse in the center of it.

My sister's suspicious gaze doesn't waver, and I know I need to prove myself.

So, I take a deep breath, wracking my mind for a perfect way to do just that.

"When we were kids, remember how we turned our attic into a potion

brewing lair?” I ask, and Zara’s silent, waiting for me to continue. “We used water, leaves, and flower petals, pretending they were rare magical ingredients as we mixed them with wooden cooking spoons. You insisted we make an oath to never tell anyone about our creations.”

It was all fake, obviously. Witches can’t brew potions. That’s for the fae, with their water magic.

“What was the chant we created?” Zara asks, testing me.

“Bubble, brew, and blood unite, mix and stir with all our might.” I chuckle for a moment at how young and innocent we were, and seconds later, Zara’s smiling as well.

But her smile quickly turns into a scowl.

“You let us think you were dead,” she says. “For *four months*.”

“I’m sorry about that. I had... things to do.”

“What sort of ‘things?’”

Some of the prayer candles nearby ignite, and I know she’s *pissed*.

I don’t really blame her.

“Things that will keep us safe,” I say, purposefully being vague in my response.

“It doesn’t matter,” Willow says softly. “All that matters is that you’re here now. With us.”

I swallow, knowing she’s not going to like what’s coming next.

Realization dawns in her eyes before I can say a word.

“You’re not staying,” she says, her voice flat. “Are you?”

“I’m sorry.” Guilt pangs in my chest. “I can’t.”

“You’re being an idiot,” Zara snaps. “You say you’re out there doing something to keep us safe. But out there, you’re *not* safe. If another coven finds out what you are—what you can do—they’re going to kill you for it. Like they did to our parents.”

Her words cut through my heart like a knife, the pain just as sharp as it was on the night our parents were killed.

“We’re always going to be hunted for what we are.” She moves toward me, continuing to twist the knife now that it’s buried inside me. “You don’t need to be able to see the future to know that. The only way we can be safe is if we stay here. We have to support Willow as she gives *everything she has* into healing Ambrogio, so he can turn us into Revenants and give us enough power to stop anyone who decides to hunt us ever again.”

“You belong with us,” Willow adds gently. “Your sisters.”

For a moment, the world tilts, and I'm brought back to that attic with them. Standing around a stovetop pot balanced on a makeshift altar, stirring up ingredients to create potions that could give us powers never heard of before.

But I can't do what they're asking of me.

"You have to stop this." I motion to Ambrogio's corpse, taken aback for a moment by a twitch of his hand. Thankfully, it stills, and I can breathe again. "If Ambrogio rises, the world will plunge into darkness. So many people will die. Every day will be a fight to survive. It'll be like the Dark Ages, but worse."

"The Dark Ages weren't *that* bad," Gwen chimes in, rolling her eyes. "Trust me—I've been there."

I glare at her, since I wasn't asking for her opinion. She'd live in the Stone Age if she thought it was the only way for Ambrogio to be alive and by her side.

Suspicion flashes in Zara's sharp eyes. "If you're not here to rejoin us, then why are you here?"

I turn back to Gwen, reach into my jacket pocket, and bring out the Wraithmist Flask. "I'm here because I stumbled upon something you seem to have lost."

I watch her carefully, waiting for a hint that my suspicion is correct. Because when I was in Europe getting the Labyrinthian Key, I learned about the flask as well.

It was last seen in Italy, in the hands of two vampires who fit Gwen and Benjamin's descriptions perfectly.

Gwen's eyes flicker for the briefest of moments. But then she shakes her head, as if she's a parent chiding me.

"I didn't take you for a closet drinker," she says, sounding more amused than anything. "Although I suppose nothing says, 'I'm preparing for the apocalypse' quite like a pocket-sized bottle of bravery."

Benjamin laughs from where he's sitting off to the side. "If I knew we were drinking to forget our problems, I would've brought a barrel," he adds with a smirk.

Zara, on the other hand, is standing there gaping at me. "How did you get that?"

I stare at her and Willow sadly, since their responses told me all I needed to know.

They're helping the shadow souls. Somehow, they got the flask to the Shadow Lord. That's how he had it. That's how he was able to ambush the Fairmont.

They want him to take over the city.

Which means my sisters are now my enemies.

Ice-cold grief claws at my chest and nearly pulls me down to the floor.

"I can't let you do this," I tell them, tears pushing their way up my throat. "But I'll come back for you. I swear it."

Without another word, I call upon my magic and let my fire engulf me, weaving around my form and concealing me from their sight. The heat's a warm embrace, although nothing could ever comfort me from the pain of leaving my sisters behind, not knowing if I'll be able to help them or not.

But I know this—I will try. I can't let Ambrogio rise. I can't let them turn into Revenants.

Luckily, this isn't all on me. Because the goddesses have chosen others to help stop Ambrogio.

The star touched.

To stop the world from plunging into darkness, I have to help the star touched. Which means I have to figure out how to help Amber control her new magic before the shadows eat her—and the city—alive.

And then I have to do everything I can to ensure she accepts Damien's proposal and takes her place by his side as his eternal queen.

## *From the Author*

Hi! I hope you enjoyed reading *Black Sun*, the first book in the *Vampire Bride* series. I'm currently working on the second book in the series—*Poison Sun*—and will release it as soon as it's ready. (Sometime in the beginning of 2024.)

In the meantime, if you enjoyed *Black Sun*, I'd love if you wrote a review. (One or two sentences is fine!) Reviews are extremely important to authors, because they encourage more readers to pick up the book. Plus, I read every review I get, and they motivate me to write faster!

Here's the link on Amazon where you can leave your review → [mybook.to/vampirebride1](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0C8K8K8K8)

\* \* \*

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\* \* \*

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The next book in the *Vampire Bride* series, *Poison Sun*, will be out soon.

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*The Vampire Wish*  
❧





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For Annika Pearce, winter break with her family was usually a boring affair. Not this year. Everything changes in an instant when vampires attack Annika's family and abduct her to the hidden kingdom of the Vale.

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As Annika desperately searches for a way to escape, she meets a mysterious stranger named Jake who captures her heart and might be her only hope. But as Annika peels back the layers of the mystery surrounding her abduction, she learns that things aren't as they seem. Everyone seems to be hiding a secret. Including Jake.

It turns out that his name isn't even Jake.

It's Jacen.

And he's a vampire.

A vampire *prince*.

With time running out, Annika races to unravel the mystery of the Vale—and decide who to trust. With her heart pulling her in one direction, and her instincts in another, she faces an impossible decision.

Can she get Jacen to fall in love with her and turn her into a vampire, so she can have the strength to escape his dangerous kingdom?

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## *Prologue: Annika*



“RACE YOU TO THE BOTTOM!” my older brother Grant yelled the moment we got off the chair lift.

Mom and Dad skied up ahead, but beyond the four of us, the rest of the mountain was empty. It was the final run of the trip, on our last day of winter break, and we’d decided to challenge ourselves by skiing down the hardest trail on the mountain—one of the double black diamond chutes in the back bowl.

The chutes were the only way down from where we were—the chairlift that took us up here specified that these trails were for experts only. Which was perfect for us. After all, I’d been skiing since I was four years old. My parents grew up skiing, and they couldn’t wait to get me and Grant on the trails. We could tackle any trail at this ski resort.

“Did I hear something about a race?” Dad called from up ahead.

“Damn right you did!” Grant lifted one of his poles in the air and hooted, ready to go.

“You’re on.” I glided past all of them, the thrill of competition already racing through my veins.

Mom pleaded with us to be careful, and then my skis tipped over the top of the mountain, and I was flying down the trail.

I smiled as I took off. I’d always wanted to fly, but obviously that wasn’t possible, and skiing was the closest thing I’d found to that. If I lived near a mountain instead of in South Florida, I might have devoted my extracurricular activities to skiing instead of gymnastics.

I blazed down the mountain like I was performing a choreographed dance, taking each jump with grace and digging my poles into the snow with

each turn. This trail was full of moguls and even some rocky patches, but I flew down easily, avoiding each obstacle as it approached. I loved the rush of the wind on my cheeks and the breeze through my hair. If I held my poles in the air, it really *did* feel like flying.

I was lost in the moment—so lost that I didn't see the patch of rocks ahead until it was too late. I wasn't prepared for the jump, and instead of landing gracefully, I ploofed to the ground, wiping out so hard that both of my skis popped off of my boots.

"Wipeout!" Grant laughed, holding his poles up in the air and flying past me.

"Are you okay?" Mom asked from nearby.

"Yeah, I'm fine." I rolled over, locating my skis. One was next to me, the other a few feet above.

"Do you need help?" she asked.

"No." I shook my head, brushing the snow off my legs. "I've got this. Go on. I'll meet you all at the bottom."

She nodded and continued down the mountain, knowing me well enough to understand that I didn't need any help—I wanted to get back up on my own. "See you there!" she said, taking the turns slightly more cautiously than Grant and Dad.

I trudged up the mountain to grab the first ski, popped it back on, and glided on one foot to retrieve the other. I huffed as I prepared to put it back on. What an awful final run of the trip. My family was nearing the bottom of the trail—there was no way I would catch up with them now.

Looked like I would be placing last in our little race. Which annoyed me, because last place was so not my style.

But I still had to get down, so I took a deep breath, dug my poles into the snow, and set off.

As I was nearing the bottom, three men emerged from the forest near the end of the chute. None of them wore skis, and they were dressed in jeans, t-shirts, and leather jackets. They must have been freezing.

I stopped, about to call out and ask them if they needed help. Before I could speak, one of them moved in a blur, coming up behind my brother and sinking his teeth into his neck.

I screamed as Grant's blood gushed from the wound, staining the snow red.

The other two men moved just as fast, one of them pouncing on my mom,

the other on my dad. More blood gushed from both of their necks, their bodies limp like rag dolls in their attackers arms.

“No!” I flew down the mountain—faster than I’d ever skied before—holding my poles out in front of me. I reached my brother first and jammed the pole into the back of his attacker with as much force as I could muster.

The pole bounced off the man, not even bothering him in the slightest, and the force of the attack pushed me to the ground. All I could do was look helplessly up as the man dropped my brother into the blood stained snow.

What was going on? Why were they *doing* this?

Then his gaze shifted to me, and he stared me down. His eyes were hard and cold—and he snarled at me, baring his teeth.

They were covered in my brother’s blood.

“Grant,” I whispered my brother’s name, barely able to speak. He was so pale—so still. And there was so much blood. The rivulets streamed from the puddles around him, the glistening redness so bright that it seemed fake against the frosty background.

One of the other men dropped my mom’s body on the ground next to my brother. Seconds later, my dad landed next to them.

My mother’s murderer grabbed the first man’s shoulder—the man who had murdered my brother. “Hold it, Daniel,” he said, stopping him from moving toward me.

I just watched them, speechless. My whole family was gone. These creatures ran faster than I could blink, and they were strong enough to handle bodies like they were weightless.

I had no chance at escape.

They were going to do this to me too, weren’t they? These moments—right here, right now—would be my last.

I’d never given much thought to what happens after people die. Who does, at eighteen years old? I was supposed to have my whole life ahead of me.

My *family* was supposed to have their whole lives ahead of them, too.

Now their lifeless, bloody bodies at the bottom of this mountain would be the last things I would ever see.

I steadied myself, trying to prepare for what was coming. Would dying hurt? Would it be over quickly? Would I disappear completely once I was gone? Would my soul continue on, or would my existence be wiped from the universe forever?

It wasn't supposed to be this way. I didn't want to die. I wanted to *live*.

But I'd seen what those men—those *creatures*—had done to my family. And I knew, staring up at them, that it was over.

Terror filled my body, shaking me to the core. I couldn't fight them. I couldn't win. Against them, I was helpless.

And even if I stood a chance, did I really want to continue living while my family was gone?

"We can't kill them all," the man continued. "Laila sent us here to get humans to replace the ones that rabid vampire killed in his bloodlust rampage. We need to keep her alive."

"I suppose she'll do." The other man glared down at me, licking his lips and clenching his fists. "It's hard to tell under all that ski gear, but she looks pretty. She'll make a good addition to the Vale."

He took a syringe out of his jacket, ran at me in a blur, and jabbed the needle into my neck.

The empty, dead eyes of my parents were the last things I saw before my head hit the snow and everything went dark.

# Annika



I HELD OUT MY ARM, watching as the needle sucked the blood from the crease of my elbow and into the clear vial. I sat there for ten minutes, staring blankly ahead as I did my monthly duty as a citizen of the Vale.

Like all humans who lived in the kingdom, I was required to donate blood once a month.

This was my twelfth time donating blood.

Twelve months. One year. That's how long it had been since my family had been murdered in front of my eyes and I'd been kidnapped to the Vale.

When I'd first been told that I was now a blood slave to vampires, I didn't believe it. Vampires were supposed to be *fiction*. They didn't exist in real life.

But I couldn't deny what I'd seen in front of my eyes. Those pale men, how quickly they'd moved, how they'd ripped their teeth into my parents and brother's throats and drained them dry, leaving their corpses at the bottom of that ski trail.

Why had I been the one chosen to live, and not them?

It was all because I'd fallen on that slope. If I hadn't fallen, I would have been first down the mountain. I would have been killed. My mom would have been last, and *she* would have been the one taken.

But my mom wouldn't have been strong enough to survive in the Vale. So even though I hated that I'd lived while they'd died, it was better that I lived in this hellish prison than any of them. I'd always been strong. Stubborn. Determined.

Those traits kept me going every day. They were the traits that kept me *alive*.

At first, I'd wanted to escape. I thought that if I could just get out of this

cursed village, I could run to the nearest town and get help. I could save all the humans who were trapped in the Vale.

I didn't get far before a wolf tried to attack me.

I'd used my gymnastics skills to climb high up on a tree, but if Mike hadn't followed me, fought off the wolf, and dragged me back inside the Vale, I would have been dead meat. The wolves would have eventually gotten to me and feasted upon my body, leaving nothing but bones.

Mike had told me everything about the wolves as we'd walked back to the Tavern. He'd grown up in the Vale, so he knew a lot about its history. He'd told me that they weren't regular wolves—they were shifters. They'd made a pact with the vampires centuries ago, after the vampires had invaded their land and claimed this valley as their own. He'd told me about how the wolves craved human flesh as much as the vampires craved human blood, and how if a human tried to escape—if they crossed the line of the Vale—they became dinner to the wolves.

At least the vampires let us live, so they could have a continuous supply of blood to feast upon whenever they wanted.

The wolves just killed on the spot.

That was the first and last time I'd tried to escape. And after Mike had saved me, we'd become best friends. He'd offered me my job at the Tavern, where I'd been working—and living—ever since. All of us who worked there lived in the small rooms above the bar, sleeping in the bunks inside.

He and the others had helped me cope with the transition—with realizing I was a slave to the vampires, and that as a mere human amongst supernaturals, there was no way out.

They were my family now.

"You're done," the nurse said, removing the needle from my arm. She placed a Band-Aid on the bleeding dot, and I flexed my elbow, trying to get some feeling back in the area. "See you next month."

"Yeah." I gathered my bag and stood up. "Bye."

On my way out, I passed Martha—the youngest girl who worked at the Tavern. She slept in the bunk above mine, and along with being the youngest, she was also the smallest.

It took her twice as long to recover from the blood loss as it did for me.

"Good luck," I told her on the way out. "I'll see you back at the Tavern." I winked, and she smiled, since she knew what I was about to do.

It was what I always did on blood donation day.



I held my bag tightly to my side and stepped onto the street, taking a deep breath of the cold mountain air. It was dark—us humans were forced to adjust to the vampires’ nocturnal schedule—and I could see my breath in front of me. The witch who’d created the shield to keep the Vale hidden from human eyes also regulated the temperature, but she could only do so much. And since it was December in Canada, it was naturally still cold.

I hurried to the busiest street in town—Main Street, as it was so creatively named. Humans manned stalls, and vampires walked around, purchasing luxuries that only they were afforded. Meat, doughnuts, pizza, cheeses—you name it, the vampires bought it.

The vampires didn’t even *need* food to survive, but they ate it anyway, because it tasted good.

Us humans, on the other hand, were relegated to porridge, bread, rice, and beans—the bare necessities. The vampires thought of us as nothing but cattle—as blood banks. And blood banks didn’t deserve food for enjoyment. Only for nourishment.

Luckily, Mike had taught me a trick or two since the day he’d saved me from the wolves. After seeing me climb that tree, he’d called me “scrappy” and said it was a skill that would get me far in the Vale.

He’d taught me how to steal.

It was ironic, really. Stealing hadn’t been something that had ever crossed my mind in my former life. I used to have it good—successful, loving parents, trips to the Caribbean in the winter, skiing out west in the spring, and an occasional voyage to Europe thrown in during the summers. I’d had a credit card, and when I’d needed something, I would buy it without a second thought.

I hadn’t appreciated how good I’d had it until all of that was snatched away and I was left with nothing.

Now I walked past the various booths, eyeing up the delicious food I wasn’t allowed to have. But more than the food, I was eyeing up the shopkeepers and the vampires around them. Who seemed most oblivious? Or absorbed in conversation?

It didn’t take long to spot a vampire woman flirting with a handsome human shopkeeper. I’d seen enough of vampires as a species to know that if the flirting was going to progress anywhere, it would lead to him becoming one of her personal blood slaves, but he followed her every movement, entranced by her attention.

They were the only two people at the booth. Everyone else was going about their own business, not paying any attention to me—the small, orphaned blood slave with downcast eyes and torn up jeans.

Which gave me the perfect opportunity to snatch the food that us humans were forbidden to purchase.

# Annika



I PRESSED up against the stall, brushed a pile of candies into my bag, and scurried away.

Not bothering to glance behind, I stayed to the side of the street, scuttled through an alley, and passed through to the other side. Once there, I leaned against the wall, finally able to breathe again.

Every time I stole, I feared getting caught.

But that wouldn't stop me from doing it. After all, this was the only revenge I had against the vampires. They might have taken away my family, and they might have taken away my freedom, but I refused to let them take away my dignity.

As a human, I was weak and they were strong. I hated them for it, but at the same time, I *envied* them for it. Because after they'd murdered my family in front of my eyes and I was powerless to stop it, I never wanted to feel that helpless again.

But I *did* feel helpless. Every day since I was taken here. How could I not, as a human amongst such powerful creatures? To them, we were animals. We were slaves.

I wish I had the power to change that.

For now, all I had was the power to take from them. Small things, and they never even noticed, but it was the only revenge I had.

I leaned against the wall and smiled, since once again, I'd gotten away with it. And so, after taking a few more deep breaths and steadying the pounding of my heart, I turned the corner and approached the bookstore.

It was empty inside besides the owner, Norbert. He sat at his desk, his eyeglasses on as he read a book. He was an older man—I always imagined

that if we weren't prisoners in the Vale, he would have been a professor at some fancy college. Perhaps even a college I might have chosen to attend.

The moment the door closed, he looked up and smiled at me. "Annika," he said, placing his glasses down at the table. "Anything specific you're looking for today?"

"Just browsing," I told him. "Have you gotten in a new shipment yet?"

"It's only been a few days!" He laughed and leaned back in his chair. "I swear, you read faster than new books can arrive."

"I'm sure I can find something I missed before." I smiled and made my way over to my favorite shelf—the fantasy section—and got started on examining the spines, pulling out the titles that looked interesting and reading the back covers.

Before coming to the Vale, I hadn't been much of a reader—at least, I'd never read books that weren't assigned for class. Between school, gymnastics practices, homework, and spending time with my friends, I didn't have time to read for fun. If I needed to relax after a long day, I usually went straight to the television.

But us humans in the Vale didn't have access to televisions—or to the internet at all. And even with my work at the Tavern, now that I was no longer training for gymnastics competitions I had a lot more extra time on my hands. So I'd discovered the one pastime that humans in the Vale *were* allowed—books.

The books I found at the store here were much more to my taste than the books I'd been assigned to read at school. It hadn't been long until I'd discovered that I loved getting lost in the lives and stories of other people. I loved exploring their hardships, their trials, their love, and how they overcame most everything, despite what seemed like impossible odds.

These days, books were the only things that gave me hope. I treasured them and the stories within them more than anything else in the world.

"That'll be five coins," Norbert said once I placed the book I'd chosen on the counter.

"I don't have coins," I told him. "But I do have something I can trade."

He watched me, waiting, and I pulled one of the candy bars out of my bag. His eyes widened, and he leaned forward with such enthusiasm that I imagined he could practically taste the chocolate already.

It worked every time.

"You're going to get yourself in some serious trouble one day," he said,

his eyes full of warning.

“Perhaps. But that doesn’t stop you from enjoying the candy,” I teased.  
“So... are you willing to trade, or not?”

“You know I am.” He smiled, and as he passed me the book, I handed him the chocolate.

I pulled the book to my chest to give it a small hug, placed it in my bag with the rest of the candies, and headed back to the Tavern.

**Grab it on Amazon:**  
[mybook.to/vampirewish](https://mybook.to/vampirewish)

## About the Author



Michelle Madow is a *USA Today* bestselling author of fast-paced young adult fantasy novels full of magic, adventure, romance, and twists you'll never see coming. She's sold over two million books worldwide and has been translated into multiple languages.

Michelle grew up in Maryland, then moved to Florida, and now lives in New York City. She wrote her first book in her junior year of college and hasn't stopped writing since! She also loves traveling, and has been to all seven continents. Someday, she hopes to travel the world for a year on a cruise ship.

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**BLACK SUN**  
**Star Touched: Vampire Bride 1**

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