

A DRAGON'S SPELL

VOLUME 1

ABBY ARTHUR

ABBY ARTHUR

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

A DRAGON'S SPELL VOLUME 1
Copyright © 2021 by Abby Arthur

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner without written permission of the copyright owner except for the use of quotations in a book review. For more information, address: abbya@abbyarthur.com

First edition January 2021
ASIN: B08P8ZGB2C

Book cover design by Miss Nat Mack
Interior design by Abby Arthur

www.abbyarthur.com

A DRAGON'S SPELL BOOK ONE

*He never wanted
this mission.
Now it might
be his last.*

FIRE AND SHADOW

ABBY ARTHUR

Múlay¹ 19, 1233 J.E. (Jorik Era)
In the 17th year of the reign of
Queen hAmari, Alëunná of the Realm

MY BIRTHDAY: the only day of the year when my egocentric manner is culturally acceptable. I, Albree Vaydmehn, am turning sixteen this week with my identical twin brother. (I'm better looking btw).

I decided to ask for chocolate chip cookies, but not just any cookies. Chocolate chip cookies from my sister, the girl who could burn a bowl of cereal. I don't really care to eat them. I just want to watch the show while she nearly burns half the castle down. Maybe

then my dad would actually leave his throne and take an interest in me outside of politics.

Thinking about it now, I'm sorry I'll miss it all. Sorry I won't get to smell those burnt cookies, won't get to shove cake in my twin's face. The metallic taste of blood tells me so.

It's warm and sticky and wet, tasting like a shot of defeat with a side of failure. Because that's what this is, a bloody lip, melted face, burning agony: Failure.

I don't digress, but I do realize I'm getting ahead of myself. Why would you care I'm lying here with a broken nose and skin melted like a fool in a fiery furnace without the gods' protection?

Let me take it a step further and suggest that maybe you shouldn't care. Perhaps you'd be safer, all alone in your ignorance. I would personally have chosen that and said, "Good day to you, Dragon, and your nefarious spells." (Only in much more colorful language, of course.) Then I wouldn't be here, lying half dead, days before my sixteenth birthday, with failure coursing through my veins, along with something that's desperate to make me rise. It screams in my mind, *Get the Firebender!* And my heart pulls dangerously in the direction of the Jäyûn. Even my blood burns with the need to obey, but this body I'm trapped in won't move, and that damn spell is to blame.

Gasping as I roll to my stomach, I try to submit, try

to crawl, try not to scream. But the agony is overwhelming, and a gurgled cry escapes me. Wetness melts down my cheeks, burning the raw skin. Every part of me is broken, I realize.

Shadows surround me everywhere in this morning light, even drape across my body at the first rays of dawn. I can't see them because my eyes are swollen shut, but I can feel them, calling out like a best friend wishing me to share his secrets. But I can't. Shadows have always been my safe place, my refuge, my home. And that firebender, she exploited the shadows, destroyed them, won.

Just let me die, I say to the spell trying to get me up. It pauses, as if considering my suggestion. Pokes my chest to see if I'll move, but I just moan in agony. It glowers with unseen eyes, says I still have lethal talent in me and I need to fulfill this mission. It doesn't care about my birthday, doesn't bother to think of my twin brother who would know the second I'm gone from this realm. It doesn't even care about the music I've written, about the band I'm a part of, or the upcoming release of our first album. It only cares that I do what it says: Bring the firebender to the dragon. If I want to die, I can do it when that task is done.

I slump to the ground, begging to differ, but it pulls harder, making my limbs scream as if acid was just poured on my wounds.

The sound that leaves me is so pitiful, I should run myself through with a blade. I slide my hand towards the dagger at my belt, but the spell stops my arm like some twisted friend eager to see me suffer.

Words enter my ears ... a soft melody sung under someone's breath. It's kind, lovely ... dare I say, surreal. Perhaps anything that can distract me from this struggle within is surreal.

Calmness enters me from my shoulder, seeps across my body like holy water soothing the protests of my wounds. I try to knock the source away, tell whomever this is that I'm not worth saving. It's better for everyone if I end here.

But gentle fingers find my forehead, and I'm sucked into a calm, dark nothing.

RATTLING chains draw me to consciousness, and I look through groggy eyelids to see a blurred scene before me. Blinking numerous times, an unadorned room comes into view. Wood paneled walls. One simple, square window looking out at the side of another building. Nothing luxurious, not even the lumpy bed below me.

My gaze slides to my left arm secured to an iron headboard by a cuff and the chains that woke me. I'm shirtless, though I don't know if that's due to what the firebender did to me or because my mysterious savior took it off. Regardless, the tattoo of a dagger under my left bicep is a glaring reminder of why I'm alive. Still intact. Still hiding the curse of my existence.

Inside, the spell glares at the cuff around my wrist,

desires to rip it free and make me run. The firebender is still out there, and I'm less broken than before. To it, I'm in a perfect position to continue on. Claw marks around my wrist make me think it's already tried to break the chains. I don't remember clawing myself, but I do notice how the shackles are glowing faintly with glittering magic, and the swirling of my powers within is currently suppressed. Whoever did this knows I'm a Jäyûn and doesn't want me to get away.

Clattering by the door draws my attention, and my gaze flashes in that direction. The small movement smarts my neck, and I moan as the door opens. A slim figure walks in backwards, hunched over something. I can tell she's female by the dress and how it curves gently over her hips. Long hair cascades down her back. Blond with red streaks. A natural color to match the neon red eyes that widen in surprise when she sees I'm awake.

Staring, I feel no shame as I take in the dark blue, tattoo-looking birthmark swirling on her hand and up her wrist—the telling trait of an Ètâscèn. “Hello,” she says after a second. Her surprised look washes from her face as she steps forward with a tray. Different colored liquids in beakers and jars rest on it.

“Is this your doing?” I ask, rattling the chain.

She sets the tray on a bare table beside the bed, close

enough that I can smell the medicinal scent emanating from it. “It is,” she says boldly.

My lips pull in an almost smile. “Well done.”

Her neon eyes find me, but the expression on her face isn’t endearing. She’s almost scowling, which makes her look surprisingly adorable. I don’t look away as she pulls up a simple chair. She dips a cloth into a blue liquid and starts dabbing it at the rawness on my chest.

“There was fabric melted into your skin,” she says, keeping her gaze on her birthmarked hand, which is now glowing. Her magic mixes with the potion and soothes the wounds. “Your face was the worst, though.” She glances to me, expression caring, then back to her hand. “That mask you wore melted into your lips and cheeks. I had to take the most time fixing it. I used your brother’s portrait to help; he keeps his hair out of his face.”

My heart skips a beat, and my blood chills. “So you know who I am?”

“I figured it out.”

She dabs the cloth into the potion and back to my chest. Her touch is soft, and I just stare at her young, smooth face, thinking she’ll say more. When she doesn’t, I wonder at how calm and focused she is. Her appearance reminds me of the girls at school, but the way she’s not giggling or blushing at the idea of being

this close to me, shirtless nonetheless, speaks of her maturity.

“How old are you?” I ask.

She lifts a brow and spares me a glance but never stops mending my injuries. “You ask my age before you ask my name? Cheeky, don’t you think?”

I hiss when the cloth touches a particularly tender spot on my side, and she leans closer. Red streaked hair brushes my arm as she inspects the wound. Her closeness makes my heart pound and my breath catch ... or maybe I’m just in that much pain.

“You were stabbed too,” she says and sets down the cloth to place her hands on the spot that made me hiss. Her fingers are cold, and though it hurts like a stab wound should, I don’t protest this time. She closes her neon red eyes and says something in the Ètâscèn language, which causes the pain to seep away like a memory lost to the wind.

The birthmark on her hand never stops glowing, and her power seeps inside me, knitting together everything that was torn. It was a spell I used, I recall, that stopped the bleeding ... slightly before the firebender roasted me.

“You can call me Hinya,” she says when she’s done and removes her hands. A slight frown pulls her lips when she sees what remains. A scar. “I’m sorry I didn’t

get to it faster. I thought you might want a smooth face more than a scar-free abdomen.”

I lift a shoulder because I don’t care either way—and partly because I’m having too much fun watching her. I can’t believe how she’s still acting so calm. “Hinya, then. How did you figure out who I am?”

She turns back to her tray of potions, ever the diligent healer it appears, and sets back to my chest and stomach, which is still chiseled like a statue, I might add.

“It wasn’t that hard. When I saw your eyes were purple and you attempted to shadow-walk, I knew immediately.”

“I tried to shadow-walk?” I gape in surprise. I don’t normally do that so obviously, especially when I’m supposed to be undercover.

She snorts. “You did. After I brought you in here from outside the inn. You woke up and pushed me to the floor, where you also fell limp like a dead man. You then tried to crawl towards the darkest shadow and your hand disappeared.” She looks sheepish for a moment. “I jumped on you so you couldn’t go anywhere without me, but your power was too drained to try. I had my dad bring the chain, and he helped me shackle you to the bed.”

My gut sinks, and I moan in misery. “How many people know who I am?”

“Only my dad and I. We work here at the inn together. You’re lucky it was I who saw you first this morning. This is a small village. If anyone else knew there was a half-dead prince at the town inn, the gossip wouldn’t be stopped, and leaving in secret would be impossible.”

Her words settle on me, and I keep my gaze on her, watch her heal my skin. “Why are you helping me?”

“Because I’m an Ètâscèn. It’s my nature and sacred duty to help an injured human.”

“Even one as foul as me?”

She pauses in the middle of dabbing my skin and looks me full on. “The person is never evil. It’s the spell they’re under that changes them.”

So she knows that too ... How much has she put together in this short time I’ve been here?

“More than you need to know,” she says, and I fear I spoke aloud. She shakes her head at my thought. “You were dying, Albree Vaydmehn. Saving your life wasn’t easy.” She pulls the collar of her shirt down to show me a slit in her skin, still looking raw and on the mend. She points to my chest where an identical wound lingers.

My throat dries. She shared part of herself with me. “Why?”

She avoids eye contact this time and seems to dive into her work again, as if refusing to answer.

“Why?” I demand. “Ètâscèn know not to share them-

selves with others. Doing something like that cuts back on your life span.”

“It is my duty to help.” She still doesn’t look at me, but I see the way she swallows, how her eyebrows raise momentarily into a flat line, telling me she fears to think of it.

I grab her wrist with my hand that’s not shackled to the bed. “If I die tomorrow, you die with me.” I’m staring her straight in those bright, red irises.

She nods, and her eyes water like she’s about to cry, but she lifts her chin and takes in a deep breath. “You, Albree Vaydmehn, Prince of Jasikx, cannot die tomorrow, nor the next day, or the next day. Your destiny is much too great.”

A shiver runs down my sternum. I pause, still staring into her gaze. “You saw my future?”

HINYA LOOKS BACK to her hands, gently pries her wrist from my grasp. “I cannot say.”

“Which means ‘yes.’”

She doesn’t look at me, doesn’t elaborate, but takes a new potion and rubs it into my chest. The skin is almost brand new, almost completely healed.

The words to press her are at the tip of my tongue, but the spell inside me draws my attention back to the shackles on my wrist. It glares, even cusses like some teenager that didn’t get his way. I’m intrigued by how young it acts, not that I’m much different. But it comes from a dragon as old as time. I’d think it’d have a more mature way of being.

The spell throws a cuss word in my direction, then glares back at the shackles again.

Give it a rest, I think to it. We're here until Hinya decides to let us go. Just deal.

I take control over my gaze and look back to the Ètâscèn. Her cloth has left my skin, and she places it on the tray. Without looking to me, her bare hands touch my stomach, her eyes close, and she feels along my muscles. Her birthmark glows the whole time, and if it weren't for that, I'd think she was taking advantage of this situation.

Despite my best efforts, my heart pounds madly, and I can't seem to keep my mouth shut. "Is this really necessary?"

She doesn't answer but keeps running her fingers along my body, up across my chest, down along my side, lower still.

I catch her wrist in my free hand, and her gaze flashes open. "Sorry," she says ... Though, part of me is upset I *did* stop her.

"What are you doing?"

"There's ... something else." She bites her lip and her brow creases. "I can't explain what it is. It's across your whole body but seems soul deep. I don't know if I would've noticed it if I hadn't linked myself to you, but ..." She licks her lips, looking to me with those neon eyes, and my heart doesn't want to stop pounding. "Do you ever feel strangely tired for no reason?"

I lift a shoulder. “I guess I go to bed early a lot. And take naps when I can. What high schooler doesn’t?”

She nods, biting her lip again. Damn those lips.

“What are you trying to say?” I ask when she doesn’t speak.

“I’m not sure. It’s too early to tell.”

“But you think there’s something wrong with me?”

“I think ... I don’t know. I’ve never seen this before. I think you should have someone back home check you out.”

My mouth twitches. “Aren’t you doing a good enough job of that?”

She shakes her head, and I don’t think she catches my pun because those lush lips of hers angle downward. “I can only do so much. I’m a hundred and eight. There are Ètâscèn more experienced than me who might know. But I think your grandmother would be a better judge on this.”

“An expert on me and my family, are you?” I can’t hide a cocky smirk.

She scowls ever so slightly, like she’s trying to be the better person here. “Fordanel de Guandair is a legend in the Ètâscèn world. Your bloodline—the line from your grandmother, not your father—has been linked strongly to the Ètâscèn since the noble lineage of your grandmother’s family began.”

My brow creases, because she’s speaking of things I

don't fully understand. My royal blood, the Vaydmehn blood, has been chronicled since the founding of Jasikx. But the blood from Grandmum, the Blitzkurr family line, is shrouded in secrets. "How do you know the Blitzkurrs?"

She pauses in the middle of dabbing another potion onto a rag. "The Ètascèn know many things about the noble families. We live longer, don't we?"

My jaw clenches, and my brow narrows as I study her. She speaks carefully, planned, like one who knows how to talk around her secrets.

I say, "I know Clyde was the boy the Blitzkurrs were founded from, and that the High Queen thought highly of him."

"Yes." She's not looking at me again and gets up from her chair.

"You're leaving?"

"Aren't you hungry?"

My lips pinch in a tight frown. "And aren't you trying to avoid my questions?"

Her blond brows resituate, and her lips pull to one side in a forced smile. "Aren't you being as forward as a gryphon in a duel?"

"Isn't that how a gryphon wins?"

She smiles genuinely this time, making an adorable dimple on her left cheek appear. But she doesn't say more, just grabs the tray of potions and walks away.

My gaze follows her to the door, watching her open it with one hand. I wait until it shuts behind her.

You have a mission, the spell nearly hisses at me.

I roll my eyes. “And you’re stuck here with me and this enchanted chain.”

So figure out how to get rid of it.

“You figure it out.”

Tried already, remember? It scowls and claws at the cuff with my free hand, nicking my skin and causing crimson to ooze from a new wound. The spell grins slightly at the inflicted pain, which I deliberately ignore.

The door opens again, and Hinya enters with a small bowl in hand. Steam curls from the top. She pauses before shutting the door behind her, eyes glued to the red on my chained arm.

“It’s the spell,” I say nonchalantly with a tiny shrug.

She scowls and sets the soup she brought on the table beside me. Smells like chicken and rice with a blend of spices commonly used by the people of this kingdom ... South Lémuel—if I remember correctly—the spell took me here in a nearly blinding dash through the shadows.

Hinya takes a cloth from a pocket in her dress and leans across me to wipe away the blood. Her scent, like flowers in a meadow, gently floats over me.

“Can’t get close enough, can you?” I grin.

Her mouth curves down, and she pulls the cloth away, my skin renewed. “Eat up,” she says. “You need to finish what you started to stop that spell from tearing you apart.”

“If you knew what it was up to, you’d think it better to keep me here, let me starve to death.”

“If I did that, all my efforts would be for nothing.” Her fingers come to her chest where the scar of her joining spell lingers, and I remember how insensitive it is to talk of ending myself now that it would end her too.

I sit upright and take the soup bowl in hand, rest it on my lap, and start eating. “You going to tell me what you know about Clyde?” I ask around mouthfuls.

“Do you want me to leave you alone?”

“Alright then. What should we talk about? ... My future maybe?”

“How about we discuss a way for you to stay alive in these next few hours.”

“And finish the evil I set out to do?”

She looks to her hands, rubs her thumb nail. “Sometimes, humans have to do things they can’t help, but it’s the spell, not the person. And right now, getting rid of that spell is the most important thing.”

“Be even better if I could keep the spell from coming in the first place.”

“One day, you just might do that.”

I pause with the spoon held to my lips. “Is that some insight you’re hinting at?”

“I can’t say.”

My brow twitches and I devour the spoonful. “So, what do you have in mind for now?”

“Don’t try and defeat the one with fire the same way you tried before.”

I snort. “That’s obvious.”

“What other skills do you have, besides combat and shadow-walking?”

“I was thinking the same thing, but killing her isn’t an option.”

“You’re Fordanel de Guandair’s grandson. She taught you before that dragon took you. What of her training can you use?”

I rack my brain, grin when an idea comes to mind.

She nods, leans over me again, and places her hand over the cuff. Her birthmark glows, and the cuff clicks open. The spell inside me rises with vile glee before my wrist fully leaves the shackles. My powers flood to the surface of my being, and as she says, “Do that,” I sink into the nearest shadow, and the spell forces me to flee.

SHOPPING. That's what she's doing. That vicious, burning, scorching firebender is *shopping*... with a bunch of other girls. I can hardly believe it as I watch her from the shadows, see her laugh and point at shoes she thinks are cute, tries on dresses. It makes me want to gag. My own sister isn't like this. Though, my own sister is a bit insane ... so maybe this is how normal girls behave.

It still doesn't make sense. Was it just yesterday I sparred her in the woods? Nearly took off her head? Just yesterday that she turned me into a melted lump of miserable teenage refuse?

But she's shopping ... as if nothing happened, as if today is some normal, happy-go-lucky day in this bright and green city. And here I am, watching from the

shadows, waiting for my opportunity to strike. I won't face her head-on again. I learned my lesson well the first time. And though the spell inside me is giddy and hardly patient, it trusts my plan and waits. Keeps me company with meaningless talk, distracting me from the questions my encounter with Hinya created.

The firebender and her girlfriends enter a café, and I sweep behind them in the shadows, being sure to avoid the firebender's shadow. She will know if I step into hers; that's part of how she won last time.

Drinks are ordered. The girls sit, giggle, and drive me crazy with how much they talk. But I keep an eye on the firebender's drink, watching as a server puts it on a tray. I slink up to it in the shadows and let my hand appear beside it for the briefest moment, long enough to drop a few dribbles of the concoction I mixed up on my way here.

The spell grins, nearly bouncing up and down inside me with its eager glee. But still we wait, watch, listen until the girl-talk nearly makes me flee like a cat from water. It makes me miss my sister's sarcastic banter and my brother's quietness. What I wouldn't give to be with them now, away from this girliness.

And then they *finally* decide to leave, stepping out of the café to go off on yet *another* shopping excursion.

Watching the firebender's eyes, I can see my potion taking effect, notice her eyelids drooping. She follows

her friends out, mentions how tired she suddenly is to the girlfriend closest to her. The friend looks concerned, offers to bring the firebender home. But as the girlfriend turns to call out to the other friends, firebender's eyes close. Her body goes limp, and before she can hit the ground, I let my hand materialize from the shadows, touch her back, and bring her sleeping body into the darkness with me.

The spell inside lightens its pulse through my veins, the main part of my assignment done. In the dragon's voice, it tells me, *Well done*, as I rapidly move through the shadows to a sub-train and start the trek home to that dragon. *Look's like you will see your sixteenth birthday after all.*

"And watch my sister burn cookies," I say sarcastically, my victim sound asleep in my arms.

A DRAGON'S SPELL BOOK TWO



SHATTERED
BLADES

*Two against one
should be easier
than this...*

ABBY ARTHUR

Täsöfäy¹ 20, 1233 J.E. (Jorik Era)
In the 17th year of the reign of
Queen hAmari, Alëunná of the Realm

LYRICS CLAW through the air like a spell searching out its prey, captivating the audience in a blanket of sound and illusion. I see it all firsthand, on stage with my little sister and the band. We are the spell weavers—our guitar, bass, and drums our weapons. My sister's voice is the commanding officer. No one escapes us. Everyone in the crowd is under our control, willingly bound to the power of Sheva and the Serenities.

This is my favorite place, here on stage with my

sister, my best friend, and my cousin. I don't feel like a prince when I'm holding my bass. I don't feel like a trained assassin who can kill as quickly as he can tell a lie. And most of all, I don't feel like the boy who's slowly dying from an incurable disease. I'm just Albree, just a sixteen-year-old who loves music—who is just as tangled up in the spell of our song as the audience abounding with our raving fans. I've never felt so alive.

Psycho they call me
Psycho they name me
Psycho
As if I'm doing this alone
Psycho they blame me
Psycho they hate me
Psycho

This is my favorite song, not that I don't love them all. The humming of the guitar mixed with the bashing of the drums and my sister's voice when she says psycho is one of the most gratifying feelings. And the range of Sheva's voice, the highs and the lows, brings the lyrics to life.

Into the dark I stare
Shadows and light beware
You're not as safe as you think

*Creeping in and out
 All of us prowling around
 And here I wait to defeat*

My fingers play a riff, short and electrifying, making the crowd scream as they join Sheva in the chorus once more.

*Psycho they call me
 Psycho they name me
 Psycho
 As if I'm doing this alone
 Psycho they blame me
 Psycho they hate me
 Psycho*

*Coming from everywhere
 Gathering here and there
 I won't let you in too deep
 Creeping in and out
 All of us prowling around
 And here I wait to defeat*

And the final chorus comes—the loudest most blood-pumping, stage-rocking blare of the night. I never want this to end. I want to be here forever. But the final notes vibrate from my strings, and my sister

does one last strut across the stage in her skimpy dress and stiletto heels. The last word is sung, the last note played, and with the screaming of our crowd, we disappear backstage.

“Albree, you slayed it!” cries Tarrek, my twin brother. He’s leaning against a vanity I’d previously used to make sure my eyeliner didn’t look girly. He chucks a water bottle at me, and I let go of my bass to catch it, feeling the instrument pull on my shoulder as I turn the bottle’s cap. I give him a halfhearted glare before I take a long, dragging gulp. His purple gaze, the same as mine, glimmers with mischief, and I raise a brow. “When did you show up?”

“Bout three songs in. I wanted to be sooner, but Dad had a meeting with the council, and he wanted me to join him.”

“The sorrows of an heir,” I sigh and throw the water bottle back at him without the lid, causing it to spew water across the room *and* on his shirt. “Let me compose a song about your laments.”

Tarrek catches the bottle in one hand and pulls his wet shirt forward with the other. The corner of his mouth hints at a grin. “Or I can compose your obituary speech.”

I sneer back and push him away from the vanity to make space for myself. There’s a bottle of pills in the corner. I open it to pour one small, yellow specimen

into my palm and swallow it down dry. There's a tiredness in my limbs I refuse to acknowledge, something I've tried to ignore since I met that Ètàscèn a month ago—the one who nursed me back to health after the injuries I suffered from a firebending Jäyûn.

“Could be doing that sooner than you think,” I say of my brother and that obituary speech.

Tarrek's expression goes somber, and I see it in the mirror, notice how his brow bends with concern. “Sorry,” he says as the sound of heels clicking rapidly across the ground draws our attention. We both turn, just as my sister springs at Tarrek. Catching her in a clumsy embrace, he falls back against the vanity.

“You made it!” Sheva's voice is muffled against his chest. Her long, black hair hides her face from view.

“Yep.” Tarrek moves to stand upright and pushes our tiny sister away. The top of her head comes to our chins.

“Are you joining us at the party too?” she asks him.

“Wouldn't miss it.”

Tarrek's grinning a genuine smile that makes his eyes sparkle and his brow soften; it's what he and I might look like on a normal basis if our world wasn't so corrupt.

I watch that smile melt away slowly, like ice melting from a roof. His jaw begins to clench, and his gaze clouds over slightly. I don't have to ask why. There's a

clawing at the side of my mind, something scraping to get inside and talk. Rather than let it cause a migraine, I open the gates to the front of my thoughts and let the dragon I hate enter.

I have a mission for you, she thinks, and I know my brother and I are going to miss the party.

“A MULTIPLIER?” I say, my voice muffled from the mask over my mouth. My brother wears one too, an attempt to hide our identities. We’re both crouched under night’s cover on the roof of a bus. No point riding inside when we’re trying to go unnoticed and our exit point isn’t any of the designated stops.

“I’ve never met one before,” Tarrek admits while looking at his hand. It’s covered in the type of glove he likes to wear, one with the fingers cut out so he can easily feel his bow when shooting. That bow is currently strapped to his back, and his exposed fingers glow a faint purple with the spell he’s using to stay secured to this bus. I don’t use a spell, but rather activate my powers and secure myself to the shadows at my feet.

“We’re almost there,” I say as a pulsing in my veins pulls my heart foreword, telling me we’re heading the right way. The prey we’re after isn’t far.

“She said he’s good,” Tarrek warns, bringing his purple gaze to mine.

“Are you reassuring me or trying to psych me out?”

His expression is all I need. A cross between him saying *you know what I mean* and *just get this over with*.

To oblige, I touch his arm and take us both into the night’s shadows, two ghosts slinking through the darkness.

Trees rise up on all sides. We’re in some forest in the south of Jasikx. It’s quiet, with only the sound of nature’s life to interrupt the night. As we sweep past, that nature silences, skitters into the brush, peeks back out when we’re gone. I can feel the animals and the bugs because I sense their shadows. Part of me tries to focus on them, just to see how the spell inside me responds.

Get the multiplier, the spell hisses at me in the dragon’s voice.

My lips twitch with knowing I annoyed it, but the spell tugs a smidgen harder to remind me who’s in control. My grin leaves, and I stop at the bottom of a hill. I drop my brother in a less than gentle manor out of the shadows, and he stumbles to catch himself as I materialize at his side.

Tarrek gives me a look, one with a raised brow and piercing purple eyes that say, *You butthead* (more colorfully of course).

I tug at a gauntlet on my forearm, checking my needle supply and pretending not to notice my twin's irritation.

Nodding towards the hill, Tarrek follows my gaze to see smoke rising from a cottage at the crest. Yellow light beams out into the darkness.

There! The spell cries with this venomous glee that makes my insides shiver.

The sigh that leaves Tarrek tells me the spell also informed him. We don't speak. I just look at him, half lit by moonlight, before I sink into the shadows and rush up the hill alone.

The multiplier is there, a burly man unaccompanied in the cottage. A fire flickers in the hearth. He's got a book in hand and a steaming cup of something in the other. There's no spell around the cottage to keep unwanted guests out. Being this deep into the woods, he's either very brave or very stupid. By the number of weapons displayed on the wall, I'm going with the latter—too many ways for someone to kill him.

As fast as I came, I slink away and find my brother at the bottom of the hill. He's gone. Visibly that is. I'm shadow, and he's light, and since he's light, he can manipulate it so no one can see him. The only reason I

know he's hiding by a tree is because I can feel the push of his powers against the shadows, the very reason he can never hide from me.

"It's just him," I say in shadow form.

Tarrek stands up straight, and I feel him take his bow from his back. "Not sure that's a good thing. This isn't supposed to be easy."

"The dragon wouldn't have chosen *us* for the job if it was." My hand materializes so I can grip his invisible arm. "I'll take you up the hill. Once I get him, I'll bring him home. You'll have to find your own way."

"Be nice if you could learn to carry more than one person."

I suck him into the darkness with me. "Where's the fun in that?"

He doesn't reply because we're at the cottage. I seep us through the shadows under the door, and we materialize as two twins poised to strike. I'm not surprised by what I see before me because I'd felt the number of shadows increase before we came in. What was just one burly man by the fire is now ten burly men holding every weapon that was displayed on the wall.

Needles shoot from my gauntlets and slice through the bodies as if they were holograms. Tarrek shoots arrows as fast as I unleash my needles, two a second, sometimes faster. But the burly man is skilled, and most of our projectiles are knocked to the side.

I disappear and attempt to test each figure with a quick dagger to the skin, which I let appear in one hand from the shadows. But the man and his clones are on to me, and I get a foot to the fingers when I'm trying to slice that special tendon behind the heel.

I scream as the bones in my fingers crunch, leaving the dagger behind. In one fell swoop, I form the rest of myself and spin to kick the man in the head. I know what I'm doing, and the blow is hard enough to knock him to the floor. Blood drips from his nose, but I don't have a chance to do him in. Another copy of the man comes at me with an axe. I jump backwards and disappear into the shadows again before he can damage my new jacket.

Showing up behind him, I shoot another needle to find it passes right through. That's when I know the one that bled is the one I'm after, but he's already on his feet and running out the door.

"I got him!" I tell Tarrek, who's fending off the rest of the clones.

I'm in the shadows behind the man outside, racing faster than he can run. I'm about to jump him, when suddenly a blazing bright light blinds me. The shadows are completely torn from my grasp and my figure bursts into my human form.

I draw a blade as I fall and spin to see a sword barreling down on me, slicing through light so bright I

can't see my opponent. My blade catches the sword, and I grunt in misery as I try to hold it with my one good hand and the broken one.

The glowing figure draws back, and I try to find a shadow, but there are none in my reach. His sword slices down, glowing with a yellow light, and as I try to stop it, our blades suddenly shatter like a glass window exploding from a bomb.

Before I can wrap my mind around why my opponent destroyed both our weapons, something hard strikes my head, and the bright light turns to darkness.

HUMMING spins in a world of black and white, creating shapes that look like the silhouette of a ghost. That humming sounds so familiar ... like the sound my mother made when she was thinking, a sweet and gentle noise that made the realm feel safe. It was a false illusion, of course, coming to an end when she was murdered one horrific vacation, now lost to a different life. So a ghost, indeed, if I'm thinking of her tonight.

Something cold passes through my lips, burns like alcohol on my tongue, and drips down my throat.

Choking, coughing, I jerk upright. The silhouette moves back.

Red splatters before me, the cough still coming. A cool hand touches my chest, sends shivers down my

abdomen, and swirls something calming into my stomach.

The silhouette draws closer, and the coolness from that hand finds my head. Red enters my vision again, but it's not crimson like my blood. It's neon like the setting sun. Like the eyes of the person in my dreams. The person who shared her soul to save my life.

And now my dream is bent over me, like a lost melody returning at the perfect moment.

My fingers find her face, brush a cheek bone with my thumb, feeling how real she seems. And before the dream can end, I fill the space between us and press my lips to hers.

She feels soft against my mouth. Warmth and sweetness, like fresh fruit juice, lingers on her lips.

My hand slides into her hair, that blond hair streaked with red, and her mouth meets mine in kisses so sweet I want to stay in this dream forever.

But she pulls away, like she always does.

"You're not dreaming," she says.

"Hinya," I say as my heart cries inside because I so want it to be true.

"Albree," she says back with a slight twitch of her brow, a look that seems more accusatory than I remember. "Why is it I'm always meeting you when you're about to die? Do you forget how much I gave for you to live?"

My eyes widen and I grab her shoulder, feel how solid she is before me. Her questioning gaze, mixed with an edge of sass, follows my touch, watches as I grab her hand and study the birthmark-like tattoo that swirls there.

Bringing my eyes back to her face, I see traces of blood on her mouth. My blood. “You’re really here?”

She laces her fingers into mine and sits on the floor beside me. It’s then I realize I’m in a room at some cottage, but not the same one I found that multiplier in. This one is nicer looking, like it has a feminine touch to it.

“I’m really here.”

“Why? How?”

“I should be asking the same of you. Have you not sought your destiny?”

Propping myself up on my elbows, I draw my face close to hers again. She doesn’t back away. “How am I supposed to go looking for something when I don’t know what I’m looking for?”

She tilts her head. Those neon eyes blaze into mine in a way that’s surprisingly reassuring, despite the fire in them. “How are you supposed to find anything if you don’t go looking for it?”

I brush her hair back over her shoulder, revealing her smooth neck. My heart pounds with how close she

is, how real she is. “I’ve thought about you every day since I met you.”

Hinya sighs, pulling her hand from where it was intertwined with mine. “I’m sorry that’s happened.”

My heart freezes at the change in her tone, at the way she pulls back a smidgen. “What do you have to be sorry about? You saved me, twice now. I should be sorry for causing trouble.”

Her gaze shoots back to me. “You should be sorry for your idleness, and you should forget about me.”

Words stick in my mouth. “What are you saying?”

She breathes in deeply, touches my chest where a scar lingers—where she connected her soul to mine. “You think you love me, Albree Vaydmehn. But I’m not a human. I’m an Ètâscèn. It is my duty to heal people, to give up my life even to save yours. What you feel for me isn’t love. Not the sort of love you need, the one you will find in a human woman meant for *you*.”

“Stop.” I touch her hand and see the look in her eyes, like it hurts her to say this. “You can’t say you haven’t thought of me.”

“No.” She swallows. “I can’t say that. But I can say you are more than just a boy. More than just a prince. You aren’t your brother’s shadow. You aren’t a speck in the darkness. You are a force to reckon with, one mighty and destined for a place only few dare to dream. Do you dare to dream, Albree?”

She asks the last part with such intensity, I don't want to answer. "I dream of being free."

"Dream bigger. Because you're meant for bigger things. Don't let that dragon squelch your power. When you realize who you are, no one can hold you back but yourself."

"Hinya." I touch her face again, glad I'm seeing her in person. "Just let me enjoy this moment, please."

She covers my hand on her cheek with her own, closes her eyes to take in a breath, as if she's soaking this up as much as I am. "You don't have much time, Albree. The spell will break through."

"What do you mean?"

Hinya looks around the room. "You're in a safe place. A haven, where the Ètâscèn come to learn. But a spell as powerful as one from the Dragon of Darkness cannot be subdued for long. Not even here."

"A haven? Is that why you're in Jasikx?"

She nods once, causing that red and blond hair to fall back over her shoulder.

"The multiplier. He brought me here?"

Her lips quake in a false attempt to smile. "No. A mutual friend did. One who doesn't want me to die because of you."

I open my mouth to say more, but a twisting in my chest makes me pause. A pounding in my mind freezes my soul, and the words of the spell burst through like a

war hammer to the doors of a city gate. *GET THE MULTIPLIER!*

As if she can see what's happening, Hinya leans forward in one quick swoop. Her lips brush mine with a soft, fluttery kiss. "Don't come looking for me," she says, and I feel her place cloth in my hand, my face mask, just as the spell forces me to disappear into the shadows.

TARREK'S SITTING with his invisibility on the edge of the small Ètâscèn town. The spell pulls me to him. *He needs you*, it says in its demanding, friendless tone.

Through the atmosphere where our power's clash, I can feel Tarrek's hands moving in quick, jerking motions as his whole body rocks back and forth. If it weren't for the fine wood chips jumping out of nowhere, I'd think the spell already made him crazy. But the fact he's making more arrows doesn't take away from the mutters I hear floating through the air.

"Why'd you wait for me?" I ask, but the mutters don't stop. "Tarrek." I form myself in front of him, touch his shoulder.

"C-can't ... w-won't ... do it alone."

I crouch before his invisible figure, look to where his face should be. “I’m here, Tarrek. Whatever darkness is messing with you, it can give up now. Let’s go finish this so you can have your mind back.”

He appears before me in the seated position he’s been in, face mask dangling from one ear so I clearly see his jaw clenched. The whites of his eyes are red around the purple irises that match mine, but the hardness in the gaze is not a look my brother would give.

My blood boils, and my brow hardens. “I’m talking to my brother, not you.”

“But I wanted to thank you for giving me this opportunity to step forward. He was struggling so much with that spell while waiting for you, it was just too easy to take over.”

“We don’t have time for this.” I slam my palm against my twin’s forehead and let a spell roll off my tongue—a spell I’ve learned to perfect for these moments when my brother loses himself.

A deep, gravelly hiss snakes from Tarrek’s mouth, but after a matter of seconds, it’s gone. He coughs and leans forward to vomit on the grass—a side effect of the darkness returning to its hiding place behind his soul.

“Sorry,” my twin says as he wipes his mouth and sits back on his haunches. A shiver visibly shakes him while he stretches his mask across his lips and secures it over

his other ear. Still shaking, he plants his hands on the ground until the quivering finally passes. “I couldn’t keep the darkness and the spell back at the same time.”

“I saw that. Why didn’t you just finish it?”

“The situation complicated.”

“How so?”

“You know, the usual if we don’t move fast enough. These targets the dragon sends us after get backup.”

I cuss and shake my head. “Everything is so much easier when the goal is to kill them. Why in the name of Lady Wisdom and the Great God Naertho do we have to bring this one back alive!”

Tarrek rubs his chin. “I don’t want to know. I just want to get this done.” A visible shiver shakes him again. “I can’t resist the spell anymore. You’re here.” He holds out his hand. “Let’s go.”

Touching his palm, I suck him into the shadows with me and follow the pull of the spell in my chest, guiding me to our target. He isn’t far, to my surprise. We find him in a small human village a few miles from the Ètâscèn haven. *Get him. Get him. GET HIM!* The spell screams, making *me* shiver this time, but I hold my ground, study the scene.

The multiplier is holding an axe and sparring a man half his size, but the duel looks evenly matched—which makes me wonder if the small one was the glowing man

I last faced. They aren't going easy on each other, but the multiplier isn't using more than one form. This tells me it's a training session.

"I just have to get one hand on him," I whisper to Tarrek. "We know what he can do now. I should have just got him the moment I saw him sitting alone. We were too cautious thinking we needed to do it together. And if that little guy is who I think he is, I need to work quickly. He didn't kill me before, and I may know why, but I don't want to risk giving him another chance. He can't know I'm around until it's too late."

"Drop me here," Tarrek says. "I'll take the small one from a distance—distract him long enough for you to dive in."

Watching the duel, I notice how fast the little one is. "You think you can get away without me?"

"Don't worry about me. I'll get out of here. You just get the multiplier so the spell stops pushing."

The longer we stand here talking, the more chances we have of being found out, so I drop Tarrek like he asked. The second he leaves the shadows, he's already bending the light to hide. Arrows shoot from his quiver in seconds, and he runs under the cover of a silence spell that he's mastered since we were ten. Even I can't sense his footsteps in the shadows.

Before an arrow has a chance to get the little man, he deflects the multiplier's axe and spins to hold a hand

out. Magic glows and freezes my brother's arrows in midair. I'm at the multiplier's side. Before he has the chance to clone himself, I grab his foot, suck him into the shadows, and pray to every god both good and not that Tarrek makes it back alive.



A DRAGON'S SPELL BOOK THREE

DRAGON'S BLOOD

*Don't trust
the shadows...*

ABBY ARTHUR

Joyssû¹ 9, 1233 J.E. (Jorik Era)
In the 17th year of the reign of
Queen hAmari, Alëunná of the Realm

ARROWS ARE POWER. A place of safety when no one else can save you. It's a skill that takes time to master—thousands upon thousands of hours to be exact. But when your life depends on how well you develop this skill, time isn't an object. You make time or die.

Most of my talents were developed this way—with fate taunting me, bearing the face of a shape-shifting dragon. Magic is one of those talents, along with my gods-given gift of invisibility. Developing each talent to

its fullest has been my life's purpose—at least the purpose for the part of my life that lives in the shadows.

As firstborn son to King Denifo of Jasikx, I'm the crown prince to my kingdom. But in the shadows is a secret that makes me a weapon, a device for destruction and turmoil. If I survive that, maybe one day when I'm king and the magic of the land flows through me, I will no longer be this nefarious weapon. But until then, I train, I fight, I survive.

In this very moment, my survival rides on the back of three arrows I loose from my bow. A figure dives out of black smoke, twirling with a purpose. Black hair, dark eyes, mostly pale skin from his days underground—the boy catches one arrow in his hands while the smoke grabs the last two. He hurls them back at me as if his magic was the bow string. I dodge two and catch one myself, string it to the bow, and shoot it back while running towards the boy.

It doesn't sink home. I can't remember a time it ever has. His smoke magic grabs this one again, breaks it into shreds, and throws dark needles out of his smoke instead.

A curse escapes my lips, followed by a fast spell creating a shield around my bow. I hold it up as I roll away. It stops those needles, and though I'm still moving, I grab an arrow lying on the ground and string it, just as the boy dives with a line of fierce smoke

wafting from his arm. He slices downward, a move that would cut me into shavings, and I loose my arrow seconds before rolling out of the strike zone.

His hand catches my arrow inches from his heart. A cruel curl finds his mouth, and I move to grab another arrow. His smoke encircles my hands and pins them to my sides. My bow falls to the ground, and he leans forward, dark eyes drawing close. Sweat drips from my brow, slides around my eyes, and his grin only grows.

“Good match,” he says in a voice too beautiful for his perfect body.

“And you,” I say back, squirming in his hold. Sweat continues down my cheek to my neck, just as an alarm blares, calling the training session to an end.

“Zi wins!” my sister’s voice calls from along the wall.

“Not necessarily,” my twin brother says at her side. “Tarrek could technically get out of that vise hold. Just give him another second.”

“The alarm went off,” I call back. “I’m not going to bother with it.” My gaze remains on Zi. “Let me go.”

He sighs, his dark eyes rolling. “Fine.” The word passes his lips as his magic releases my arms.

“Our turn!” Sheva chimes, way too excited to duel our brother. She prances to the center of the training rink where a glowing, blue circle marks the starting point. That same blue light lines all the walls and is the only light source here in the underground. We’re below

the castle we call home, near the heart of the volcano our home is built on. It's the dragon's favorite place, though I can't explain why. She's an air dragon and spends way too much time underground, if you ask me.

A chill slithers over the sweat lining my skin. I don't have to turn to know she's there. Tall, lean, and deadly—even in the human form she likes to walk in.

Everyone pauses to look her way, watches as the dragon enters the room. Her clothes are her dark blue scales, fitted to her human body like a tight dress. Her face is angular, adding to the vicious feel of her appearance. Her black eyes skim over us, and I wonder what devious plan she's thinking now.

"Mummy dearest!" Zi exclaims, and the dragon's eyes flash to him. "Come to watch us kill each other?"

"I'm *not* your mother," the dragon says, even with her long tongue flicking from her mouth like a snake. It's not exactly true, since she adopted Zi. That technically makes the human boy her son and she his mum, but the dragon prefers guardian versus a maternal status and ward rather than child. Nevertheless, the fact she hasn't run him through with her razor-sharp tail when she's pissed at him proves just how much she actually likes him ... dare I say, cares for him.

"If you're not here to watch us train," Zi says in this theatric way, "pray tell, what is on that ancient mind of yours?"

The dragon's black gaze locks on him. Vertical irises flash white before going black again. Part of me expects her to tell him off, but then I remember comments about age aren't actually offensive to dragons—even if they're as old as time itself, like this one. Still, her brow twitches, probably accompanying some choice words she's telepathically sharing with Zi.

He lifts a shoulder nonchalantly, and the corner of his mouth pulls back in arrogance. His dark gaze is locked on the dragon, confirming their silent conversation. His shoulder drops, but the pull to his mouth remains. His gaze finds me. "Guess we have some things to do, Little Prince."

My jaw clenches, though I'm not sure if it's due to the unnecessary nickname or the mission he's implying.

“WELL THIS BLOWS,” Zi says from the shadows beside me. He’s not like my twin, who can literally become a shadow, but he’s well trained in stealth and lets the shadows cover him like a blanket. He doesn’t wear a mask either, like my brother and I always do. The realm wouldn’t know who he is if they spot him, a perk of not being royalty.

I remain silent and gaze down the slope we’re hiding on. We’re at a coastal town on the edge of Jasikx, and our target is on the docks a good half mile away, watching a group of people board a ship.

I’m standing in what would normally be a completely obvious place. My powers waft around me like a suit, hiding me from eyes that can see. Part of my soul stays attentive to the fact I can be spotted by those

who don't see with their eyes. But from what I'm told about our target, none of that will matter when we're in range. He's a mute with powers that turn off magic.

"She didn't tell us he's an elf," Zi continues. "This changes things."

"Not really," I whisper back. It doesn't change the fact there's a spell coursing through our veins, telling us to get the mute. His race doesn't make him any less of a threat, nor any less important to the dragon who wants him for the gods know what.

"No, really." Zi's peculiar sass comes through when he says that. I'm not sure if that's from spending too much time around my sister, or if his actual personality is slightly girly. I've known him for six years and still can't figure that one out.

"Elves travel with company," he continues. "Have you ever seen one on his own?"

"Our targets always have company," I say. "Your guardian never sends us on the easy missions."

Zi shakes his head and looks to the sky. He points one long finger up in a sassy jerk, and I follow his gaze. A black shadow floats in the night above, like a bat in the sky. Squinting, I notice the long body, the jagged tail.

"Dragon," I whisper.

"Yep." Zi pushes away from the wall and walks past me. He disappears behind the crate closest to us before

our target has a chance to notice. Hiding from the dragon, however, is a different story. There's a good chance he's already seen us.

Zi says a short spell in the dark language, and I understand what it's for, having heard it numerous times in our sparring sessions. I'm not surprised when a dark, black shield made with his wafting black smoke appears, floating above us. It stops two jagged spikes from stabbing through his head.

"Go," Zi yells, but I'm already moving, already running down the line of shipping crates to avoid the dragon out to kill us.

It doesn't follow me. My invisibility is still working, and Zi's enough of a distraction to keep it busy. If it was anyone else, I might feel bad for leaving him alone with the dragon. But this kid ... even if I didn't think he could handle it, there's a part of me that believes the realms would be a better place without him. It'd be a better place without either of us. But the spell pulling at my chest doesn't care about what I think. It says that the elf is close, and now's as good a time as any to take him in.

Jumping, I grab the edge of a cargo crate and hoist myself up. My blood pounds in my ears, the spell making my adrenalin rush like a caffeine overload.

I close my eyes, try to focus enough to get a grip on what I'm doing. But the spell won't let me think, and

there's a force inside me chuckling in the darkness of my soul, waiting to get loose when I'm least expecting.

A deep growl claws through my throat as I command the spell to give me some space and punch the darkness inside with a bloody fist. My battle with him, the nefarious weapon inside, is ongoing, but right now is not the time to start a new brawl. Right now is—

I jump from the crate, feeling my invisibility get stripped away by unseen claws.

A figure appears before me. Tall, lean. Silver eyes bore into me, glowing like daggers in the moonlight.

I draw an arrow in half a second, shoot it with the remaining half.

The elf bends out of the way, his silver hair blowing. My arrow soars through that hair, cutting strands free but leaving the elf unscathed.

The severed hair is still sinking when I loose two more arrows. Two daggers appear in the elf's hands, and my arrows are sliced from the air.

"Csharynn sends a boy after me?" the elf asks in a melodic voice that's almost too perfect.

"You know the dragon?" I ask.

"There isn't an elf that doesn't." His gaze jumps from me to Zi and the dragon brawling. I take advantage of the moment, shoot more arrows. The elf's gaze is quickly back to me, and he avoids my shots as if they

were from a slow child and not from a person who's mastered the skills of the bow.

"Her eyes are here too," he says, and part of me pauses. 'Eyes' are what elves call a person connected to a dragon—their word for rider.

"Csharynn doesn't have eyes," I say and loose another set of arrows. The spell in my chest screams with glee at how close I am to its target.

"Oh, but she does," he says and moves so fast I almost don't have time to stop the butt of the dagger he tries to slam into my temple.

"Don't go easy on me," I say, my arm lifted to stop his strike.

"I don't want to kill you." The elf jumps back, just as I hear Zi scream. I spare half a glance to realize the dragon bit his leg. "But he can die," the elf says.

A SECOND PASSES, and the elf bends at the waist, hacking up black gunk. I don't go in for the kill because killing him isn't my mission. I just watch as he suffers and hear the dragon roar. Black fluid spews from the dragon's mouth. Biting Zi was the wrong choice as it appears Zi poisoned the dragon in the act.

Zi runs towards me, blood melting down his leg while the elf and dragon continue to vomit their guts. If the dragon dies, so will the elf. We can't lose the elf.

Zi stumbles into me, curses as the growing pain in his leg fights his efforts to walk. His fingers dig into my flesh like a vise. "Get me to him. Now," he demands.

I drag Zi towards the elf, who's soaked in the sea of black liquid spewing from inside. Zi collapses at the

elf's side when I get him close enough, and a spell rushes from his mouth.

The elf tries to push him away, but he's weaker than Zi now, and Zi pins the elf's arms to his chest, keeping the creature from drawing any hidden weapon. The spell continuously flows from Zi's lips. Black smoke twirls from him to the elf. But the dragon's on the ground now, quiet and twitching with pain. The elf goes limp too, and I can feel my invisibility returning. They'll both be dead soon.

Zi's black hair falls into his face as he chants. Sweat beads on his brow. The smell of rancid blood and melted insides wafts through the air on vomit infested wind. I gag before covering my mouth with my hand. I'm wearing a mask, as I always do on these missions, and even that doesn't help.

My stomach squirms, and I can't stop myself. I pull my mask below my chin and retch on the ground beside me.

All the while, Zi's chanting, his skin growing pale with the loss of blood. I drop to my knees beside him, sloshing in the black liquid. I place my hand on his leg and use one of the few spells I've mastered to stop the bleeding.

The elf moans, and Zi chants faster.

If there's something else I could do, I might try to help him more. But the spell inside doesn't force me to

do anything, and I'm not skilled in healing someone beyond the extent of stopping blood from gushing out of a wound. What Zi's doing, severing the elf from his tie to the dragon, I'm far too unqualified for.

Let me, a voice deep inside says. I close my eyes, swallow, let the taste of bile remind me I'm here and in control. That which is deep inside me has no right to come forth.

You wouldn't help, I think to it. *You only want to kill*.

It grins an evil smile, and I strengthen my inner guard, fortify my soul with purple walls, and wait for Zi to finish.

It's a long, drawn out moment as his spell finally breaks through. The dragon gurgles its last, miserable breath, and the elf sobs, too weak to fight back.

Zi touches the elf's head, and his black smoke claws its way into the elf's mind, causing the creature to fall asleep.

"How'd you do all that?" I ask, swallowing against another desire to barf.

Zi drops his face into his hands, and his shoulders fall with a sigh. Black streaks his face when he lifts his head again. He looks tired but doesn't seem to be affected by the smell. "Very carefully," he says to me and touches his leg. Black smoke swirls around his wound, knitting the skin back together, and I'm in awe—not for the first time—at how advanced his magic skills are for

one so young. But then again, the time I've put into my bow can match the time he's put into his magic.

"The trick to facing a mute is to shield your magic from their touch before they get close enough. It's a spell in itself." He touches my shoulders and uses me to rise from the ground slowly. His eyes are closed and his face winces with the effort. A strangled breath escapes him, but when he opens his eyes again, they're focused and fierce—a dark shadow in their depths that makes my stomach squirm, though that could be from the smell that still lingers.

"Let's get this mute home," he says.

I nod in agreement, slide my bow around my back, and realize just how glad I am that sparring Zi is the only way I'm on the receiving end of his magic. I don't think I'm enough to win in a real fight against him, and the gods help me if that day ever comes.

A DRAGON'S SPELL BOOK FOUR

*Facing himself
is his deadliest
challenge*



THE
DARKNESS
WITHIN

ABBY ARTHUR

Aícössû¹ 12, 1233 J.E. (Jorik Era)
In the 17th year of the reign of
Queen hAmari, Alëunná of the Realm

MY PEN GLIDES across the lined pages of my notebook, scribing the words that seep from my soul. Arithmetic is chanted from Mr. Gunther, our algebra teacher here at Baylored Prep, but I can't get myself to pay attention. Too much inspiration resides inside, desperate to break from the prison of nothingness beyond the void.

*Through purple eyes, I watch the world,
Witness the changing colors*

*Of black to gray and never white.
As the lines are drawn between me and others.
Who's a prince and who the subject?
Who be the slave or the free?
Who does her bidding and who resists?
In this land of opportunity.*

“Tarrek Vaydmehn,” Mr. Gunther’s voice cuts through my thoughts, and my gut drops to the floor at my name. I feel like I’ve been caught in the middle of a deadly crime, but then I see Mr. Gunther’s face. Calm, waiting as he holds the chalk out to me. “Will you come finish this equation and show us all how it’s done?”

I set my pen down and resituate my glasses, slide a glance to my twin brother watching from the desk beside me. He’s slouched back with his arms crossed, chewing on a new lip piercing and looking like anywhere in the realm would be better than here.

My lips twitch ever so slightly at Albree’s insolence, and I make my way to the front. Part of my soul yearns to be back at my desk, scribing more poetry that’s just waiting to be birthed, but I tell it to wait, to be patient. On the outside, I take a few moments to solve the equation and head back to my desk.

Mr. Gunther says something enduring, and I nod as if in thanks. But I’m looking to my twin, who’s shaking his head at my “over-dedicated studiousness”—or at

least that's what he likes to call it. He knows I wasn't paying attention earlier, but he also knows I read ahead in *everything* school related. We miss classes too much not to ... and unlike him, I need straight As, have to prove myself to the realm.

I take my seat and notice Albree slide forward, looking down as if he's taking notes from Mr. Gunther's lecture. Dark, black hair dangles before his face, and I think—for the briefest moment—he must be taking the king's words seriously. I overheard their heated conversation the other day about how Albree needs to start making better grades. Both made a fine argument, which ended in shadows.

Perhaps Dad won, I think, until I notice it's not Mr. Gunther's equation he's writing but words on his paper. And that's not his arithmetic book, but his book of lyrics.

My lips pull into a grin; twins to the core, it appears. I slide my gaze back to our teacher and attempt to listen this time, but two muses are calling inside me, and I grab my pen, choosing to listen to the one that doesn't want me to die. I write:

*He with eyes the same as mine
Walks this path we've laid
And over the passing of time
He's the one who's always my aid.*

*Though he be my twin at heart
I know there are secrets
Secrets that may keep us apart*

*They are hidden by silence
Buried deep in his soul
Gained by prowling in solace
In the shadows alone*

Writing poetry again? A cunning, female voice says in my mind, and my soul quivers like an arrow in a bow. I swallow and close my eyes while pushing against the darker muse. It tries to consume me every chance it gets, and I have her to blame for that.

Csharynn, I think back in way of greeting.

Her consciousness brushes across mine, prowling slowly like the predator she is, a dragon inspecting its prey. Her attention is drawn to my first poem, and I can feel the smile in her words when she reflects, *You think so beautifully of me*. My fist clenches at the idea, but I don't respond. She's still talking. *I'm flattered to find my way into your poetry. Your little sister was just composing too ... and Albree. The Vaydmehn siblings, three souls in one song*.

I blow out a slow breath. Release my clenched fist. *Can't this wait until after class?*

Always concerned about your studies. I feel her twitch,

like she's raised a brow. But on her the look is much more dominating than on a human. It burns to the core, and I'm grateful I don't actually see it, only sense it. Though, even that makes the darkness inside perk to attention, and I pound it with an internal fist to keep it back.

There is one I need you to get, she says, and I clench my desk to brace myself for what comes next. *Find the one with the bones as blades. Bring her to me before it's too late.*

Her consciousness leaves, and my insides freeze over as a mark on my lower stomach comes to life. Hidden below my shirt, I feel the triangles of the black star burn within the skull tattooed to my abdomen. The spell shivers through my body, and the desire for my class, even the need to write, is locked away behind the demand of the spell now taking over.

My gaze slides to Albree. He's glowering. *She do it to you too?* he mouths to me. I nod, and anger boils off him like steam from a pot of water.

"We've told her not to interrupt during school hours," he says in a hushed voice.

I nod again, knowing it's not that he cares we're missing classes. It's that we have to come up with yet another excuse as to why the princes are leaving school early ... again.

"We'll come up with something," I whisper back and look forward, racking my brain for a reason to leave. It

isn't easy, since the pull in my chest created by the spell makes my head spin and causes the darkness to scrape at my gut. I breathe in deeply through my nose and take comfort in knowing the darkness can't do anything unless I let it out. When he's out, I can't control him, but inside, that's a different story.

He grins at me, and as I turn away, he settles ... waits.

A CRACKLING NOISE comes over the school's intercom, right before the voice of one of the secretaries says, "Prince Tarrek and Prince Albree to the office please."

"Seems we don't need to come up with a plan after all," Albree whispers, sliding me a glance as he takes his books from the desk in one swoop. I follow, knowing only one person who would be behind that call. Inspiration rises up inside, and if I wasn't scraping my own books into my arm, this is what I would write:

*Her hair be black
Her heart be too
And in a battle
I pray, she not face you*

*For if her powers you were to fight
You're sure to die in an ice-blue light.*

Albree and I leave the classroom with nothing more than curious glances from our uniformed classmates. They don't ask us what's going on. They know to keep their mouths shut. We'll come up with a lie to share later.

With the spell still making its home inside us, my twin and I walk the halls in silence and enter the office together. I lift a brow at the skimpily dressed girl standing there. She's leaning against the counter with her arms crossed, taking in mine and Albree's ugly purple and green uniforms. "I never get tired of seeing you two like this," my little sister says before blowing a large, blue bubble out of a piece of gum, letting it pop, and chewing it again.

"You could always decide to come here sometime, Sheva, join us in the fun," I say.

She snorts, and her ice-blue eyes sparkle in a dangerous way. "Too much to do in a day than to waste my time at a school. I'll stick with my tutors, thank you." She turns to grab a clipboard off the counter, and light catches on the dagger strapped to her thigh.

"Come on," Sheva hands the clipboard to me. "Sign out. Dad's waiting for us."

I take the clipboard from her, giving my sister a long

look that says, *What did you tell them?* She lifts a shoulder as if to say, *Don't worry about it.* Shaking my head, I grab the pen dangling from the board in my hand and sign myself out. I pass it to Albree, who's leaning against the wall closest to him and pulling at his lip piercing absentmindedly. Perhaps it's all he can do to keep the spell at bay.

Sheva leads the way out of school, and as we go, I let the spell claw through me, enter my mind, consume my thoughts. It's then I start to see what we are after. A dark-haired woman.

The darkness inside me rises with glee, eager to devour, but I don't have to fight him. The spell does it for me, pushing him to the back of my being and reprimanding him with a vise grip around his throat. *Capture her, do not kill her,* the spell says in Csharynn's cunning, dangerous voice.

The darkness clenches his teeth, claws at the spell gripping his throat but concedes.

"So the three of us are on this mission?" Albree says when we walk down Baylored's front steps. He makes it to the bottom of the stairs and stops with a sharp pause, staring into a sleek, black vehicle with a triangular nose, a crystal powered veep parked feet away. "Correction," he says flatly and with the utmost dislike in his tone. "The four of us."

I follow his gaze to see who's there, not that I'm

surprised. It's hard for Sheva to go anywhere without Zi tagging along.

*He the brave and valiant fool
Come to join us in the duel
Not the brightest, I dare to say
But the bravest in many ways*

*Son to no one, sad but true
Ward of the dragon that did ensue
Orphaned as a child barely ten
And raised by the dragon in her den.*

I pass Albree and pull the front passenger door open to the blue glow of the veep's holographic dashboard and plop in the passenger seat. Sliding Zi a glance, I store the poem about him in the back of my mind. "How's life with the dragon?"

"Bright as a cloudy, downcast day," he says with this slight grin I know to be wary of. "Shall we get this over with?" he asks as Sheva and Albree crawl into the back, leather squeaking as they move.

"How long do we think this will take?" Albree says. "We're supposed to have band practice tonight." He swings a hand between him and Sheva.

"She's close," Zi says, though all of us can feel that.

“And with the four of us on her, I think we can have it finished by night fall. Stupid fool to think she can come this close and go unnoticed.”

I don't disagree. If I could put up a sign over this city, it would read: Beware the Dragon. But as it is, her presence goes unnoticed, hidden in the heart of the volcano my home is built on.

“Put this on.” My sister throws a bag into my lap, and I open the flap to see a shirt and pants inside.

“Shreeking leather?” I ask, recognizing the black and blue shine that only comes on leather made from the impenetrable pelt of a drakora.

“Only the best.” Sheva grins before sliding her dress over her head. I turn away, not wanting to see her in her underwear, and slide a glance to Zi, making sure he's not watching in the rearview mirror. He presses a button in his door, causing the windows to tint darkly before he places his hands on the hovering wheel. It's connected to the dash by a glowing light, and with his foot on the pedal below, he starts to drive. His gaze slides to the rearview mirror, and I slug him in the arm. He looks away, only to grin at me before putting his eyes on the road.

I unbutton my uniform and slide into the stretchy shirt and pants my sister brought. It's then the spell consumes me like a rushing river. I gasp in a breath, just

trying to breathe as the full image of our target overwhelms me. Her dark hair is the color of a Kuromai from Sarden, and her almond shaped eyes are the orange of a setting sun—proving she’s a Jäyûn. But the part of her that draws my attention is the dragon tattoo spiraling around her torso and up her back. It’s blue and orange and shows through her skintight clothing as if it was a part of her leather. A samurai tattoo.

My consciousness comes back to me, and I settle into the chair, my eyes wide. “We’re after Tsubasa Ayumasaki?” I gasp, knowing her well.

Zi just lifts a shoulder and lets it fall, as if the fact we’re hunting a full-blown samurai is nothing.

“She graduated from *YFA*,” I say, looking over my shoulder to Albree sitting behind me. His expression is even less excited than mine. “She’s the best of the best. We watched her in the Skygame’s tournaments, guys. She’s a machine.”

“Csharynn wants her,” Sheva says. “That’s good enough for me.”

“And what about the dragon Tsubasa rides?” I ask.

“Sheva and I will take the dragon,” Zi says. “You and Albree take the samurai.”

I moan and drop my face into my hands, but the spell grabs hold of me, as if sitting me firmly in a chair inside my chest. It tells me I can do this ... After all, I don’t have a choice.

My gaze narrows, and I breathe in deeply. Find my focus, imagine myself facing Tsubasa and winning. I'm suddenly glad Sheva chose shrieking leather for this mission. We're going to need it.

ZI PULLS his veep up to the front of a skyrise. As I gaze out and up to the roof fifty stories up, I reach into my soul, calling on a part of me that's as close as my very breath. My powers seep out, surrounding my body like a suit and causing me to disappear from sight.

Like this, I can feel my brother seep into the shadows, becoming one with them. I open the door and step out, just as Zi and Sheva do the same. The shrieking leather hugs my sister's tiny body like a formfitting suit, and her natural, black hair is replaced with a red wig. Her make up is gone. No one would recognize she's the Jasikx princess now.

We come around back, and Zi lifts the trunk with a wisp of black smoke that seeps from his palms.

Weapons rest before us. My bow and quiver, too

many blades to count, and a set of needle-shooting gauntlets. Those gauntlets disappear into the shadows, and I know Albree has them.

I take the bow, watch as it shimmers with a purple-blue hue, telling me it's hidden in my illusion. I hold it in one hand, slide my quiver over my head, secure a few blades with a belt to my hips, and wait as Sheva and Zi stock up with the rest.

"After you," I say. Sheva leads the way in. A door keeper notices her and Zi and is about to stop them, but with a spark of ice-blue magic from my sister's hand, he forgets what he's doing and we sneak on by.

Albree's presence is gone, and I'm sure he's rushed ahead through the shadows to assess the situation. It's nearly impossible to stay back with the spell pulling us forward. One of my legs is bouncing as we wait for an elevator. Our target is so close, my blood hums. The darkness is alert, watching, hoping I will call him.

The elevator arrives with a ding, and I enter with Sheva and Zi while taking some arrows from my quiver. I string one to the bow while holding four others in the same hand, ready to rapid fire if the situation calls.

Zi's black smoke keeps our elevator from stopping anywhere on our way up. When we make it five floors, Albree's presence seeps through the top of the elevator. His figure takes shape in a lunge-like crouch before us.

“This will be interesting,” he says and lays out everything he’s discovered. My gut sinks at what he says, but I can’t turn back, can’t stop the spell.

We’re almost there, I think as the spell inside seems to giggle with glee. The darkness draws that much closer to the surface, and I give it a glare in warning. He grins back.

The elevator stops, and I step out onto the skysrise’s roof with my invisibility cloaking every part of me. Albree’s in the shadows, and Sheva and Zi step out with their magic swirling around their bodies.

I’m momentarily frozen at the sight before me. Even though Albree said this would await us, it’s another thing to see the paper lanterns hanging on strings draped across the roof. Food is on a table with a cake at the end. Two candles stick out from the top as a young girl sits on a high chair, preparing to blow them out. She’s got black hair like Tsubasa but brown eyes like a regular Kuromai. Five other people are there, a girl who could be Tsubasa’s twin, only she looks younger and lacks the samurai tattoo.

There’s an elderly couple with gray streaks in their hair, both Kuromai in nature, but with muscles to tell me they’re smart with a weapon. The man has a gold and red gryphon tattoo, challenging the one Tsubasa wears.

And lastly, a young couple, probably the child’s

parents. One looks like my brother and me, but without Jäyûn eyes. A local, a Jasiken, our subject. And that means this child is our subject too. And here, at her second birthday party, we're going to scar her for life.

My bow rises as if it has a mind of its own, the spell forcing me to act. My arrow flies out from my invisibility, making itself known after it leaves my touch. It travels straight for Tsubasa's face, and something white and sharp shoots from her palm, slicing my arrow down the middle and knocking it from the air. Her bone sword.

I leap to the side, still invisible, but this way they can't track the arrow back to me.

Zi and Sheva walk forward like two dangerous weapons risen from the grave of some haunted bedtime story. The older couple take Sheva on while Zi takes the younger man and the teenaged girl. My arrows shoot after Tsubasa again, all four launched in less than a few seconds. Another bone shoots up from her other palm, and my arrows are cut from the sky. But Albree's on her now, shooting metal needles from the dark.

At the same time, I watch the little girl's mom run for her daughter and rip her from the chair. I don't shoot, don't want to hurt them, but when the woman makes it to the side of the building, I scream after her as she jumps.

My heart stops, and I can't compute what happened

until suddenly, large, black wings flap above the skyrise, and the mom and daughter appear again, but this time on the back of a dragon.

I'm prepared for it to blast us with whatever it is this species blows from its mouth, but the dragon doesn't come for us. It flies away, replaced by a gryphon as big as a veep and two dragons with sharp, daunting teeth and talons just as intimidating.

This needs to end fast ... or we're all dead.

I run, diving into the thick of the fight, shooting the last of my arrows before throwing my bow aside and drawing two daggers. Albree's needles fail to penetrate our samurai target. She's too skilled in the magic her kind train in for war. I slice my blades after her, but even being invisible, her bones shoot from her body and keep me from slicing her skin.

Zi and Sheva are talented in their powers too and somehow manage to keep the old samurai and the other weapon wielding opponents at bay. But the dragons are swooping in, and we need this Tsubasa now or the mission will fail.

I let my invisibility go. Duck to avoid Tsubasa's cutting bones and manage to distract her just enough for Albree to get his hand on her. Tsubasa's figure disappears into the shadows with him, and Albree's presence seeps away like a darting rabbit escaping death.

The spell inside me breaks, lets go of my chest, frees me from its drive. But the battle around me still rages, and a dragon dives before me.

I jump to avoid its tale, zig and zag out of the way. I spew a spell from my lips, causing my speed to increase. One dragon I can handle, but the other slips from Sheva's hold when she's cut by the teenager's blade.

Two dragons fight me, and though I'm fast, though I'm smart, one tail clips me in the side of the head like a battering ram and the realm goes black.

IT'S COLD.

It's silent.

It's dark.

But I'm not alone.

Shivers slither through me like lice scurrying up my veins. I stare into the darkness before me. Watch it take form until I'm staring at a rendering of myself—like a statue of darkness with solid black eyes and a smile so cruel it twists the face that looks like mine, makes it menacing, makes it ... wrong.

"Hello, Darkness," I say in way of greeting.

"My friend," he says back with a voice that even sounds like mine—like he wants me to believe we are one. "Come to let me out?"

"Never," I say back, knowing exactly what he would

do if I did. All the wars in the realms could not match the carnage he'd create.

His solid black eyes look past me to a ray of light. I spare a glance over my shoulder, see an open door, and realize one of us has to walk through it.

He dashes like a figure of smoke burst forward with a gust of wind. I leap to my feet, dive after him with all the strength I have in me, and though I trip, I manage to grasp his leg. He hits the dark ground with a thunderous thud, and I don't let his foot go, won't let him escape. But he kicks me in the head, and I feel my nose break. Blood drips down my face.

I grab that other foot and throw him as best I can away from the door. But he's as heavy as I am and doesn't go far. I'm on my feet, fists ready to fight, and he dives for me, punches at me. I evade his blows just as easily as he evades mine. We've been through the same training, after all.

But something from outside the door calls to me, whispers what I need to know.

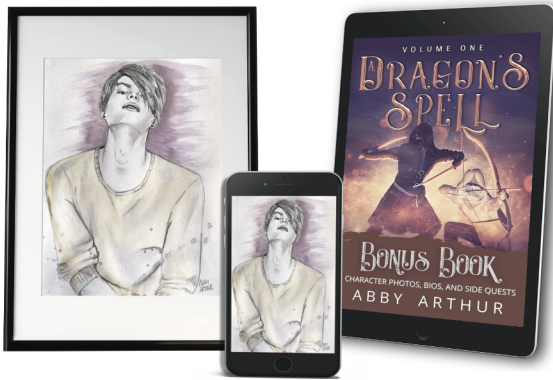
"I am your master," I say to the darkness, and he freezes with a fist inches from my face. "You listen to me."

His black eyes narrow, his jaw clenches, and I step away from him towards the door. He doesn't move. Doesn't flinch, but as I walk into the light, his voice rings in my head like a whisper from a ghost:

ABBY ARTHUR

*Through purple eyes, I watch the world
Witness the changing colors
And in the darkness of your mind
I'm waiting to stop taking orders.
For wherever you go, I go too.
We are one, and I am with you.*

WANT MORE?



Sign up for my newsletter and get the *Volume 1 Bonus Book* (with character photos drawn by the author, bios, and side quests) FREE. Be the FIRST to get the latest news, sneak peeks, free books and short stories.

Get Your FREE Book Now

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Abby Arthur lives in small town Iowa with her husband and son. She's absolutely obsessed with writing young adult fantasy and mildly enjoys sleeping, eating, and breathing. When she's not writing, she's thinking of her next book to create and watching Asian shows or Marvel movies.

For up to date promotions and release dates of upcoming books, sign up for the latest news here:

Website

Abby loves hearing from her fans, so please feel free to reach out to her on any of the platforms below:



ALSO BY ABBY ARTHUR

Twins of Shadow



For a complete and updated list of Abby's books, Check out
her BOOKS page on her website:

AbbyArthur.com/Books

NOTES

CHAPTER 1

1. Moo-LAY – Like March, literally means *daylight* in Hayöni

CHAPTER 1

1. TAY-soh-fay like April, literally means *promise* in Ancient Naerthen

CHAPTER 1

1. ZHOY-soo – like May, literally means *joy blade* in Hayöni

CHAPTER 1

1. (AI-koh-soo) – Like June, literally means *fire blade* in Hayöni

