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*The Shadowborn Duet*

BOOK ONE

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BRAMBLE



## P R O L O G U E

This is the tale of how a chosen one falls.

Like most legends, it is unremarkable at its start. There was nothing special about the girl when the sun god chose her. He had his pick. He was among the most revered of the gods among his mortal followers. Every dawn and every sundown saw countless offerings upon his altars, food and silks and riches and soft bodies—every mortal pleasure a god could desire. He was particular with his favor. He chose for himself only the most flawless faces, the most powerful warriors, the most skilled sorcerers.

This girl was none of those things.

The two sisters arrived at the temple with nothing else in the world but each other. If they did not find shelter here, they would be cast back out to die, like countless other faceless innocents.

It always begins like this. In times of great darkness, humans crawl to light like flies to the gleaming silver of a spider's silk. These are the souls that gods feast upon. No one loves you more than someone who has no one else.

The older sister was almost beautiful, save for the stench of her difficult life and all she had done to survive it. She had scrounged together a silk dress designed to highlight her curves, carefully draped to hide the stains. She had thick, dark hair, lush lips, smooth skin—delicate in all the ways the gods typically enjoyed. She collapsed at the altar of her god, prayers spilling from her lips. She swore to him her faith, her life, her soul, all as the priests watched with curls of

disgust over their lips. She was, in their eyes, not the type who was worthy of salvation.

Perhaps the young woman hoped that the candles arranged around the altar would burst to life as she offered her god her soul—a sign of the sun god taking a new chosen.

But the god accepted her fealty with only vague disinterest. He had been gifted thousands of other desperate souls just like this one today.

No, it was not the young woman who interested him.

It was the child with her.

She trailed behind her sister, eyes bigger, hair wilder, staring up at the sky no matter how many times the priests hissed at her to lower her lashes in supplication. She listened to her sister's tearful offerings and watched the priests' disapproving stares, and though she was only eight years old, she understood what would happen after this.

She had nothing to offer. And what would a god want from her, anyway?

Still, she reached into her pocket and closed her fingers around a fragile little reminder of her home. The shape of it was burned into her palm. She withdrew it and slid her own offering across the altar:

A feather.

Like the girl herself, the feather was not remarkable. It was small, a dull gold, bent and half-bare from weeks of the little girl's absent-minded grasp.

So why did this gift—this child—capture the god's attention so?

The god's other chosen had been glorious men and women, flowers plucked at the height of their splendor. This girl was pretty enough, but no great beauty. Smart enough, but no great wit. Perhaps he enjoyed the uniquely mortal slant of her smile or the way her freckles fell across her nose.

Or perhaps gods, like mortals, are simply mesmerized by their own damnation.

Because he paused then, peering through the veil between worlds, at this little girl.

The little girl, in turn, peered back.

In the background, the priests grew tired of her sister's weeping pleas. They took hold of her arms, dragging her away. Her sister's protests and the priests' harsh chiding faded into a hazy hum in the background. She lifted her chin to the sky.

And for many years later—decades, centuries—the child would not forget what her god's voice sounded like the first time she heard it:

*I see you, little one. Reach out your hand.*

The magic came to her so easily. As if it burned straight from her heart itself. The clouds thinned, the honeyed sunlight hot on her face. One by one, the candles around the altar blossomed to flame.

And at last, fire ignited in her splayed palm.

It took the others a moment to realize what was happening. But by the time she held the flame in her hands, the priests were gasping in awe. Her sister watched, wide-eyed, silent.

The little girl did not see any of them. She just stared up at the sky, cheeks aching with her grin and warm with the love of her god. She had finally found something that she had been chasing her entire short, fraught life. She would not know how to describe this for a very long time. But the word she was searching for was: *purpose*.

The sun god thought he had received another devoted acolyte that day. Even he could not describe what he found so charming about the child, but what did it matter? She would be another chosen one to add to his collection, happy to receive his attention when it suited him and easy to put aside when it didn't. She would follow him until the end of it all, just as all the others had.

He was right. For a time.

But such a boring story that would be.

This is the tale of how a chosen one falls. She does it screaming, clawing for her old life with broken fingernails. She does it slowly, over the course of decades.

And in the end, she takes the whole forsaken world with her.

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PART ONE

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**LIFE**



## CHAPTER ONE

The dark went on forever. The candle would not light. Sweat rolled down my brow. I sagged against the bars of my cell, eyes fixed on the unlit candle, which stood crooked and dusty within a cobweb-coated lantern that dangled from a hook on the opposite side of the room. It was precariously close to a heavy velvet curtain, once green but now dull with long-dried blood.

One spark.

One spark, and the candle would go up, and then the curtains, and then I would have a flame big enough to manipulate even now, with my diminished magic. Once, I wouldn't even have needed the candle at all. Once, I could've summoned the power of the sun in my palm. I could have burned my way out of here. Vampires were never quite prepared for it—the sun. They definitely never expected it to come from me, a vampire girl with big eyes and a bigger smile. I could always get so far on that.

My arm strained through the bars. A shaky breath escaped through gritted teeth as blood dripped a melody onto the floor. I reached for the magic that had once come as easily for me as breathing. Reached for the god who had once chosen me.

*Please, my light,* I begged him silently. *Please.*

But it had been more than a year now since Atroxus had answered my prayers. More than a year since I'd felt the warmth of his magic

at my fingertips. Each attempt opened burns instead, as if to mock me: *What else does the sun have to offer a vampire?*

Tonight was no different.

I tried until my body gave out on me. Then I collapsed.

I pressed my forehead against the bars, shutting my eyes against the sting of tears and blood. I was covered in it. A lot of it was mine, but not all. The soldiers from the House of Shadow had killed a merchant, too, when they came for me. I relived the look on the merchant's face as the Shadowborn arrow had pierced his throat, the way the soldiers had casually tossed his body aside as they descended upon me. He'd been kinder to me than I deserved. Maybe he took pity on me, a dirty, broken-down traveler in the middle of nowhere.

How had they found me? I'd been on my own for months now, and I was so careful to leave as little a trail as possible. Of the three vampire kingdoms, the House of Shadow had the greatest mastery of spycraft. They dealt in secrets, emotions, knowledge. If anyone could root out a single criminal, I supposed the Shadowborn were best equipped for it.

But I'd still been miles away from the border of the House of Shadow. And I was just one girl. They came for me like they knew exactly where I'd be.

Then again, I wasn't "just" anything. I had murdered a prince of the House of Shadow.

I wasn't stupid. I knew it would catch up to me eventually. That was why I'd left the House of Night, wasn't it? To shield my friends from the consequences of my actions.

At least there was that.

My head swam. Maybe from the blood loss. Maybe not.

I choked back a sob and slipped my hand into my pocket. It was empty, as I knew it would be. The Shadowborn soldiers had taken all my possessions. I'd been half-conscious as they rummaged through them, their magic binding my thoughts, but I still had almost managed to reach out as they took Raihn's letters.

Raihn's unopened letters.

He had sent me so many of them. Oraya sent a few, too. They'd come to me if I was close enough to the capital of the House of Night,

sent by their magic. Every week or two, I'd take a detour to circle back into range, and I'd cradle those wrinkled pieces of parchment like precious riches. I could imagine what they said. Raihn's scrawled handwriting: *Where the hell are you, Mish?* Oraya's looping script: *Don't make me send Jasmine to go hunt you down.*

I could never make myself read them, though.

I couldn't make myself throw them away, either.

I fiercely regretted both decisions now. I could still see Raihn's face in the moment I'd told him I was leaving. That puppy-dog look of utter hurt. The memory made another near sob bubble up in my throat.

Gods, I had made so many mistakes.

I jumped at the sudden sound of stone grinding against stone.

The door swung open, strings of cold light flooding over the ground. I lifted my head and was punished with a powerful wave of dizziness. More blood dripped onto the floor.

A woman and a man stood in the door. The woman was nobility. I knew it the second I looked at her. She was tall and straight-backed, her hands folded delicately in front of her. Long tendrils of deep chestnut hair tumbled down her shoulders. She wore a gown of emerald velvet that wrapped tight around her body and brushed the floor. The bodice was tight, pushing her breasts up against a low neckline. A classic example of the Shadowborn style of dress—expensive stuff. She stepped forward, surveying me with a cold, piercing gaze.

Something about her was familiar in a way that crawled under my skin. It went beyond her appearance. I could *feel* it, even if I couldn't place it.

Her companion closed the door behind her. Him, I recognized right away. He was a hulking man, with slicked-back dark hair and fine leather armor, a cloak that matched his mistress's dress falling down his back. My gaze locked onto that cape. He hadn't changed it since he'd dragged me in here. It was ruined. My blood was all over it.

The woman stood silently as her guard returned and opened the cell doors. She stepped into the cell.

"Get up," she said.

Her voice was flawless, melodic, and for those two syllables, it was the most entrancing thing I had ever heard. My body was broken. And yet, at her command, I *wanted* to stand. No other possibility existed, every alternate snapped away like branches from a vine.

I was on my feet before I made the decision to rise.

Shadowborn magic, I realized. The magic of minds and compulsion, illusion and shadow.

When little human children in a country half a world away told scary stories at night, the vampires of the House of Shadow were the monsters that came to them in their nightmares. Sure, the Nightborn were intimidating, with the wings and the swords and all that battle prowess. The Bloodborn were frightening the way rabid wolves were, vicious and unpredictable.

But the Shadowborn were like ghosts. They manipulated reality itself. They drank up the darkness like wine and relished the notes of fear within it.

The woman circled me slowly. I swayed. My mind had obeyed her command, but my body wasn't actually capable of standing right now. The floor felt like it was tilting.

*Talk your way out of this, Mische*, I told myself. But words, for maybe the first time in my life, felt so far away. And I couldn't find any before she stopped in front of me, surveying me feet to head, and gave me a cruel, unimpressed smile.

That was what did it. The smile.

The realization barreled into me. Who she was. Why she looked so familiar.

My eyes widened.

A little ripple of pleasure passed between us as she chuckled.

"So this is the one who killed my brother." Her smile soured, melting into a snarl. "What an embarrassment. A prince of the House of Shadow, murdered by some little bitch he Turned. He never could control his own impulses. That's what happens when you spend your whole life getting everything you want, I suppose."

She did look so much like . . . *him*.

And more than that, she *felt* like him—I could sense it, that little echo of our shared magic in her hold on my mind. He had Turned me, had given me the cursed gifts of vampirism that I tried so hard to shut away. Her magic made something stir behind that door, my own recognizing a hint of its maker.

*Deny it, the final dregs of my rational thought urged in the back of my mind. They have Raibn's letters. Your guilt implicates the House of Night. You have to deny it.*

It took every shred of my strength to force my charming smile.

"I think you have me confused for—"

She rolled her eyes. Her magic ripped into my memories like claws through paper. My skull felt as if it was exploding. Flashes of my past flew by as she rummaged through my mind: the Citadel of the Destined Dawn, my sister's face, the blue sky over the sea, the shores of the House of Shadow—

Then *him*.

She stopped. My breath was ragged. I was against the wall, her hand to my throat, even though I didn't remember her putting it there. The steady drip of my blood had gotten more rapid.

She smiled slowly.

"Ah. There it is. My brother's death day."

Her magic pushed through my mind like a blunt knife. She grabbed the memory and excised.

*The prince of the House of Shadow was a devastatingly handsome man, and he was gazing at me like I was a pleasant surprise he looked forward to devouring. He stared at me from across the ballroom, and I dried the sweat on my palms against the gold fabric of my magnificent, ridiculous dress. Ten minutes ago, I'd felt beautiful in it. Now, I hated how much it made me stand out in this crowd. I couldn't tell Raibn or Oraya. Not when so much binged on this party going well—*

She pushed deeper. Pain split my head, seams between the present and the past popping.

"Careful, Egrette," the man warned. His voice sounded a world away. "You can't kill her yet."

*Egrette. I'd heard that name before. Distantly, it clicked together.*

The House of Shadow had a princess, too. A second heir, sister to the man I'd killed. But this knowledge flew by, lost beneath her assault on my mind. I barely heard her response.

"She'll die soon anyway. Before she does, I want to see how she did it."

She tore through my memories of that party—the coup, when Raihn had been kidnapped and Oraya disappeared. Pushed past the images of the Bloodborn guards dragging me away and locking me up, a gift for the Shadowborn prince's favor.

And then she stopped—right there, right at the moment it happened.

*I had the prince against the wall. Oraya was behind me. His hands were on my throat. I was so, so angry.*

*This man had taken everything from me. He had Turned me into a beast undeserving of everything I'd devoted my entire life to. He was the reason I had lost my magic. He was the reason my god had abandoned me.*

*I thought about nothing but that hatred as I grabbed the sword Oraya had given me.*

*As I drove that blade straight through his chest and kept going, and going, and going, until I couldn't push anymore—until the prince's perfect face went slack—*

Egrette stopped. Her magic clung to that image—her brother in his moment of death.

She smiled.

"Poor, poor Malach. How very sad."

But I could feel her emotions through the thread that connected us, too. She wasn't sad at all.

She released me, and I fell to the ground in a gasping heap.

"No use in lying," she said. "Besides, killing him was the most useful thing you'll ever do. Not a lot of time left to top it anyway."

I tried to roll over, tried to push myself to my hands and knees. But a delicately slipped foot emerged from beneath the princess's skirts, pushing me back to the stone, pointed toe burying into the worst of my wounds.

"Egrette," the man warned.

"Oh, pssh. The extra blood will add to the effect. My father will enjoy the suffering of a spy."

*Spy?*

"I'm not a—"

"Spare me. I just came to survey the quality of my gift before I hand it over."

"Gift?"

The word was slurred and gummy. Black blood gushed onto the cobblestones. Egrette watched it with a faint line of disgust over her nose.

I lifted my gaze past her, to the unlit candle hanging in that dusty lantern.

I could envision so perfectly what her face would look like engulfed by flames. Vampires burned differently than humans did. Humans melted, but vampires went up like dry paper, skin cracking and peeling and withering to white ash.

Mere months ago, I could have had her alight in seconds.

But instead, I just heaved helplessly as she rolled me over with her foot.

"I've seen what I need to," she said. Her voice faded. My lashes fluttered closed. I curled up around the open wound in my side. Death lingered in the shadows.

And still, my god was silent.

But why should I expect any different? Why should I *deserve* any different?

I was not a chosen one anymore.

The candle remained cold.



SAESCHA USED TO scare me with stories of vampires when I was a little girl.

"They're evil beasts," she would tell me. "They are more dead than alive, and they resent humans for having what they can't. And do you know what they like to eat the most?"

Sometimes, if I was feeling playful, I'd turn it into a game—*Toes!* I'd giggle. *Ears! Belly buttons!* But usually, I'd say proudly, "Blood!" I liked to be right.