

[PDF] A Sliver Of Shadow (Abby Sinclair, No. 2)

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Books Details:

Title: A Sliver of Shadow (Abby Sinc
Author: Allison Pang
Released: 2012-02-28
Language:
Pages: 400
ISBN: 1439198349
ISBN13: 978-1439198346
ASIN: 1439198349

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pdf, mobi, epub, azw, kindle

Description:

About the Author A marine biologist in a former life, **Allison Pang** turned to a life of crime to finance her wild spending habits and need to collect Faberge eggs. She also loves Hello Kitty, sparkly shoes, and gorgeous violinists. She spends her days in Northern Virginia working as a cube grunt and her nights waiting on her kids and cats, punctuated by the occasional husbandly serenade. Sometimes she even manages to write. Mostly she just makes it up as she goes.

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One

Run, Abby.”

Sonja’s warning slid around me with a wash of power. Startled, I shot up from where I huddled beneath a cluster of fallen logs, decayed bark scattering as a set of claws shredded my hiding place. I ducked, the sharpened talons slicing the air with a deadly whistle.

Grinding my teeth, I narrowed my eyes and concentrated, letting my own form shift. Small, furry, fast ...

Hare.

The Dreaming rippled. I bounded away, sleek and long, haunches bunching and then springing forward to propel me into the darkness. Sonja’s low growl of frustration echoed behind me. I didn’t know exactly what form she’d taken, but my rapidly twitching nose instantly recognized the acrid scent of something feline.

The urge to go to ground vibrated through my little body, but I pushed forward, leaves sliding beneath my paws. All around me were shadows as my nails dug into the moist earth. The scenery blurred past in a haze of ragweed and pine trees, needles brushing my fur. I couldn’t hear Sonja anymore and I paused, my ears rotating to cup the darkness. The faintest breeze caught my attention, and I instinctively flattened against the grass as Sonja swooped past, this time in the shape of a barred owl.

She wheeled, but I bolted, aiming for the tinkling stream nearby. Shedding the last vestige of the hare, I leapt toward the surface, my skin sluicing into scales as I slithered into the depths. My gills opened to shunt out the water, gravel scraping my pink salmon belly.

“Good! Very good.” Sonja applauded from the banks. The succubus had shifted into her more human form, the bloodred feathers of her wings shining in the moonlight of the Dreaming. Her skin had an alabaster purity that could never be matched by anything mortal. Between the hidden depths of her dark eyes and the scarlet wings, she seemed more fallen angel waif than daemon seductress. “You can come out now, Abby. I think that’s enough for tonight.”

My tail flicked me through the current as I changed again, pulling together the part of what made me, *me*. Emerging from the water, I squeezed the drops from my hair and pushed it from my face. “I’m getting better.” I wrapped the Dreaming around me until I was dressed in a pair of jeans and a shirt.

Sonja nodded cautiously, smoothing out the wrinkles of her own tank dress. “You are, but you’re still barely tapping your potential.” She gestured around us with a hint of irritation. “These are *your* Dreams. You limit yourself to your own sense of physics. Becoming a rabbit was fine and you’ve certainly improved your shifting ability—but why not change the ground, or the trees?” She yanked on a damp ringlet of my hair. “Why waste time with this when you could instantly dry it? If you’re ever going to really, truly defeat your nightmares, you’re going to need more than just a few parlor tricks.”

“I don’t think that way. You know that. We’ve been through this how many times now?” I

concentrated on the water flowing over my toes before giving her a wan smile. “Have patience with me. I’m new to this.” One dark brow rose at me sourly, but she let the lie pass without comment. In truth it had been over six months—six very *long* months. She was frustrated, I was frustrated. I’d been banging my head against the metaphysical equivalent of a brick wall in my attempts to break free from the confines of everything I’d ever known in an effort to make sense of the dark shadows of my inner psyche—which often took the form of vicious, man-eating sharks.

My nightmares certainly hadn’t paid the slightest bit of attention either way.

If it hadn’t been for a certain incubus awakening me to the existence of the Dreaming nearly eight months ago, I would have continued to experience my familiar nightly cycle of waking up from the intimate practice of having the flesh shredded from my bones. That should have meant something.

On the other hand, sometimes ignorance really was bliss. Discovering that I could visit the place where my dreams occurred was one thing. Being told I could potentially bring my nightmares to life was something else entirely.

I understood Brystion’s motivation of having his sister teach me the finer points of Dreaming—we weren’t exactly dating anymore, and my chances of focusing long enough past the hurt of his leaving was a bit of a toss-up. I couldn’t argue against the need to control myself better, though I wasn’t sure Sonja saw me as anything more than a chore. Still. The faint scent of the sea rolled past us as though to emphasize the point and I shuddered. Dreams or not, I had no wish to see the sharks again anytime soon.

The succubus sighed at my woeful expression. “You’ll get there. You just need to concentrate.”

I wagged my nose, annoyed. I might not quite grasp everything she tried to teach me, but I wasn’t completely ignorant. “Is *that* all there is to it, Endora?” My eyes narrowed as I stared at her, the power rushing through me, a thin rivulet of the Dreaming taking form in my mind.

A small change, perhaps.

The succubus glanced over her shoulder with a surprised laugh. Her scarlet wings now gleamed a brilliant purple. “Not bad,” she admitted, ruffling them with a shiver, a flush of crimson staining them back to their normal shade.

Her face sobered. “But seriously, Abby. You have enough potential to make a first-class DreamWalker. With the right training, you’d be able to slip in and out of the Dreaming at will—and not just into your dreams, but into others as well.”

“Planning on having me go all Dom Cobb on someone? Let me dig up a top.” Despite my words, I couldn’t even begin to grasp the sort of power that might take. Hell, I could barely manage to keep from being devoured by my own nightmares—and I *knew* what caused them. What would my chances be against someone else’s private despair? It wasn’t any of my business, anyway.

She picked up a stick, sketching out a series of circles on the ground. “Nearly everything that sleeps visits the Dreaming in one form or another. Whether they remember it or not is another story, but I’m sure you’ve heard of people who have prophetic dreams or astral body projections or some such?”

“Well, sure. But the one time I actually attempted to leave the Dreaming without waking up, I ended

up getting lost on the CrossRoads. And attacked by daemons." I frowned at her. The silver roads granted passage between the mortal realm and Faerie and I'd never really figured them out. "Brystion was pissed."

She waved me off. "And rightfully so, but you wouldn't be on the CrossRoads for this. Here ... each circle represents a single person's Dreaming Heart. Let's say this one is yours." She tapped the one closest to me. "Now, the Heart of your Dreaming is sacred space, particularly for mortals. No one can enter it without permission." Her mouth pursed. "Or in my brother's case, invitation?"

I scowled at her. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Indeed. Anyway, that's a bit more than the average sleeping person would normally allow, but people who are close to each other tend to form bonds..." She drew a few squiggles from my circle to the ones closest around it. "Friends and family, perhaps. Lovers." Her eyes met mine with a hint of amusement. "TouchStones. As a Dreamer, you could follow these pathways into their dreams."

I shuddered in distaste as visions of accidentally stumbling into Phin's personal unicorn-porn theater crossed my mind. "And what about enemies? Could they traverse those bonds to me?"

"It is possible," she admitted. "But that's one of the reasons why you need more training." She gestured at the thick iron gate surrounding my Heart. "The unwary have their own defenses built in—but Dreamers have defenses of a different sort at their disposal. The Dreaming itself can become a weapon if you know how to use it."

"Ah. Yeah. You know, I'm not really trying for that sort of thing." I had no desire to become any sort of neoshaman and messing with people's dreams was tricky stuff. "I'll stick with the blue pill, thanks."

"Suit yourself, but you might change your mind someday. It wouldn't hurt to at least understand the basics." She held out a hand to help me out of the stream, and we slowly ambled in the direction of my Heart. The inner sanctum of my dreams lay behind the gate in the form of the old Victorian I'd grown up in. Brystion had told me it couldn't be breached—as long as I stayed within its confines, I would be safe. Even from him.

I scanned the dark forest behind the house. My former lover had made good on his promise to be scarce and I'd barely seen any sign of him, short of the occasional sound of bells echoing like some distant memory through the trees. The few times we'd run across each other at the Hallows nightclub had been polite, if a bit strained. I didn't usually hang around to listen to him sing, and he avoided flaunting whoever his latest TouchStone was to my face, a fact for which I was utterly grateful.

The whole point of TouchStones was to give OtherFolk the ability to stay in the mortal world without limitations ... and to travel the CrossRoads at will, usually in return for some sort of gift. The sacred bonds between mortals and OtherFolk didn't always involve sex, but in his case it had to. Knowing that didn't make it hurt any less. Knowing that after six months he probably wasn't going to come back to me hurt a lot more.

Sonja arched a brow at me and I flushed. "Have a good night. We'll try again tomorrow."

I waved at her, watching as she passed through the gate to fade away in a slurry of silver. I often wondered how she could m...

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