



A Sliver of Shadow (Abby Sinclair, No. 2)

By Allison Pang

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Following *A Brush of Darkness*, the second novel in a dark, fun, and sexy urban fantasy series—featuring a mortal heroine deeply enmeshed in a magical OtherWorld that she’s just learning to navigate.

WAR IS HELL. AND WAR *WITH* HELL IS NO FUN EITHER.

Just when her new life as a TouchStone—a mortal bound to help OtherFolk cross between Faery and human worlds—seems to be settling down, Abby Sinclair is left in charge when the Protectorate, Moira, leaves for the Faery Court. And when the Protectorate’s away...let’s just say things spiral out of control when a spell on Abby backfires and the Faery Queen declares the Doors between their worlds officially *closed*. The results are disastrous for both sides: OtherFolk trapped in the mortal world are beginning to fade, while Faery is on the brink of war with the daemons of Hell. Along with her brooding elven prince Talivar and sexy incubus Brystion, Abby ventures to the CrossRoads in an attempt to override the Queen’s magic. But nothing in this beautiful, dangerous realm will compare to the discoveries she’s making about her past, her destiny, and what she will sacrifice for those she loves.

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Editorial Review

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 waggled 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 manage the CrossRoads directly like that, but Brystion had the same talent.

I reached out and stroked the gate with a curious finger, the rusted metal flaking into my hand. Physics or not, it still seemed so real here. And as far as confronting my nightmares ...

I glanced over at the rocky path that led to the sea. So far I’d managed to keep the worst of the memories at bay. It was chickenshit of me, but the worse the memory, the larger the shark. I wasn’t any sort of hero to go facing them down. The sharks paid no mind to my efforts. They would continue to lurk in all their sharp-toothed glory, regardless.

“Always the coward.” I rubbed my face before shutting the gate and locking it tight. I didn’t mind keeping it open when I was here, but now that I knew there were other beings actually wandering around in the Dreaming, I disliked leaving it gaping in my absence.

The fact that I might have been locking the incubus inside didn’t bother me so much. He certainly could make his own way through if he wanted to. My gaze drifted over the thick cluster of hemlock behind the garden and the heady taste of jasmine suddenly grew heavy on my tongue. I took a step toward the trees, the scent growing stronger.

Brystion.

Tempted, I gave the darkness a wry smile. “No games tonight.” And I meant it.

The one time I’d actually given in, I’d wandered for hours, emerging to find myself richer only by the number of brambles stuck in my hair. I debated mooning the woods, but in the end I merely entered the house, gently closing the door behind me. And if I thought I caught my name whispered on the breeze, I chose not to acknowledge it.

Poke.

Something sharp prodded my back. Bleary, I shifted away from it.

Poke.

“Phin, if that’s you, you’d better have a damn good reason for pulling me out of my training.” I yawned the words and attempted to roll over.

“I thought you might want to know he’s awake again.” The cat-size unicorn clambered over my hip to dig his cloven hooves into my thigh.

“And he won’t go to sleep for you?”

“Abby, in case you haven’t noticed, I don’t have hands. But I *do* have teeth, so unless you want that delicious ass of yours blemished, I suggest you get your butt out of bed. Little angel wants his mamma.”

I groaned. Normally Talivar took the night shift but he'd gone to Faerie before I'd crashed. Apparently he hadn't returned yet. Some bodyguard. "What time is it?" I cracked an eye at the clock—4 A.M.

Shit.

"Fine. But I'm *not* his mamma." I sat up and snarled when my toes hit the chilly floor.

"You're the only thing here with tits. Close enough." Phineas grinned, wriggling under the warmth of the sheets I left behind. "Mmm ... cozy," he said with a sigh.

"Don't push your luck." I glared at him, gathering my robe around my shoulders. Sure enough, now that I'd managed to pull myself out of the hazy state between awake and Dreaming, I could hear Benjamin's wailing cry down the hallway. "I'm not sure I get paid enough for this," I muttered. But who was I kidding? Moira said jump, and I jumped. Why should the job stop at a little thing like child care? Especially when it came to the Faery princess's son.

I padded down the hall with a yawn. "I'm coming, sweetie." I winced as his voice jumped two notches from slightly pissy to full-on megahowl. Upon entering the room and switching on the nightlight, the reason was quickly evident. Wedged up in one corner of the crib, Benjamin had managed to get one of his limbs wrapped around the bars. The fact that the limb in question was a neatly feathered *wing* made very little difference to the furious little eyes peering at me from a squinched-up face.

Angel, indeed. Spitting image of his father.

Startled by how much he looked like Robert when he thrust out that chin, I tsked at him soothingly, gently extricating the wing without knocking any feathers loose. His volume lowered about two decibels and I picked him up to rest his head on my shoulder. He snuffled, dark hair damp against my neck, his mouth rooting to take hold of my collarbone. "That time again, is it?" I patted his back and covered him with a blanket, starting up what had become a twice-nightly ritual of pacing.

This time Benjamin wasn't having any of it, though. I quickly changed his diaper for good measure and then the two of us headed into the kitchen so that I could warm up a bottle. I continued rocking side to side as the pot on the stove heated up. My enchanted fridge always had his milk in good supply, though what it was, I wasn't entirely sure. Moira wouldn't hear of giving him mortal formula, but I'd never actually seen her carrying a breast pump either. In the end, I supposed it didn't matter. Whatever it was seemed to keep him healthy and it's not as if I'd even know where to begin to find food for a half-angel/half-Fae child anyway. Based on the amount the little booger was going through, I could only imagine his metabolism was higher than a mortal child's, although his somewhat limited development was troubling. At eight months, a human baby would have been at least starting to wean, and certainly wouldn't require two feedings a night. On the other hand, human babies couldn't fly, so maybe the comparison was unfair.

Two weeks ago, Moira had been called away to the Faery Court to give her testimony about Maurice's betrayal. Consumed by jealousy, Maurice had concocted an elaborate scheme to remove his former lover from power in a last-ditch bid to land himself a place in Faerie—a plan I had somehow managed to thwart, although that was mostly just dumb luck on my part. Of course, the offshoot of that had nearly been my death, so it wasn't like I'd gotten away unscathed.

Undoubtedly I was on his ultimate shitlist, but I'd been spared the testimony requirement and acquired a bodyguard in the form of Moira's brother, so some things had worked out. On the other hand, staying behind

meant I had to run things on my own—including the task of being Benjamin’s nanny.

Talivar had been happy enough to take the night shift, but when the infant had sprouted wings a few days ago, the prince had decided it was worth the risk of leaving us behind to tell his sister directly.

Regardless of what Moira had told me, the knowledge of who was Benjamin’s father wasn’t for public consumption, but feathers would be hard to hide for too long.

Benjamin began to whimper. The bottle was nearly warm now, so I shushed him until it was the right temperature. I retreated into the living room, and curled up on the sofa. He smacked his lips at the sight of the bottle and suckled greedily. “Better be careful,” I warned him. “Keep eating like this and you’ll be too heavy to fly.”

If he heard my words, he ignored them, eyes closing in contentment. “Silly boy,” I murmured, shifting him so that he was crooked in my elbow. Now that his needs were fully taken care of, I blinked sleepily myself, my gritty eyes burning. “Not yet. Gotta get you all tucked in first, eh?” I glanced down at the pile of loose papers on the coffee table and turned the lamp to its dimmest setting, grabbing the top few sheets.

Might as well try to get some work in.

Dear Abby...

I rolled my eyes. Just my luck to be stuck with the same name as the columnist. I couldn’t recall exactly when the first letters started showing up, but shortly after the whole Maurice debacle, I began to find them. At first, they’d be randomly slipped under the door of the Midnight Marketplace, or even sometimes at the Pit, the used bookstore where I worked. I wasn’t foolish enough to think the letters were meant for me. Not really.

Moira was the Protectorate of Portsmouth. Part of her job was to oversee disputes and issues of the OtherFolk living here. As her mortal TouchStone, I was simply a conduit to possibly getting her attention faster.

But as I tentatively began to read the letters, Moira decided I could use the practice and allowed me to try to answer. Like a floodgate opening, they started showing up on my pillow, in my bathroom, taped to the fridge. I drew the line when I found the one in my underwear drawer.

Or really, Phineas blew a gasket.

“I don’t mind you having your hobbies,” he’d exploded at me that morning, “but goddamn if you could keep them out of your lingerie?”

Even aside from the fact that he wasn’t actually supposed to be *in* my underwear drawer either, this was one time I agreed with him.

I formally set up a separate address at the Marketplace, with occasional diversions to the Hallows, and made it clear that any letters showing up in my sheets were going to be burned.

Still, the flow kept on here and there; how useful my answers were was up for debate.

I was hoping you could settle a little issue between me and this ghost I’m living with.

“Not bloody likely.”

I'm a brownie, and I used to work for Mr. Jefferson. Now, technically, brownies work until their chosen masters pass on and then we are set free. But in this case, Mr. Jefferson did not fully move into the light and his ghost haunts the place and refuses to let me go ...

I groaned, placing the letter on the cushion beside me. I hated these kinds of questions. Not as much as the TouchStone or the star-crossed lover ones, but without knowing both sides of the story, how was I supposed to answer this?

Even if I meant well, there was no telling what the repercussions would be if I gave them the wrong advice. “Have to find a ghost whisperer, Benjamin.” Benjamin’s jaw was slack now, the nipple hanging off his lower lip, milk in the corners of his mouth. “All right, little man. Back to bed with you. And Auntie,” I amended as the front door creaked open.

“Here, I’ll take him.” Talivar emerged from the darkness with a quiet grace. The elven prince-cum-bodyguard had finally relaxed his rather minimal dress code of tunics and torcs a few months ago, even as he had relaxed his vigilance.

With a little shopping help from me, he had taken casual chic to an entirely new level. Dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt, he cut a nice figure in the dim light, his long hair tied in a loose queue and a bit of hipster scruff on his chin setting off the strong jaw. Frankly, I found that the oddest thing about him, given that I’d always thought elves couldn’t actually grow facial hair, but I was hardly an expert.

Besides, I liked it.

The delicate points of his ears poked between the sable strands of his hair, silver hoops gleaming near the tips like tiny stars. He still retained the leather eye patch, though. My threats to glitter it up had been met with a slightly chilly smile, and in the end I’d decided to leave well enough alone.

“Ah. I didn’t hear you come in.” I peered up at him. “Good trip?”

“There is much to discuss, but I think it can wait until tomorrow.” He watched the baby, a strange expression ghosting over his face. “My sister wasn’t overly happy to hear about the wings, as you can imagine, but she’ll manage.”

I grunted, not really sure I cared about anything other than getting back to my bed. Not at this hour, anyway. “When do you think the trial will wrap up?”

He gently took Benjamin from me, cradling his nephew’s head with a careful hand. “Maurice is not being cooperative, as we suspected. His refusal to explain how he removed all that succubus blood is becoming most ... vexing.” Talivar’s mouth compressed in a way that left little doubt that *vexing* probably wasn’t the word he was looking for, but it curved into a crooked smile a moment later as he shrugged at me.

“I don’t think it’s the removal so much as what he did with it.” Although probably insane on some level, Maurice had somehow discovered a way to use the blood of succubi in the form of paint. Which sounds harmless enough—until he used it on Moira and myself, among others, to trap us in portraits made of our own nightmares.

“No doubt. And Moira has given her testimony, but ...” He hesitated. “Well, the truth is our mother is not doing as well as she might. Moira is keeping an eye on her.”

“Translation: Things are fucked,” I quipped with a sigh. “I already know where this is going.” Visions of raising Benjamin to his college years filled me with a weary sort of resignation. “What are the chances I’ll be seeing Moira again before my Contract is up?”

“Well enough, I’m thinking. The Queen won’t keep her there forever.”

Easy for him to say. Maybe six years didn’t seem like much to a nearly ageless elf, but it might as well have been forever as far as I was concerned.

“I still think we need to tell Robert. Benjamin *is* his son, and however uncomfortable that makes people, he should know. After all,” I said dryly, “who’s going to teach him to fly?”

Talivar shifted Benjamin to his shoulder and shook his head. “We do not recognize paternal claims in Faerie, Abby. All lineages are drawn through the mother. By that logic, I’m actually more closely related to my nephew than Robert is.”

“Yeah, I can tell, what with those *wings* and all. Still makes no damn sense.”

“Yes, well, we’re a rather promiscuous bunch. We cannot trust our wives to be faithful, any more than our wives could trust us. At least this way I know my sister’s children are related to me. But my wife?” He shrugged at my raised brow, a wan smile on his lips. “My hypothetical wife, anyway. She could take a hundred lovers over the course of our marriage and I would have no right to gainsay her that.”

“And that doesn’t bother you? Knowing that you have no real acknowledgement of your own children?”

“Children are rare and precious to our kind. We tend not to look too closely at where they come from. Usually.” He looked down at the baby, his gaze distant. “And that, I think, is enough for one evening. Or morning, as the case may be,” he noted, glancing at the false dawn through the blinds. “I’ll tend to him now. Hopefully your rest wasn’t disturbed much.”

“Mmm ... you’re assuming I *like* to be awakened by a horn half up my ass.”

“Probably depends on the horn.” A smirk crossed his face before he slipped through the kitchen and down the hallway to the baby’s room. I watched him go, rubbing my eyes again. He didn’t have Brystion’s blatant sexuality, but there was an ethereal beauty to him that sometimes stunned me.

A pang of sadness twisted in my chest and I told it to shut the hell up, ambling to my bedroom to try to catch a few more hours of shut-eye. Today was Katy’s eighteenth birthday, after all, and I had things to do—party plans to set in motion and her werewolf boyfriend to keep under control. My duties didn’t get put on hold simply because I had a messy personal life.

Phineas was unabashedly drooling on my pillow, his equine mouth half open. “Lovely.” I grimaced, snatching up a spare from the closet. I hunched beneath the blankets, wrapping them partway about my head as though I might shut out the memories.

The unicorn snuggled closer, making kissy sounds.

I shoved him beneath the blanket. “You’re an ass. See if I make you any breakfast.”

“Be still my wounded heart,” he retorted. “However shall I manage without a plate of burned bacon?” There was a snuffling sound and a sigh, and then a miniature chainsaw revving next to my ear.

Out of a perverse sense of revenge I nudged him with my shoulder. “I’ve got to try to find a ghost whisperer today, if I can. Remind me when you wake me up again.”

There was a sudden silence. On instinct, I jerked my backside away from him, peering out of my nest to catch his teeth clicking shut on the space where my ass had just been. The unicorn gave me a sour look. “Almost got you,” he mumbled, flopping onto his back with his legs spread obscenely. “Ask Charlie. She’s always talking to dead people.”

I frowned. I hadn’t spoken to Charlie in quite a while. At least not about anything that didn’t end up being awkwardly ... awkward. “Charlie as in ‘the girlfriend of the angel who cheated on her with my boss and whose baby I’m taking care of’?”

“Yeah.” His mouth pursed. “Hmm ... I guess I could see where that might be a problem. Good thing I don’t have to talk to her.”

“Nice.” I slouched down and rearranged the blankets, rolling to the other side to keep my posterior out of range. “Whose side are you on anyway?”

“Thought you’d have figured that out by now.” He yawned, one eye cocking open to wink at me. “Mine.”

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Users Review

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