NIGHTBANE

ALEX ASTER

LIGHTLARK #2



AMULET BOOKS • NEW YORK

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Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for and may be obtained from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-4197-6090-7

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Book design by Chelsea Hunter

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Printed and bound in U.S.A.
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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VAULT

Isla Crown tasted death on the back of her tongue.

Moments before, she had unlocked the hidden vault in the Place of Mirrors. Inside, power churned, whispering in a language she didn't understand, calling to something deep in her marrow. It felt urgent, obvious, like the answer to a question she had somehow forgotten.

The rest of the abandoned palace was falling apart, but this door had remained closed throughout the curses. Her ancestors had fought to keep it a secret. Her crown was the only key and Isla thought, as she pulled the door open with a scream of a creak, that they must have hidden it away so thoroughly for a reason.

Her heart raced as she peered inside. But before she could get a look at anything good, a force battled through the gap, struck her in the chest, and sent her careening across the room.

The door slammed closed.

For a moment, there was silence. Peace, almost, which had become the most coveted and rarest of luxuries. It was all she dared wish for nowadays. Peace from the pain that pulsed through her chest, where an arrow had split her heart into two. Peace from the thoughts that ravaged her brain like insects feasting on decay. So much had been lost and gained in the last few weeks, and not in equal measure.

For that one second, though, she was finally able to empty her head.

Until it cracked against the stone floor, and her peace was replaced by a vision of carnage.

Bodies. Bloodied. Charred. She couldn't see what realms they were from; she could see only their skin and bones. Darkness spilled around

the corpses like knocked-over pots of ink, but it did not settle, or puddle, or disappear.

No. This darkness devoured.

It finished off the rest of the bodies, then turned its attention to her. The tendrils climbed, cold and damp as lifeless limbs. Before she could move, the shadows parted her lips and forced her to drink them. She gasped for air, but all she tasted was death.

Everything went black, like the stars and the moon and the sun were just candles that had been blown out, one by one.

Then, the darkness spoke.

"*Isla*." It had his voice. *Grim's* voice. "*Come back to me. Come back—*"

A blink, and she was back in the Place of Mirrors, all refracted sunlight and skeletal branches scraping against the remaining glass, reaching for her like hands.

And Oro. He was there in an instant, cradling her in his arms. He was not one for dramatic reactions, which only made his expression of horror more concerning.

Isla reached up and found blood running from her nose, her ears, her eyes, down her cheeks. She looked at the blood on her fingers, and all she could think about was what she had seen.

What was that? A vision?

A warning of what Grim would do if she didn't return to him?

She didn't know, but one thing was clear: as soon as she had opened that door, something had slammed it closed again. Something was in that room.

And it didn't want Isla to find it.