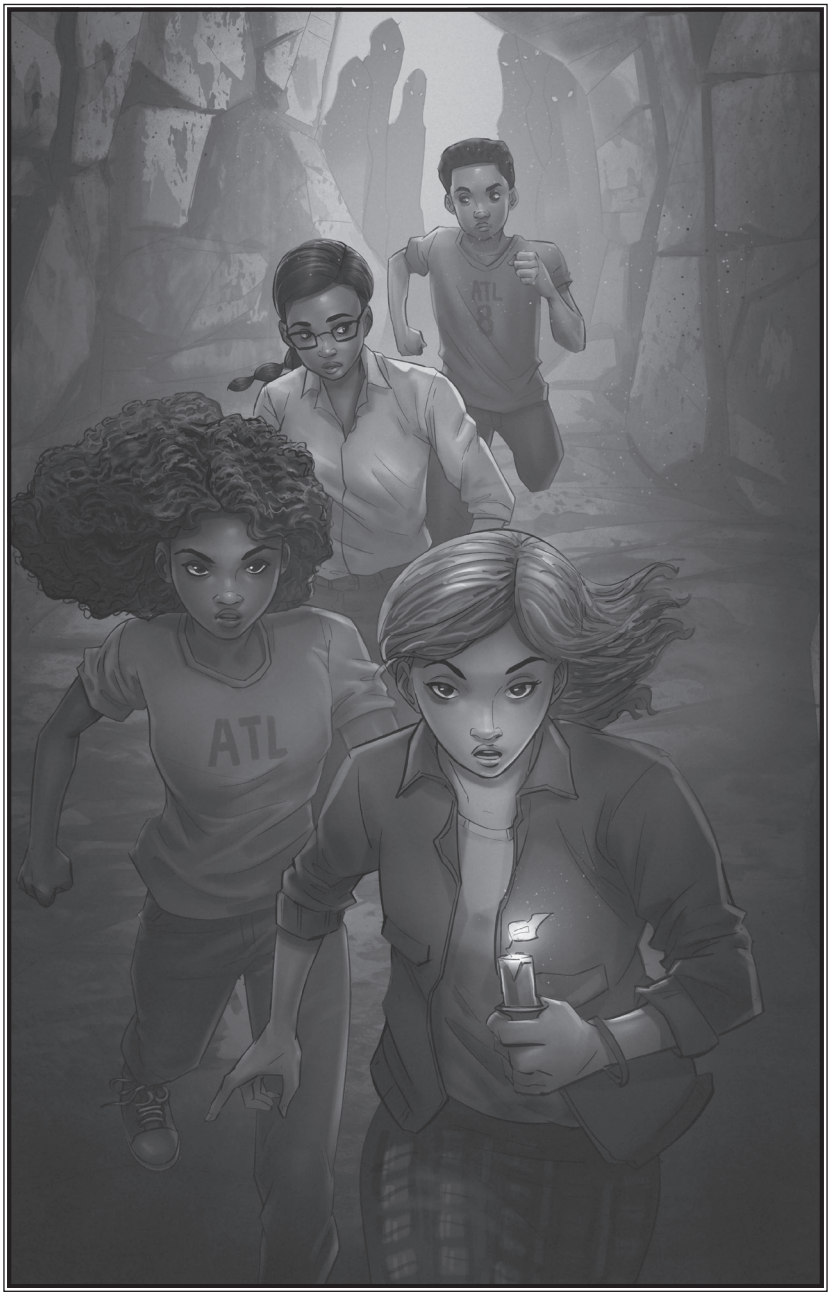
AMARI

AND THE

DESPICABLE WONDERS


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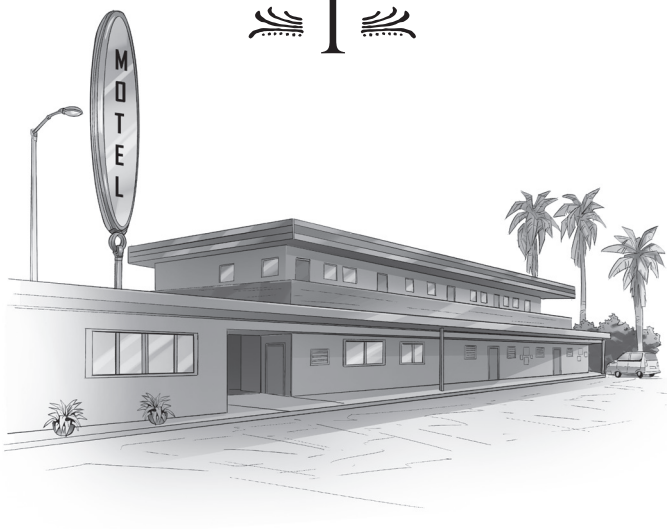
For my dad, Bruce, who always set the example
for what a good man should be



Also by B. B. Alston

Amari and the Night Brothers
Amari and the Great Game

1



When Quinton told us we'd be hiding out somewhere top secret, I pictured an underground bunker way out in the wilderness. Something totally off the grid and really high tech – I'm talking fingerprint scanners and surveillance cameras hidden in the trees. Maybe even a trusted werewolf or two to scare off anyone – or any*thing* – that comes too close.

It's the kind of protection you'd expect from the supernatural world's most famous Special Agent.

Instead, I'm sitting cross-legged between Jayden and Elsie on the floor of an outdated motel room. Lots of pink-and-red-striped wallpaper and double beds that are so stiff, it's comfier down here on the carpet.

While my brother is out doing who knows what, the three of us crowd around Elsie's laptop. Onscreen, the Vanderbilt Hotel burns, bright flames and billowing black smoke blotting out the stars above. Fire trucks and ambulances race to the scene, sirens blaring.

I can't look away, even as a jumbled knot of guilt and dread churns in my gut. *This is my fault.*

Words scroll across the bottom of the screen.

> Breaking News: Magicians Attack American Bureau!

As the footage loops, a broadcaster gives commentary. *"Last night's torching of the Vanderbilt Hotel, a front for the Bureau of Supernatural Affairs in Atlanta, sent dozens of known worlders to nearby hospitals. Now the entire supernatural world holds its breath, with many fearing the incident could spark a larger conflict, one as devastating as the Ancient War.*

"With Prime Minister Merlin and the Supernatural World Congress still frozen in time, it will be up to the new acting Prime Minister, Elaine Harlowe, to respond. The post had belonged to Deputy Prime Minister Bane, before he unceremoniously quit just hours after the attack. Harlowe's meteoric rise, first through the ranks of the Bureau and now supernatural world government, is unprecedented.

"Before the time freeze, many officials believed the centuries-old magician threat had finally come to an end after the demise of Raoul Moreau, the last remaining Night Brother.

But now another magician, Dylan Van Helsing, has emerged as our world's most dangerous criminal. Terrifying – albeit unconfirmed – reports claim that he is backed by hundreds *of previously unknown magicians –"*

Me and Jayden both jump as the computer slams shut.

"That's enough news for one day," says Elsie, shooting me a concerned glance. "Don't you think?"

Jayden nods. "It *was* gettin' kinda depressing."

"We're stuck in this motel room until Quinton gets back," I say. "The least we can do is keep track of what's going on."

"Sure . . ." says Elsie. "But that's all we've done since we checked in this morning. The othernet is nothing but doom and gloom. Let's try to think about something else for a while."

"I don't want to think about anything else," I say, shaking my head. "The Vanderbilt Hotel is in ashes because *I* let Dylan win the Great Game. People are in the hospital because he's wearing the Crown of Vladimir instead of me. If he hurts anyone else, I need to know."

I make a move to reopen the laptop, but Jayden grabs it first, pushing it out of my reach. I frown at him, but he's looking at Elsie. They seem to be having a whole conversation with just their eyes. It ends with Jayden giving Elsie an encouraging nod.

My best friend takes a deep breath before turning to face me again. "Jayden and I have been talking and . . . we're worried about you."

We've been together all day – how'd they do that without me knowing? And what exactly have they been saying about me?

"You were in the bathroom –" Elsie starts to explain but cuts herself short. "That's not important. Your aura has been blue for most of the afternoon, and it's only gotten worse. I – no, *we* think maybe you're being too hard on yourself."

There's no point denying it. As a weredragon, Elsie can tell exactly how I'm feeling from the colour aura my emotions give off. So I shrug and say, "I've been kinda down but I'm fine. I've got to be if we're going to fix my mistakes."

"That's the thing," says Elsie. "What's happening isn't *your* mistake. Nobody could've guessed Director Harlowe was using her supernatural ability to control both the Bureau and the Prime Minister. And it's not like the Great Game was fair – Cozmo forced your hand in the final challenge. *He's* the one who handed Dylan control of the League of Magicians. If Harlowe and Dylan go to war with one another, that's not on you."

"You done your best," adds Jayden. "Can't ask for more than that."

I'm grateful to my friends for trying to make me feel better but, truth is, I'm not sure I deserve it. "My best wasn't good enough. I didn't accomplish anything I set out to do this summer."

Jayden shakes his head. "Nah –"

"Yes!" I interrupt, my frustration finally bubbling over. "Merlin and the Supernatural World Congress are still

frozen. And when Director Harlowe showed up to gloat, all I could do was run away. Els, we left Lara behind to fend for herself . . .” I pause, fighting down a rush of emotion. “And what about everyone else at the Bureau? None of them are safe from Harlowe’s mind control. Maybe you’re right that I didn’t cause what’s happening out there, but I had chances to stop it, and I failed. You can’t deny that.”

It’s quiet – clearly neither of my friends knows what to say. I hate that I raised my voice like that – it makes me feel worse than I already did.

“Sorry.” I blow out a sigh. “It’s not you guys. After last night, all I want is another chance to get things right. But so far we’ve done nothing but wait around this motel room.”

“Quinton brought us here for good reason,” says Elsie, taking my brother’s side as I knew she would.

Elsie’s the biggest VanQuish fan on the planet. Special Agents really are the superheroes of the supernatural world, and nobody is bigger than VanQuish – aka the team of Quinton and Maria Van Helsing. If my brother had his partner instead of his sister, maybe he wouldn’t be out there alone. But Harlowe had Maria arrested for nothing.

“It’s not safe for us right now,” Elsie continues. “Did you forget that Harlowe wanted us sent to the Sightless Depths? Or that Dylan tried to burn the two of us before he set fire to the Vanderbilt Hotel?”

“Quinton is the one who told me to keep fighting,” I say. “That I shouldn’t just lie down and surrender. Of course, if he really meant that he would’ve taken me with him.”

When Jayden raises an eyebrow, I realise I accidentally said that last part out loud.

"So that's why you all cranky," he says. "You being treated like a kid when you thought y'all was gonna be partners."

I can't help sulking a little. "Maybe?" I admit.

"That still might happen," says Elsie. "It hasn't even been a full day since everything went down. You and I have come up with enough plans to know they take time. Especially when it comes to deciding who's gonna do what. He probably just wants us safe while he figures out our next move." She grins. "I *totally* get it, though – whenever one of my experiments goes wrong, the first thing I want to do is try again."

I rest my chin in my palm and sigh. "I know you're right – it's just hard. Sorry again for being such a grump."

Jayden just shrugs.

Elsie shakes her head. "No apologies necessary. Talk to your brother when he gets back. I bet he's got a good reason for leaving you behind."

My pocket buzzes and I reach inside for the boring flip phone Quinton gave each of us. I'm still sad I had to give up the apps on my smartphone, but this thing is supposed to be untraceable.

New Text Message from Q:
On my way back

"Looks like I'll get my chance soon," I say, showing Jayden and Elsie the message.

"Ask if he bringin' food," says Jayden. "'Cause I'm starving."

I glance at the pile of empty chip bags stacked on the bed. "Boy, you've been munching on Doritos since we got here."

He sighs. "Chips are good, but burgers are better – *so* much better."

"A burger *does* sound tasty," Elsie agrees.

Before I can send a food request, my phone buzzes again.

New Text Message from Q:

Heads up: Mama stopping by after work.

Mama's coming here to the motel? It's already after ten at night. What if she's followed?

I make myself relax. Quinton wouldn't let her near this place unless he knew it was safe. That's when another, more pressing worry skips through my head. Last night, Dylan and I had a nasty battle to settle the final challenge of the Great Game. And I didn't just lose, I showed up to my apartment looking like it too. It was lucky Mama wasn't home to see.

I've already changed out of my beat-up Junior Agent uniform and washed the dirt and grass from my hair. I even cleared the nicks and scrapes from my hands and forearms using the Hurried Healing gel in the first aid kit.

But there's still a bad scratch along my chin. The gel didn't do much for that one – according to the bottle, deeper cuts can take up to twelve hours to clear.

"You good?" Jayden asks, staring.

I point to the scratch. "Mama's on her way here, and that lady is gonna freak when she sees me."

He winces. "Yeah, Mrs P don't play when it comes to you."

Heading to the closet, I grab the bottle of Hurried Healing gel and start for the bathroom.

Elsie follows. "The warning on the bottle says not to use too much."

"I didn't survive the Great Game just to have Mama kill me instead." I step into the bathroom and shut the door behind me.

"Just be careful," Elsie calls.

"Will do," I say.

The mirror in here is grimy, and the light bulb is dim. Not the best combination, but I take a long look at myself anyway. No matter which way I turn my face that scratch is front and centre.

If I still had my illusions, changing my appearance would be easy. I could snap my fingers and look however I wanted. But losing the Great Game cost me more than just the Crown – Dylan took my magic too. Thinking about it stirs up an awful feeling that I'm not whole.

I flip the bottle around and read the warning again.

Warning: *Overmedicating may cause unexpected side effects.*

It's enough to make me rethink putting on more gel . . . at least until I take another look at my chin. Mama's even more protective than Quinton. If she thinks I've been hurt, she might tell my brother to keep me locked away, out of danger. Well, I've had enough of sitting around – I need to be out there doing stuff that matters.

I tilt the bottle to dab a bit of gel on my finger but suddenly feel dizzy. I blink as my vision goes so hazy I have to hold on to the sink to keep my balance.

That's when I hear a voice. It's faint – barely a whisper. "*You'll be punished for what you've done*."

I whip my head around, eyeing every inch of the tiny bathroom. Chipped tile on the walls. Ripped shower curtain. A toilet that barely flushes.

I'm the only one in here.

But knowing that doesn't stop my heart thundering in my chest.

Because I know whose voice that was. I'd recognise it anywhere.

Dylan Van Helsing.