WHERE SHADOWS MEET

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To my younger self, who loved vampires and believed in happily ever afters but doubted if she was deserving of one—who tried to mold herself into someone everyone would love. Everyone but herself.

You are enough just as you are.
This one's for those like you.

And to Sara, Vicki, and Vanessa. This book wouldn't have become the story I needed it to be without you.



Author's Note

Thank you for reading *Where Shadows Meet*, the first in a romantic fantasy duology featuring vampires, humans, and the gods that created them both. Fantasy and romance have, at many times, provided me with a much-needed escape as well as validation and catharsis. As such, it was important to me for my characters to reflect the world I've lived in and the things I've lived through—the struggles, joys, and everything in between. For the royal family tree and a guide to the vampire bloodlines, please see the back of the book.

Content Warnings

Please know that this story contains depictions of blood (including the drinking of blood), death (including that of multiple family members), kidnapping, psychological abuse, murder, systems of oppression (pulling from my family's history in the American South and the use of enslaved Black people as disposable labor but, of course, unfortunately relating to many different people across the world), and violence of all sorts. There's also a character who has self-harmed and shows and makes reference to those scars. The actual self-harm occurred years prior and is not depicted.

It's my hope that I've treated all this with care. Enjoy this book of my heart.

Sincerely,
Patrice

". . . He who eats My flesh and drinks
My blood has eternal life."

—JOHN 6:54





Before

1,201 Years Ago: The Heavenly Realms

Once long ago in the Heavenly Realms, a princess in a gown of sunlight made her way through a floating forest.

Though it was her first visit, she walked with confidence. As if this overgrown forest of the southernmost realm was her home and not the glittering cloud castles of the eastern realms.

No one saw the princess arrive. No one bowed or cleared her path. There, she was treated like all other gods, which was to say, she was mostly ignored.

In the forest, there was usually only one god—*if* she could even be called that. The daughter of a human and a god, she was more outcast than anything else. As if respecting her self-imposed isolation, the forest had spread, consuming everything it touched around her. Except for a stream, a cottage, and a small graveyard the outcast visited each night.

The princess stopped when she happened upon that very same

stream. From behind a tree, she observed the girl who seemed so much a part of this place. The forest's spirit personified, the princess would've thought—if she didn't already know the truth.

The sun, beaming high overhead, kissed the outcast's dark-brown skin in a warm glow. She stood there naked; two giant, majestic wings sprang from her back. Wider than any the princess had ever seen. Stark white and glimmering, the wings dipped into the waters, shrouding the girl, protecting her, ever ready to whisk her away.

The princess watched as the girl parted her hair into four sections and brushed them, one by one. She half expected a song to come from the girl's lips and birds to dance in the air above her, chirping. But there were only the trickling stream, the rustling of the wind, and the girl detangling her thick, long, curly hair.

When the princess finally pulled her gaze away, stars were in the sky and the chill of night had settled. It was as if the girl had woven a spell and the princess had lost all track of time while caught in it.

Soon, the princess would be missed. Soon, her father would realize he hadn't seen his daughter all day. The last thing she needed was for the king of the gods to find out where she was. To suspect what she might be up to. Still, she hesitated to reveal herself. Once she did, there'd be no turning back.

She could easily return to where she came from and forget this girl. But there was nothing easy about forgetting, and the princess did not want to go back to the way things were, had been, and would always be with her father caring more about the next goddess he could lay with and her mother doing nothing to stop him. Soon enough, he'd have what he really wanted ever since her brother's death: a son who could replace her as his heir.

She had to take control of her destiny.

She had to act now.

She took a step forward and snapped a twig, at once breaking the spell.

The girl in the stream gasped, and her wings innocently wrapped around her. The two stared at each other, neither knowing what to say. Finally, the outcast broke the silence.

"Can you hand me my clothes?" she said in a clear voice. She gestured to the branch just above the princess where undergarments, a dress of handspun wool, and a leather belt hung.

The princess grasped the rough wool of the gown—so very different from the silks and satins she and the other royals and nobles wore—and stepped forward, holding the clothing out to the girl. The girl glided forth. Her water-pruned fingers brushed against the princess's soft, slender ones, causing small bumps to appear along the princess's arms and shivers to rush down her spine. The princess quickly withdrew and turned away before the girl could catch sight of the blush creeping up her cheeks. After a few moments, she peeked and found the girl was fully dressed.

Her green gown fit loosely, doing nothing to complement the curves the princess had glimpsed or the girl's skin, which glowed beautiful and blackish blue in the moonlight. The girl's wet curls fell over her shoulders and all the way down her back. She looked at the princess, a hard edge in her eyes. "If you expect me to bow—"

"I don't," said the princess, voice soft as if in a trance.

"You're a long way from home."

"I'm lost."

The girl threw her head back and laughed. The sound echoed throughout the forest, making the hairs on the princess's neck stand straight up. "The princess of the gods, lost in the very kingdom

she'll one day rule?" She shook her head. "I'm no fool. Your family has taken enough from me. Let me live and die in peace." The outcast fastened the princess with her stare once more, her eyes dark, empty, and alone.

The girl was right. The princess had come there for a reason, a means to an end, but in the girl's eyes she saw something she wasn't expecting—an instant connection with a person she barely knew. She, too, was often alone. Used by others to get closer to her father, never seen for who she was, who she wanted to be—who she deserved to become.

"You're right. I'm not lost. But I'm also not my father. I—" The princess paused, unsure of how to explain what she was here for. "It's getting dark," she said instead. "I must get back. I'll return again."

"Whatever you say, your highness." The girl shrugged, trying to hide the shift in her eyes, but the princess seized on it: the smallest glimmer of hope.



The princess, Thana, went back every seventh morning. Her wash day, explained Favre, the outcast, the day she did her hair.

Every visit, Favre expected Thana to ask for something—like the gods who'd visited her mother always had. But Thana asked for nothing; she merely offered her company. And soon, Favre looked forward to those days. The ones when she wasn't so alone, when she had someone to speak to, to create dreams with. Still, she tried to hide her truest parts. But slowly, with time, Thana gained her trust. In her, Favre had found a friend, and soon after, a lover—a girl who also longed to be someone else, a girl shunned because she was misunderstood by all the rest.

One evening, Favre headed toward the graveyard she visited each night. She'd been telling her mother about Thana, about how happy Thana made her, about the small yet powerful joys her presence—and acceptance—brought her. She wished to see Thana always, but they had to be careful. Thana's father wouldn't like them seeing each other. And when people did *anything* the king of the gods didn't like, they wound up dead.

The graveyard was marked by a wrought-iron gate that towered over Favre. She held the only key. Just one person, her mother, was buried there. Far away from the gods who had used her mother for her powers; far away from the king who had let her mother die.

But when she approached, the lock was broken off. And standing there, placing roses onto a mound of dirt, was Thana.

Favre's chest tightened.

"What are you doing here?"

Seeing her there, uninvited, felt like a violation. Like Thana had forced herself where she didn't belong. Even the forest hadn't dared to creep there. It was as if Thana was reminding Favre that, no matter what, she was the princess of the gods, and thus owned this land. Nothing here belonged to Favre.

No. Favre took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. She *knew* Thana. Thana wouldn't do that . . . not intentionally. Thana, who had so much, likely hadn't thought twice about breaking the lock, hadn't considered how it would make Favre, who had so little, feel.

The graveyard was her place. Her sanctuary. And now something she had to share.

"I needed to see you." Thana closed the distance between them. She touched Favre's arm. Unlike the other times, she didn't ask first. She leaned in for a kiss.

Favre stumbled back, gripping the broken gate. "You could've met me at the—"

"I didn't have time to wait." Her voice was sharp, a tone she'd never used. A tone that the men who'd seduced her mother had used when they needed something from her and had grown tired of waiting for her to give it. A chill went up Favre's spine.

Favre's gaze raked across Thana. Her gown, usually made of silly, amusing things like starlight or flowers or even the air, was jet-black satin, like she was in mourning. Her hair, usually in neat braids with golden cuffs clipped onto each one, was wild, fanning out across her head. Her baby hairs were curled and damp at her temple. Tiny beads of sweat ran against her brown skin, cheeks flushed a deep shade of pink.

"We can't be together." Thana's voice cracked. "My younger siblings followed me. They spied on us and told my father." After that, Favre only heard snippets. How he gave Thana a choice: Favre or her crown. Kovnu wouldn't have a witch tainting *his* bloodline.

Witch. Thana's words rang through Favre's ears. Of course he'd called her that. Of course he'd spoken of her like that. *Like a disease.* When he was the one who plagued the Heavenly Realms.

Her blood surged; she wanted to scream.

All the hatred she had buried deep rose from within. All the rage she'd tried to tamp down.

Her mother had not been a good one; she'd cared more for powerful men than she had her own daughter. But still, she had been her mother—the only family Favre had ever had. Men like him, men like the king of the gods, had asked her mother for favors she could only grant with the power running through her blood, gifts her mother had thought it was her duty to bestow, magic that

had cost her life. Kovnu had promised to save her, but he let her die in the end. *She's just a witch*, he'd said, while Favre begged, not worth the years off his own near-immortal life that resurrecting her would require.

If it weren't for Kovnu and his many broken promises, her mother would still be alive. If it weren't for the king, Favre wouldn't be alone. No one would ever choose her over a crown. She had to give Thana a third option. Quietly, she said, "We'll figure this out. Will you come back tomorrow? Tonight, I'd like to be alone."

After Thana was gone, Favre curled up beside her mother's grave. She looked to the sky, the night bright and clear. She could easily fly away from here. But what use was the freedom her wings gave if to claim it she must do so alone? As long as he was alive, Kovnu would find a way to ruin her life.

And so, she called upon the magic her mother had passed down, and it told her its price.

She dug into the ground beside her mother's grave and found the buried knife. Then, before she could change her mind, she hacked off her wings.

Her screams filled the forest. But no one heard. No one was there to hold her and tell her everything would be all right. No one stopped the pain or the blood streaming down her back and soaking into her mother's grave.

As she cried, her blood forged a weapon that could kill any god. The very wings that had once freed her would now free Thana, too, allowing them to be together for eternity.

The next night, Thana killed her father with the sword Favre had made.

She severed his head in one fatal swoop. But she didn't stop there.

She drank his blood, not wasting a drop. And as the blood filled her, it changed her into something else, into something *other* . . .

Had Favre been there, she would've seen the predatory gleam in Thana's eyes, the meticulous actions of one who'd dreamed of this moment for a *long* time: a princess tired of waiting, a girl determined to have power at any cost.

But Favre did not see that.

She was weeping for her wings.


PART ONE

He refused me his kingdom, though I was his rightful heir. And so, I drank his blood, destroying his flesh, not wanting to wait in the shadows.

Eternal life is mine.

—THANA ADAEZE,
FROM *SHE WHO CROWNED HERSELF QUEEN: THE RISE AND FALL OF THE FIRST VAMPIRE*, CHAPTER ONE
FIRST EDITION, 901 AD
MERKESH ROYAL ARCHIVES



CHAPTER ONE

Favre

Present Day: Nekros

I place my back flat against the wall of a long corridor outside of the manor house's great hall, watching and waiting for her. The corridor has no light, making it the perfect place to disappear into the shadows.

Souls drift into the hall, one after another, single file, heading to their final resting place. They're translucent. Some have symbols inked on the back of their necks, denoting *what* they once were: *Vampires.* The humans have no such symbols.

I can't see into the hall, yet I know every feature. Long ago, this house was mine—my sanctuary, my home, the last place Thana and I were together. Hands float from the wood-paneled walls, each gripping a rusted candelabra and caked with wax. The wax drips slowly onto the stone floors and the vines snaking through their cracks.

When I first arrived here, I wondered . . . Thieves' hands? The hands of those who'd wronged the gods? I thought of my life growing up in the Heavenly Realms, of the many cautionary tales Mother used to tell me. *The gods punish first and they never forgive,* she'd say. And, for once, she was right.

After the gods trapped me, I learned there is no point in wondering. Things happen how they happen; fate is on your side, or it's not. My mother thought she could change her fate, she thought that she could control it. Instead, she ended up in an early grave, brutally abandoned by the god she served and loved.

The line of souls grows shorter, until the sun dips below the horizon and darkness seeps into the sky, until there are no souls left at all. Finally, the goddess of the dead leaves the judgment hall. Eyes barely open, the goddess stretches her arms out wide and yawns. Moonlight slips in from cracks along the walls, bathing her brown skin in midnight's blue.

Eventually, she makes her way to her chambers.

I wait, and then I follow, wrapped in a cloak of shadows.



Slowly, we climb the spiral staircase to the house's second floor. My bare feet grow cold against the stone stairs, a breeze from an open window slicing through my tattered dress. The stairs are splintered with cracks, and the railing groans as we ascend. Whereas I stumble, trying not to make a sound, adjusting to legs I haven't used in centuries, the goddess glides from stair to stair, her gown fanning out behind her, cutting a stretch of darkness, velvet indigo atop white marble. She holds her head high, as if she is the mistress of this place, not just a tool of the gods. I sneer. Easy to be replaced.

Soon, we reach the top and head down a long corridor. Like the hall, it's dimly lit with candelabras held by floating hands. Wax drips and pools beneath them on the chilly floor.

A shadow flickers before us, and the goddess hesitates, clutching her hands, gripping them until her knuckles pale to yellow. My eyes flit back and forth before they still—there's nothing there. This place has a way of taking root deep within you. Creating images only in your mind. Planting suggestions you know to ignore but don't. That's what happened to the goddess of the dead before this one. And to be honest, the one before that one, too—they lost all sense of what was and what wasn't and had to be replaced.

Finally, we reach her bedchamber. I stop well before and press myself within a nook in the wall. I make myself small, like I did as a little girl. Only, instead of hiding from Mother, lest she drain a pint of my blood for a spell, it's the Reapers I need to avoid. They stand guard on either side of the door, putting themselves between me and my plans. They hover over her, nearly as tall as the corridor's vaulted ceiling is high. Ligaments gnarled like a tree. Nails sharp like a beast's, which I suppose is what they are with their fleshless faces—all bones except for a slender red tongue that flicks out between two *long* fangs.

The goddess says something inaudible to them, closing the door behind her as the Reapers turn back the way we came, walking right past me. I hold my breath until they're gone. Then I walk to the goddess's door and turn the knob.

"Hello?" she calls.

I swing the door open.

The goddess sits, brushing her hair in front of a dressing table. She looks at me and gasps. Her brush clatters to the ground.

A mirror is beside her, but I don't need it to know the truth. I look like some*thing* the swamp spat up. My black lace gown barely fits where it should, my eyes are blood red, and my hair is terribly matted. A far cry from the girl I once was.

I can smell her fear, and it awakens something deep within me: the taste for human blood.

I feel my fangs as they descend, as they hunger with a thirst I haven't been able to quench in centuries.

The goddess falls from her chair. Quickly, she pulls herself up and glances out the window, searching for it: a tree separate from the woods surrounding us and right in front of the house. A peculiar tree, adorned with bottles instead of leaves. Bright blue bottles that gleam under the moonlight and clink together in the wind.

Clink. Clink.

Her heart rate quickens. The bottles sway in the wind.

She gasps. She's seen it. The glass shattered underneath the tree. She looks at me. She stumbles back. A wicked grin spreads across my face.

The color leaves hers as she puts it all together. "H-how? It's impossible."

I step toward her. I once thought the same. A thousand years I hoped and prayed. A thousand years I called upon every ounce of my magic. A thousand years I was trapped there.

How? I'd wondered, as I'd tumbled to the ground. As I was suddenly free. As fate was on my side once more.

I take another step. She grabs her brush and holds it before her like a sword. I throw my head back and laugh. Her knuckles pale.

"Y-you can't open it. They cursed it. Protected it. You seriously think you're the first to try?" Her voice wavers as she references

the real reason the gods created her role a thousand years ago, after they locked me and Thana away. The gods told the people of the lands of the living that there is a goddess of the dead. That she lives on an island named Nekros, a place where all souls go at their end. There, she sits atop a gilded throne in a manor house where she judges the dead, ushering them, one by one, to their final resting place. I snort, suppressing a laugh at the thought. The spirits would go wherever they go regardless of her. It's just more lies spun by the gods to keep people from seeking out this island, to keep them from finding out the truth: what's really hidden here.

Her heart rate quickens, and her breath grows shallow. Her veins pulse under her skin, the blood calling to me. I step toward her.

"I know I'm not," I say with a grin. "But unlike the rest, I was there that night—I know how to free *her*."

The goddess picks up the chair and throws it at me. I stumble to the ground, caught off guard, and she jumps over me. She opens her mouth in a scream, making a run for the open door. But I am faster. I grab her leg and pull her down just before she reaches the hall.

On the wall there are four hundred tally marks.

Five hundred years, the gods had promised the goddess of the dead when she was but a human girl and I watched her arrive from my glass prison. Five hundred years of playing this role and we'll make you a real goddess.

Like a fairy tale.

Of course, they didn't lay out the logistics of *how* they'd do that: make a human a goddess. A question the girl failed to ask before she took the blood oath that bound her to this lonely, haunted place.

She twists around and scratches my face, but I summon my

strength and throw her across the room. She barrels into the mirror, splintering it into a million pieces.

She tries to push herself up off the ground, but her arms give out. She looks up at me, pleading, but it's too late. The hunger within me has grown into a full-fledged thing, starving and furious. I couldn't stop now if I wanted to. It begs to be fed.

I run my tongue across my fangs and kneel beside her trembling body. "Shh," I whisper, "it'll be over soon." But that only provokes her. Her fists beat upon my chest. Punching and scratching, doing whatever she can to break free. I lean down, hovering over her, over the pulsing of her vein. My fangs graze her, caressing the skin on her neck. I inhale slowly, taking it all in, and bite down.

With a whimper, she quiets. Toxins release into her bloodstream, making her still. I drink and drink. Until her blood becomes my own. Eventually, her whimpers die down. Her kicks soften until she releases the grip on my hand.

Her body, drained of its blood, slumps to the floor.



Moments after killing the false goddess, acid fills my throat, and I try not to hurl. The images of what I've done replay on a loop in my head. Crushing her, silencing her, killing an innocent girl.

No one is innocent, I remind myself. *No one is without their faults.*

Her ring, slick with blood, I slip onto my hand, crowning myself the new goddess.

"You won't get away with this," a voice howls at my ear.

I turn around. A spirit hovers over where her body used to be. Just my luck. She's still here.

She wags her finger at me. "You won't get away with this." But

this time it's Mother's voice that I hear. A voice that always reminds me of who I really am: a disappointment, an outcast, a girl who will never be anything more than the bastard, undesired daughter of a sorceress and a god.

I clutch my hands so hard my nails dig into my skin. *You're dead*, I repeat to myself, again and again, even as I slap on a smile and throw my head back and laugh before leaving the room wearing the trappings of another's life, the taste of her blood still on my tongue.

I walk down the same candelabra-lit corridor until I reach its very end. A simple wooden door is there, gold paint peeling off. I sink to the ground.

I want to close my eyes and rest my head there, to touch it, caress it. I yearn to thrust the door open, to pull Thana into my arms. But I can't do any of those things. The door is cursed, just like the dead goddess said. Touching it will kill me. Cursed to hold my beloved Thana in—the queen the gods tried and failed to kill, and so they trapped her in a tomb in a spell-locked room and told everyone alive that she's dead.

I gather myself from the ground and return to the bedroom. Along the way I pass a Reaper, who bows at me. I hold my head high, the mistress of this place. Soon, I will release Thana. Then we will be together again. Together, we will reap vengeance on those who brought us down and tried to lock us away for eternity.

Ignoring the dead goddess's howling spirit, I reenter the room. I sit upon her chair. I pick up her brush and, finally, do my hair. Trying to soften what I see before me, trying to hide the creature I've become. But the brush only snags painfully. It'll take more than its bristles to detangle this. To undo what has been done.

I toss it to the ground. *Focus, Favre. On what you came here to do.*

I stand and walk over to the mirror. Now cracked and stained with the dead goddess's blood. Distorting my image even more. I look away and out the window to the bottle tree where the gods trapped me for a thousand years. Once, when I was a little girl, Mother told me that her own mother had a bottle tree right at the entrance to their home. It was filled with the same bright blue bottles, just like the one that once held me, ready to trap evil beings and stop them from entering the home.

With hope I thought long abandoned, and a wicked grin, I concentrate on what I need, and the mirror shakes and glows. It shows me where the people I wish to destroy and the person I seek are found.