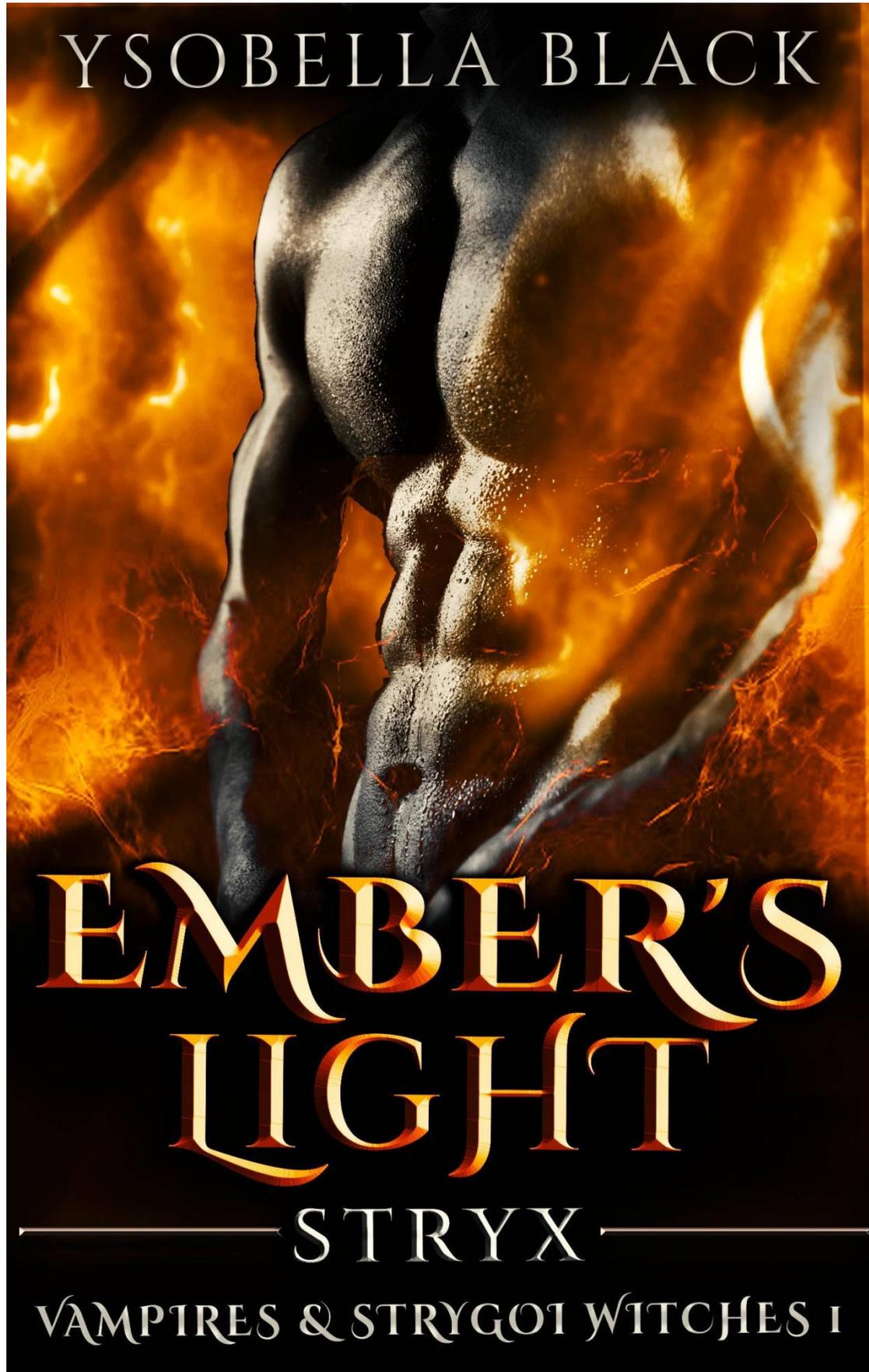


YSOBELLA BLACK



EMBER'S  
LIGHT

— STRYX —

VAMPIRES & STRYGOI WITCHES I

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WEDNESDAY,  
DECEMBER 4

# CHAPTER ONE



One unexpected benefit of having a twin was, if Musette happened to be murdered, Ember could take her place with the help of a wig. The purported calming colors of her bedroom were doing nothing to soothe her temper, or extend her sister's life. The deep blue walls, the forest green comforter on her four-poster bed, the turquoise throw rugs — that were blue and green *at the same time* — scattered over the hardwood floor. None of them were working.

Ember only saw red and orange.

Her anger flared almost out of control at the tiniest reason lately, but her gentle, kind-hearted, wouldn't-hurt-a-bug twin didn't deserve to bear the brunt of it. Ember only ever wanted to hear her sister laugh and know she was happy.

And would gleefully burn down the world of anyone who threatened that happiness.

They were opposite as two people could be in many ways, though as twins, they shared many things — identical looks, except for their hair color, a bond, even thoughts, whether they meant to or not sometimes — but their bedrooms were considered sanctuary.

*Musette wouldn't be invading your space unless she was fretting.*

The only problem was, Musette *always* fretted about something.

Closing her eyes, Ember counted to ten forward, then backward, and forward again, unsure why Musette's Mystical Moments of Madness had become *her* problem. *Oh, because Aunt Bridget departed on another of her trips, dropping off the face of the earth to 'find herself' in some arcane part of the world.* Ember sighed and resisted the urge to tell Musette to get some ice cream and eat off her worries.

Ember breathed deep, held it, and made an effort to keep her temper out of her words. "You're worried about nothing again." Sliding a small camera bag into her backpack, she mustered a patient smile, opened her eyes, and faced Musette. "I'm going to be fine."

"No, you can't go!" Musette marched across the room and snatched Ember's keys off the bed. "I won't let you."

"I have spare sets." Ember's smile and amusement faded as she took in Musette's appearance — usual immaculate styling absent — green eyes red-rimmed and puffy, golden-blonde hair in a bun that looked like it had exploded, and pajama top buttons askew. Even at three in the morning, Musette wouldn't let flaws like these mar her image unless something was wrong.

"I'll have my cell *and* satellite phones." Gentling her tone, Ember offered an olive branch. "I'll call if I need help, but I'm just going to hike into the park, shoot

the sunrise, hang out for the day, and get some shots of the sunset. I'll be home tonight. I promise."

"I just have a feeling something terrible is going to happen." Musette bit her lip. "Can't you wait until someone can go with you? I have to do makeup for an entire wedding party today, but I can go tomorrow. You could wait one day."

Ember shook her head. "There's a storm forecast for tomorrow and nothing but foul weather in the mountains for days after that. This is my last chance to get the shots I want for the show next week. And Viktoria needs time with the images so she can paint. It's not fair to make her rush."

Musette paced, fidgeting with a loose string on the hem of her pajama top. "Don't you already have enough pictures for the show? You have two million you've never used for anything."

Non-photographers never understood that the number of photos already taken had nothing to do with wanting the next perfect shot. Shaking her head, Ember clipped a sleeping bag to her pack and slung it to the floor. "We don't have these last shots. Besides, the days are getting shorter. I want to enjoy the sun while I can."

Her twin capitulated as her shoulders sagged. "Call me when you arrive. And after sunrise, every hour during the day, at sunset, and when you're on your way home."

Her twin worried more than anyone else she knew, but this was going to extremes, even for her. Ember narrowed her eyes. "What's got you so spooked? You've had your sixth sense about me before and nothing happened. I'm always okay."

Musette sighed. "I know you don't believe in my feelings, but I do. And it just feels... I don't know... different this time."

Ember sat on her bed and held out a hand. She wanted to believe in Musette's Mystical Moments of Madness, but they were so vague they could be interpreted to mean anything. She tried to ease her sister's mind like their aunt could. "Okay, let's go through it. How do you feel about me leaving the house today?"

Musette squeezed Ember's hand and sat next to her, eyes going distant as she concentrated. "That part is okay."

"Driving to the park?"

"Still okay."

"At the park?"

Musette shuddered. "The park feels... sinister."

Ember pulled away and crossed her arms to stop herself from throwing her hands in the air. "You've been to Talol National Park with me before. The most sinister thing we've ever seen there was the hungry squirrel that statue-stalked us to steal our snacks."

A small smile played on Musette's lips. "I can't believe you're still defending that evil rodent. He was a menace."

"You tormented him. Every time he tried to come closer, you had to turn around and stare at him, so he froze. It took the poor thing forever to reach the picnic

table. Remember?"

"You're trying to distract me." Musette flopped onto her back across the bed and sighed. "I know it seems ridiculous to you. You always say bad things happen, and it's nothing to do with my *moments*. I just can't shake the feeling something about today is wrong."

"Like what? Volcanic eruption? Sasquatch attack? Speeding glaciers?"

Her sister's eye roll was epic. "It doesn't work like that."

"Well, how do you feel about me staying home?"

Musette frowned. "Home doesn't feel right either."

Ember fought to keep a grimace off her face. "And what if I were to go to work with you?"

Eyes bulging, Musette's mouth dropped open. "You would *never* set foot in a salon! And you'd probably end up killing the entire bridal party. They'd all come back as ghosts and leave terrible reviews."

"I can see it now." Ember smirked. "'Musette's makeup was murder. Zero stars.'"

"I'd be so fired." Her sister laughed and the lines of tension marring her face vanished.

Musette's musical, infectious laughter always made Ember happier than it should. "Well, you can't say I never believe in your feelings. The one about me in your spa-salon is accurate." She stood. "And if home isn't any better, there's no reason for me to stay here, right? I promise I'll be extra careful and call so often you get sick of hearing my voice."

"I'm sorry I'm being so weird about this. I can see you're trying really hard not to tell me to just get over it."

Ember hugged her twin. "Three in the morning is far too early for you to be awake. Back to your bed with you."

"But this one is so much closer." Musette yawned, curled into a ball, and pulled Ember's bedspread over her head.

"Someone's been sleeping in my bed," Ember rumbled in her best deep, growly bear voice.

"Save your Goldilocks jokes, Gingerbread Head," the bedspread muttered.

When they were three, someone called Ember a ginger because of her flaming-red hair, and Musette had called her Gingerbread Head ever since. Identical in every way except for their hair color, they used the only difference between them as a constant source of teasing. After twenty-three years, Ember accepted Musette would never stop.

Chuckling, Ember hefted her backpack to her shoulder, scooped up her keys, and left her twin in the bed. If it made Musette feel better to stay, it cost Ember nothing to let her. In the kitchen, Ember pushed a button on the fob to remote start her Jeep, mixed a large thermos of hot chocolate, and raided Musette's *secret* stash of peanut butter cups in retaliation.

Prepared for a wintry day in the mountains, Ember zipped her jacket and went outside with a shiver in the chill air. Gazing into the clear black sky, she hoped the storm would behave and wait until tomorrow before blanketing the entire area with snow.

If anyone was even less reliable than Musette and her *feelings*, it was a meteorologist. Climbing into her Jeep, Ember turned the heater on full blast and waited for the temperature to reach something higher than Antarctic winter.

Across the street, a car door slammed. Someone else was having an early day. Or a late night. A tall man with white-blond hair stood by a black SUV, a cell phone pressed to his ear. His eyes bored into her as she backed out of the driveway and drove past him. The shiver running through her this time had nothing to do with temperature.

She monitored her rear-view mirror as the man approached a cottage across the street from her house. Hoping he was just visiting and not a new neighbor, she released a relieved breath. *Thanks a lot, Goldilocks. Your heebie-jeebies are contagious.* Shaking them off, Ember concentrated on driving as she navigated to the highway.

# CHAPTER TWO



Stryx braced his hands on the rail as he stood on a third-story balcony overlooking the largest dance floor of his nightclub. Behind him, black leather furniture filled the red-painted foyer that opened into two corridors lit by chandeliers full of candles, where each vampire of his Ildum had a private suite in which to entertain his guests.

Club Saol, popular with humans and Other Worlders alike, had been busy all night and showed no signs of slowing even at three in the morning mid-week. At the moment, the crowd below was mostly human — full of beautiful women in skimpy clothes looking for fun and men who hoped to give it to them.

The entirely different supernatural idea of entertainment took place in other areas of the club. It wouldn't do to let the humans know how many things that went bump in the night were real, and how close they could be.

Aromas of alcohol, sweat, cloying perfumes, stifling colognes, and lust filled the air. Elevated heartbeats combined with the thumping bass as the dancers gyrated enthusiastically in their peculiar human mating ritual. Did they know how their heartbeats aligned with the music rather than their partners'? At least, most of them did. The hearts of a few of them pumped a little faster in anticipation of a successful hunt.

Lights strobed and cell phone cameras flashed as humans took their incessant selfies to let the world know they were not at home, what they were doing, and how popular it made them.

Well. Inane things were bound to be humorous for those whose lives were almost as short as their attention spans.

None of the people or their petty, self-important amusements interested him.

As his gaze traveled over the throng, a blonde woman met his eyes. He let his vampire side out to see if anything stirred. His senses sharpened and above the music, the woman's heartbeat quickened. She licked her lips and took a step toward him.

His eyes slid away from her as the predator in him receded into slumber, uninterested in the lack of challenge or worthy chase. The human was not important enough to warrant a change in his routine.

Constancy.

Everyone and everything had a place and purpose. He ruthlessly made sure of it, and put back, with force, people and things stepping out of line. And if they were of no use, he rid himself of them. As long as he was in control and knew what to expect, he could predict actions and events in order to keep Selene safe.

He existed to protect her. It had been his goal and sole purpose to the exclusion of all else for so long he knew of nothing else to do. Trained to be a ruthless hunter, he excelled when there were monsters — human or Other World — to kill. His stoic logic and lack of empathy were bonuses, not handicaps. Find the threat, deal with it. No mercy. No mess.

Well, that wasn't strictly true.

Sometimes there was a mess.

But there hadn't been a threat, even a hint of a threat, for centuries. Nothing to hunt. Nothing to fight. Nothing to kill.

Some of his Ildum thought life had become tedious. Sabien, his twin brother, had left over a century ago, unable to stomach the unchanging routine. He returned to visit their mother, Selene, and check in on the theater he owned, but always departed after a few days, eager for something different and unpredictable.

A heartbeat out of time with the music approached, tripping in excitement, and accompanied by a waft of sickeningly sweet floral perfume. The very definition of tedious swayed toward him, wearing a low cut, blood-red, ankle-length dress so tight, and heels so high, her steps were limited to inches at a time. Long, shiny brown hair swept to the side, Tabitha raised her chin to expose her neck. She minced across the space between them, making sure he had plenty of opportunities to see her.

Tabitha hadn't been wearing that while she reinforced the wards around the club. Stryx would have to pick a new favorite color. Red was ruined. Some credit was probably due. It couldn't be easy to walk so far with her self-imposed limits. Then again, it was stupid to willingly wear constraints that made it nearly impossible to move.

If he acknowledged her, he could speed up their interaction and end it sooner. But there was no point in encouraging this sort of behavior. He ignored the witch and pretended not to hear the irritated huff she tried to keep under her breath.

She finally made it to him without toppling over, tilted her face up, and pasted a smile on her red-stained lips. "Hello, Stryx."

"Tabitha."

His terse, one-word response made her blink. "I've finished with the spells and wards."

That was her job and why she was here, after all. And why *he* was still here and forced to deal with her. "The manager will pay you."

The witch already knew that. It was the same thing he told her every time she updated the magic in and around the club. Maybe there was such a thing as too predictable.

Her smile faltered. "That's it?"

"Was there something else?"

For once he'd welcome the pleasant surprise if she said no, but she always wanted something more — like a relationship... and his blood. He'd made the mistake of feeding from her once. What was no more than the equivalent of a human opening a beer had turned into a case of perpetual indigestion. Tabitha turned up unexpectedly and was never wanted.

If she wasn't one of the most talented witches in Port Storm, he wouldn't put up with her tiresome insistence he be around when she worked. She was determined and ambitious — qualities he would have respected if she hadn't decided he was something to conquer to further her magic. But the wards and protections around his club were too important to let a minor annoyance interfere with the work, or trust it to someone less skilled.

Inching closer, Tabitha slid a red-lacquered fingertip up his arm to his chest and leaned toward him. "We're good together. If you and I combined forces, if your magic and mine... united —" She lifted her hand to reach for his face.

The spell on her fingers crossed the line. She thought she could compel him? He wouldn't allow her his blood or the rare magic in it. Not even at the risk of losing her services.

His vampire side rose, enraged by this brazen attempt at manipulation, sharpening his vision as his eyes went black. Tabitha needed a reminder. Stryx seized her wrist and pushed her hand away, causing her to falter on her absurd shoes. He infused his voice with menace. "You forget your place, witch. You were asked here for a specific purpose and will be compensated as agreed. I expected nothing less and you should have expected nothing more."

Stumbling in her ridiculous dress, she tried to keep her balance as his voice backed her up. "What is wrong with you? The spell wouldn't have made you do anything, only let you act on what you want."

He smiled and brought her hand to his face. She inhaled and her eyes half-closed when her magic touched his skin.

Stryx felt nothing, his power blocking hers. "I want you..."

Her lips parted, and her pupils dilated.

"To get out."

Tabitha gasped and recoiled as he broke her spell and her magic back lashed. She narrowed her eyes at him. "One day, Stryx, you're going to meet someone you want. And I hope she can't stand the sight of you." She spun on her heel and teetered away.

He had no urge to pursue her as she flounced to the elevator. She was only *one* of the most talented witches in Port Storm, after all. A new witch would be an inconvenience at first, and require supervision, but could be trained to do what he required.

Without his presence being one of her requirements.

Behind him, a door opened, then closed, and Melchior leaned against the railing. "That went... well." The pale-skinned, white-haired giant towered over Stryx's six-foot height. "It may not have all been her fault. Witches are naturally drawn to us as we are to them."

While that may be true for the others, Stryx was not drawn to Tabitha, or any witch he'd met. He wasn't drawn to anyone. "Her attraction to me wasn't the problem. The decision to use her power on me was entirely her deliberated choice, not an accident."

"True."

“I will not forgive or tolerate that behavior.”

“What *would* you forgive or tolerate?” Melchior sounded tired. It was a discussion they’d had before. He was always after Stryx to make connections and try to feel something.

Stryx hadn’t felt a human emotion in a thousand years and wanted no part of them, or the lecture Melchior usually gave him, and returned his attention to the crowd below.

Melchior sighed as he ceded the battle and pulled his cell phone from a pocket. “I’ll call the next witch and have her protect us from the last witch’s protections.” He eyed Stryx and took a few steps away, holding his phone over his head. “I’ll make the call from over here.”

Stryx smirked. “I won’t touch your precious technology.” If his magic went haywire, those couple of steps wouldn’t protect Melchior’s phone.

“It’s better to be sure.” Melchior took an additional exaggerated step.

“You’re not funny.”

“What do you know about funny? You have no sense of humor.”

There was no arguing with that. Yet another thing the others thought Stryx lacked. Humor wouldn’t protect Selene. Emotions wouldn’t keep her safe. Mages almost killed her a thousand years ago. It wouldn’t happen again.

*Protect Selene.*

Those were Riordan’s last words to Stryx, and he would obey his father’s final order until he burned in the sun, lost his head, or took a stake through the heart.

Selene understood. She stayed in an impregnable fortress and accepted what he needed to do without censure.

Melchior finished his call, hid his phone in a pocket and returned to Stryx. “You should feed.”

“There is no need to tonight, and I haven’t needed a nursemaid in a thousand years. Plus, we can’t all be Alaric.” Stryx inclined his head in the direction of another of his Ildum.

On the dance floor, Alaric’s angelic, golden-haired, wide, blue-eyed, innocent guise hid the predator lurking beneath his skin well. Groupies, who didn’t know what he was, always surrounded him. The Fae was far from human, but loved their culture.

Melchior shuddered. “I am grateful to all the gods for that.”

Stryx pushed away from the railing. “I’m going home. I assume the new witch won’t need me here while she works.”

“No. She won’t.”

Stryx headed for the stairs. The elevator was like as not to stop working if he set foot in it.

“Living like this isn’t what your father meant,” Melchior called.

His father knew what obeying his last order would cost Stryx. “You heard Riordan. His order was explicit. I will keep Selene safe. No matter what.”

“I knew him for five thousand years before you were born. He would have wanted you to feel happiness.”

Stryx sighed and waved a dismissive hand at the people below. “What would be the point in getting to know any of them? They're all pretense. They wear chemicals to make them smell like things they are not. They use cosmetics and have surgeries to change their looks. They drink alcohol to change their personalities so they can talk to one another. Everything about them is an act.”

“You are numb.”

“No. I am following orders.”

Since the Dragă Massacre, it was all he had left.