

The Depth of Shadow - Chapter 1

Dust filled the air in the hot midday sun, and the only sound was that of hoof beats and heavy footsteps. The scent of the newly disturbed dirt filled the dry air, but the odd hint of something burning lingered subtly amongst the smells of heat and dust. The company of demons had been growing weary of their journey, but none quite so much as the large, blue-gray demon at the head of the campaign, whose golden eyes glimmered in the heat as his black mount trudged heavy hoofed across the cracked, arid ground.

The sky was cloudless and bright, yet the hazy atmosphere made it difficult to see too far into the distance. The smell grew stronger. A muddy patch of gray formed on the white horizon as they continued to walk, and the large demon called for his men to pick up their pace. The lazy, shuffling feet of the men and demons behind him turned into a steady, swift march as they neared the cloud of smoke dispersing into the sky.

It had stopped burning quite some time ago. Not every building had been set to flame, but more than half of this small village was in ashes, being carried away by brief gusts of wind. The large demon dismounted his rath as the company entered the town. He scowled at the scene.

“Find survivors!” he growled out the order to those who followed behind him. It was a pointless search however, there was no one here.

For the last three months he and his men had been chasing a rogue band of demons back into the Southern Quadrant. Only once or twice did they actually manage to come into contact with them, but he intended to follow them well back into their territory before returning to the East. They had not only threatened the border, but crossed it, terrorizing trading posts and Eastern villages nearest to the border. Now, as they headed back into the South to avoid the Eastern army, they left a trail of destruction in their wake.

It was mostly human villages, he considered as he walked through the decimated remains of the town. There were corpses littering the streets, man, woman, and child. There had been no discrimination, no agenda... at least none that was obvious. Human slave trading was a common problem in the South, but it didn't appear any of these towns had been raided for slaves. Just as curious was the lack of looting. Yes, many things were taken, but much was left behind as well. Then they were all set to flame, as if to burn any secrets left behind.

His boot landed heavy on the floorboards of a partially preserved house. The wood creaked beneath his weight, and he had to duck down as he stepped through the open doorway to avoid knocking his curved horns on the low frame. Two mangled bodies lie on the floor, a man and a woman, husband and wife no doubt. He considered their states.

The woman was fully clothed and fairly undisturbed, they had not raped her. She lay on her back, a stab wound through her chest. The man lay face down, his throat had been cut. They were

likely facing each other before they were killed, the man fell forward as his throat was slit, and the woman backwards as she was run through. They had not been dead long. the bodies were still freshly colored and had not yet begun to bloat. Wood on the other side of the house still smoldered, it was surprising the entire village hadn't burned to the ground.

One of his men shouted to him from outside. No doubt to report that no survivors had been found. He turned in place towards the door, and through the loud creak of the boards, another sound could be heard. It was a slight, almost inaudible sound, and it came from behind him. He turned again.

There was a tall cupboard fashioned to the wall, and it sat off kilter where the foundation below it had broken. He stood watching it for a moment - the sound had come from inside *there*. He advanced on the cupboard with slow, even footsteps. His long legs quickly closed the distance between himself and the door. Between the warped planks of wood he could most definitely tell that *something* was in there.

Reaching out he opened the door to the cupboard, and his eyebrows rose slightly. Inside, crouched on the floor was a small, human child. Her hands were crossed over her head in a protective manner, her knees were brought up to her chest, and her eyes were shut tightly. She was holding her breath, and her partially hidden face was wet with tears. The demon was a giant compared to this tiny creature, and he knelt down so that he could look the child in the face.

She continued to hold her breath, and refused to look at him. He held out a hand as he lowered himself further still, to try to get a look at the girl. "Come," he offered to her with a slight gesture of his fingers, each of which was tipped with a sharp, black nail. "You will not be harmed."

The girl peeked out from below her arms, her big green eyes filled with tears. She looked at the demon and considered him for a moment, then peeked around him. He leaned to the side, blocking her view. "There is nothing over there that you need to see," he said plainly to the child, who quickly hid her head back in her arms.

"You're a demon!" she cried accusingly, muffled through the ragged dress that covered her knees.

"Yes, I am," he started. "Did demons hurt your parents?" he inquired, already knowing the answer.

"Yes!" her tiny voice replied. Another voice called to him from outside yet again. He was being looked for.

"Child, I will not harm you. Come, you should not stay here." He urged her again, holding his hand only inches from her. She looked at him through narrowed eyes, a scowl on her round face. She considered for a moment longer, then without warning the child flew from her hiding place and wrapped her arms around his neck. The demon pulled back in surprise, but the child clung tightly to

him. Sweeping an arm under her small frame, he lifted the child as he stood, turning to shield her eyes from the bodies in the main room.

She moved her arms and held them close to her chest as they walked outside, her tiny hands hiding her face from the other strangers that wandered in the streets.

“My Lord...” a lion headed demon addressed him.

“Keep an eye on this, Alastor,” he began as he moved to hand the child to the other. He stopped. “Child, let go.” The girl’s arms had once again moved around his neck, and she tightened her hold as he gently jostled her. With her face buried in the collar of his gray coat, she shook her head in protest.

Removing her would be easy enough, but not wanting to harm the child he contemplated his situation. The sun had begun to fall in the sky, and within the next few hours it would set. They should be leaving soon to set up camp. A good distance outside of the village would be best, to avoid the stray embers that still floated through the air.

“My Lord?” the lion headed demon asked again, as his superior continued to hold the child.

“Never mind, I will keep her,” he stated shaking his head. “Get the rest of the men together and prepare them to move out.” Alastor nodded and turned to carry out his orders.

He looked down at the small child in his arms. Her wavy brown hair was in a distressed set of tangles. She was hardly a burden as she weighed next to nothing in his arms, but he had to shrug off a growing sense of irritation as he climbed onto his mount.

The company rode until the sun coasted just above the horizon behind them. The demon came to a halt, and peered curiously at the child still clinging tightly to his coat.

“We will make camp here tonight,” his voice boomed, but the child remained still. “We will prepare to head back East on the morrow.” Between the clamors of movement, small cheers and exclamations could be heard amongst the soldiers. It had been a tiresome journey, and while they had not been able to stop the threat, they had at least managed to push it back well into Southern territory. Aside from that, with their most recent addition to the company it was not practical to continue southward.

The demon Lord's tent was the first to be erected, and he swiftly passed his mount to his first and headed towards it. “Alastor, bring some bread and water for the child,” he said in passing, not waiting for a response.

Upon entering his large tent, he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Sitting on the furs and blankets piled onto the ground, he addressed the girl again. “Child, you are safe, let go.” She shook her head. “Why?” he inquired, his patience growing thin.

“You’ll put me somewhere else,” she said quietly.

“You will stay here tonight,” he assured her. “You are trying my patience, now let go.” His voice was stern and unyielding. She did as he said. Not missing his chance he quickly plucked the child from her perch and placed her gently on the blankets. He then turned and stood to remove his heavy jacket and armor.

The human sat quietly with her legs crossed in front of her, watching him as he removed his boots. “Nire,” she said suddenly.

“What?” the demon inquired, not turning to acknowledge her.

“Nire. That’s my name,” she elaborated. “You were supposed to ask what my name was,” she instructed him on the proper etiquette when meeting someone new.

“I see,” he said flatly.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

It had been a long time since anyone had used his name, even himself. He paused for a moment to finish what he was doing, then moved to sit next to the girl. “Lucian,” he said, looking her in the eye.

“Loo-seen,” she repeated.

He cocked an eyebrow. “Loo-see-in,” he announced for her.

“Loo-seen,” she tried again.

“No,” he said flatly as he eyed the child. “How old are you, Nire?”

She held up a single hand with all five fingers spread wide. “Five,” she answered. “How old are you?”

She had quite the distinct knack for conversation, didn’t she? “Far too old to count on fingers,” he responded. She began to count as high as she could using her fingers to help, but quickly gave up.

Alastor called from outside the tent. “My Lord?”

“You may enter,” he called back as he straightened. The lion headed demon walked through the heavy flaps of cloth carrying a plate of bread and a cup of water. He glanced curiously between the two disparate figures sitting in front of him. Lucian nodded his head towards the girl.

Bending down he offered the food and water to the child. Nire stared at his face wide eyed, and unmoving.

“Do you like cats, Nire?” Lucian suddenly inquired. Glancing quickly over at the other demon, she nodded softly. “Just think of Alastor as a great big cat, he’s friendly enough.” Alastor

blinked, and shot the other an awkward glance. He smirked at his first. Looking back to the child, she seemed to be considering Lucian's words.

"Do you chase mice too?" She suddenly asked, cocking her head to one side as she took the plate and cup from his very human looking hands. Expressions on the face of a lion are not always the easiest to read, but Lucian had known him long enough to see the stunned look that crossed his features. He tried to stifle a laugh as he had purposely, and out of spite, subjected his first to the horribly uncomfortable conversation with a child.

He sighed. "No, I chase much larger things," he finally stated. The girl ate a piece of bread and continued to look at him. After a brief awkward silence, Alastor straightened and took his leave.

When she had finished her meal, the great demon slid his hands beneath her arms and moved her to the far side of the bedded area, laying her back. "You will sleep here, understood?" She nodded. "Good," He settled into the bed of furs on the other side of the girl. She gasped as the candles in the tent suddenly went out. "Be still," he said to reassure her. "I put them out."

The demon woke suddenly in the night to movement. "What are you doing?" he asked the girl that was curled up next to him.

"I'm scared," she said.

"Of *what*?" he questioned irritably. "I am far more frightening than anything else that might be here." Nire looked up at him. In the darkness she could see his golden eyes glimmering, and the ram's horns that crowned his head did make him look formidable. But he was not frightening.

"I had..." she tried to begin. "a bad dream," her voice cracked. "About momma..."

Lucian did not need light to see clearly, and it was obvious the child was distressed. He sighed. Moving his arm underneath her, he pulled the child to lie against him, her head cradled on his large shoulder. She remained still and quiet, and Lucian tapped a finger impatiently as he waited for the child to fall asleep before placing her back on the other side of the bed.

When morning approached the demon awoke to Nire once again curled up by his side. Rolling his eyes he sat, and moved the girl away from him. She had not yet woken, and he dressed and prepared for departure as she continued to sleep.

Stepping out of the tent he made his way towards Alastor, who was preparing his mount. "Sleep well?" The lion mocked. Lucian threw him a glance. This whole situation was utterly ridiculous. "Is the human going to become just as permanent a fixture as your horns?" He added with a raised brow, glancing towards his superiors feet.

Lucian turned and looked down. Nire had followed him out and was right at his heels. "I thought you were sleeping," he regarded the child.

"I woke up," she said plainly.

“Clearly,” he said to the child. Turning his attention to Alastor he asked, “How far off is the nearest suitable town?”

“Two days ride I believe,” he hesitated. “Are we in need of unloading some surplus weight?”

“Yes,” stated the demon flatly as he mounted his rath. Nire stared up at him, and the large two horned creature that he rode. Alastor stepped forward and lifted the child, seating her gently in front of his superior.

“There you are,” he stated lightly to the child. Nire smiled and settled quickly, leaning back against the demon behind her. Lucian's gold eyes shot daggers at the lion, and for a brief moment he was practically dumbfounded by his boldness. Alastor tried desperately not to laugh, but he couldn't help but indulge a sense of amusement from the situation.

“Alastor...” Lucian said with warning in his voice. The other tried not to chuckle, he was retaliating for the cat comment earlier. The little human looked up at the gray demon with big eyes. The presence of a child was exhausting. He grunted. “Oh, go chase a mouse,” he stated with extreme irritation as he turned his rath to go.

The sound of laughter behind him was not masked at that comment. Well it was nice to know that *someone* was finding this situation amusing. The child smiled up at him as they took the lead of the company and began the journey eastward.

Tomorrow they would near the Southern city of Misery. *Misery*. He thought as he glanced towards the child who was messing with her tangled head of hair. It didn't sound like the best town to be leaving a child in. Then again, *any* Southern city was not the best place to leave a human child in. It would be at least a month's worth of riding before they came to cross the Eastern border, and even then the bordering cities were on Southern trade routes, and often dangerous places for humans.

The first full day traveling with the child had been a trial for all. She stopped the company at least once every three hours or so, in order to run off behind a rock so she could relieve herself in privacy. Not to mention the consistent comments about being hot, hungry, thirsty, or her simple inane attempts to engage in conversation out of boredom. The demon had not spent more than 24 hours with the girl, and he already knew her favorite color, favorite food, and all about the time she got lost in the desert with her cousin, Kip.

Sitting in the gray tent, the demon considered his situation carefully as Nire messed with her hair. It was entirely impractical to continue to travel with a human child, but it seemed somewhat senseless to save a child from one fate, only to subject her to another that gave her no better chance than the first. The girl grunted, interrupting his thoughts.

“I need a bath,” she said as she tugged at her hair.

“Excuse me?” Lucian turned his head to regard her.

“I need a bath,” she repeated.

She wasn’t wrong. Her hair was a mess, her face was covered in dirt and soot, her clothes were filthy... Lucian brought his hand to his face and pinched the bridge of his nose. This was going to be an *exhausting* journey. He stood and collected the small wash basin from the corner of the tent. He placed it on the floor next to her with a rag and towel.

“I can’t fit in that...” Nire said dubiously.

“You don’t *fit* in it, you wash with it,” Lucian tried to explain as calmly as possible.

“How?” she asked.

Putting his hand to his face again he took a breath and calmed himself. “Take the rag, put it in the water, and wash your face,” he said shortly.

“But... I’m *really* dirty...” she protested. “I need a *bath*.”

Frustration took control and the demon opened the flap of his tent. “ALASTOR!” he shouted into the camp. His first hurried and called to him upon his approach.

“My Lord? What is it?” he inquired upon entering the tent.

“She needs a bath,” he stated with irritation, gesturing to the human girl.

Alastor stared at him, then looked at the girl. “Alright... then...” he said as he stepped back out of the tent.

Lucian had no idea how to deal with a child. He paced back and forth as she watched him closely. His usual approach to disobedience was anger and violence, but that was clearly out of the question. She was frustrating, and stubborn, and he had no experience in dealing with small, defenseless creatures that needed his protection; especially ones that tried his patience to such a degree. He was *not* a patient person.

Alastor returned with a moderately sized metal tub. This was all the company had in the way of a bath tub. It had two handles on either side, and was fairly light weight. It made a gong sound as he placed it on the floor of the tent.

“The men are heating up some water...” he informed them.

“Thank you,” Lucian stated, his face still in his hand.

“My Lord, should I bring in one of the human men who has children?” Alastor offered.

“NO!” Nire shouted suddenly.

Not moving his hand from his face, Lucian made a sweeping gesture towards the child.

“Very well then,” Alastor nodded.

When the tub was filled halfway with warm water, Lucian crossed his arms and stared at the child. “Well?” he asked. “There you are,” he said gesturing to the tub.

“I need help with my dress,” she stated.

Lucian sighed and rose from his seat. He knelt down behind the child and began to loosen the laces of her dress while she held her hair out of the way. “Can you at least bathe yourself?” the demon inquired.

“Yes,” she responded quietly. “but...”

“But what?”

“I can’t get in.” The demon considered her. She was barely taller than the tub. As he finished removing the laces of the dress he swiftly put his hands under her arms and lifted her into the tub. The dress fell to the floor in a heap, and he picked it up and walked out of the tent.

When he returned, Nire was sitting holding her legs to her chest. Her face was clean, and her hair was untangled. “The waters gone cold,” she said quickly. It was cool out tonight. It suddenly occurred to Lucian that she probably could not get *out* of the tub on her own either. He swiftly gathered a towel and knelt down behind her.

“Stand up,” he ordered, holding the towel open. She stood, shivering, and the demon wrapped the towel around her and lifted her from the tub. She clung to the towel around her shoulders and turned to face him. Her teeth chattered and the demon rubbed her arms with his hands. “Don’t just stand there soaking wet,” he ordered again. “Dry off and you won’t be so cold.”

Grabbing a blanket from the corner he threw it around her shoulders and up over her wet head. He wrapped it around her as she stood shivering. “There, better?” he asked. The child nodded. He laid her down, and rather than calling Alastor he swiftly picked up the tub of water and walked it outside the tent.

“Luceen?” the girl asked when he walked back inside.

“Loo-see-in,” he corrected her.

“Where are we going?” she asked, ignoring his correction.

“I am returning home, to the East,” he responded as he removed his boots.

“Where am *I* going?” she asked again.

“That, I have not decided just yet,” he said looking at the girl.

“Can I come home with you?”

He sighed. “And what would I do with you?” he inquired earnestly.

“I’m a good helper,” she stated, putting some thought into her response. “I helped momma all the time. She said I was a good sweeper,” she added.

“I have an entire staff of people whom I pay to clean for me,” he stated.

She thought hard. “I could pick flowers for you. Momma said I always picked the best flowers.”

He raised an eyebrow as he wondered what kind of flowers the girl would have been able to find out here. He also had to admit it was mildly endearing how hard she was trying to think of something useful she could do. “Go to sleep, child,” he said as the candles in the tent suddenly snuffed out.

“How do you do that?” The human asked quietly.

“I control the darkness,” he responded shortly. “go to sleep.”

In the morning Alastor brought the human girl's now clean dress to the large tent, and she once again held her hair out of the way as Lucian helped to lace it up. He hoisted the child onto his rathe before climbing on himself, and the company set onward towards the town of Misery.

It was, in fact, a miserable town. The water was filthy, the population was astronomical, and poverty was abundant.

“My Lord,” Alastor addressed him as he rode to his side. “There is an orphanage on the other side of town, shall we make our way in that direction?”

Lucian looked down at Nire, who looked up at him. “No,” he stated. “An Eastern town would be a better solution, one that is a good distance from the border.”

Alastor studied him. “Are you sure, my Lord? The nearest Eastern town from here is a good months’ ride, and we will be more than halfway back to Eastcastle when we find a town well beyond the border...”

“Yes, I am sure,” he responded. “She is within my charge to place properly; I won’t leave her somewhere no better than where she was before.”

Alastor nodded. “Understood, my Lord.”

He glanced back down at the child. Her dress was clean, but it was none the less torn, scorched, and about ready to fall apart. “Alastor send one of the human men to the market and have them buy a proper dress for a girl the age of five,” he ordered thoughtfully.

“Uh, yes, of course, my Lord,” the lion headed demon responded as he turned.

Over the course of the next few weeks, the child seemed to grate on his nerves far less than she had originally. Perhaps he was building a resistance. The men had started to talk, and though they all had enough sense not to say it to his face, Nire had become known throughout the company as his ‘pet’. The talk did not bother him so long as his men maintained respect when addressing him. He was not sure if Nire was aware of the nickname, but if she was she didn’t seem to mind.

They had passed the Eastern border two weeks ago, and every town they stopped at since had been left just the same as they came, with the child seated directly in front of Lucian. There had been many homes willing to take her, and even a few families. But Lucian found none of them suitable. He felt that a young child who just lost her parents would need more than just a moderate home with a moderate family, who would moderately care for her.

He was by nature and by status a person of responsibility, and he took none of it lightly. If he were directly responsible for something, it would not be done half way. Had any other member of his party picked up the child it would be up to them to decide what to do with the girl, but he had been the one to pick her up, and in doing so he accepted her problems as his own.

It was only another week to Eastcastle. The girl no longer seemed to be much of a burden. She was in fact easy enough to care for, once he had her figured out. Baths were still a bit awkward, and she didn’t seem to understand the value of personal space. She was clearly far more comfortable with the situation than he was, but that was to be expected.

Perhaps there was a home in the city of Eastcastle that would be proper for her. The capitol *would* be the best place after all, the safest not to mention the best economically. And it would be close enough that he could check up on her well being now and then... Good. It was settled then.