

## The Depth of Shadow - Chapter 2

“Not *one* word,” Lucian instructed Alastor as they passed through the gates of Eastcastle, the child still situated directly in front of him.

“I still don’t see what was wrong with the orphanage here, it seemed perfectly fine to me.”

“I said, not... one... word.” The other fell silent, but a smirk formed on his lips.

The staff of Eastcastle greeted the incoming company, and more than a few heads were turned at the small human child that sat atop the large black rathe just in front of their High Lord. A young woman with silver hair, wearing a gray and white house maids uniform approached the large, horse-like beast, with what seemed to be an unusual air of confidence.

“What do we have here?” she inquired at the child.

“Margery, this is Nire. I will explain more about it later. In the mean time please escort her to a proper room and see that she is cared for,” he instructed the woman, who nodded in return.

“Yes my Lord.”

“No!” The child suddenly shouted. “Why can’t you take me?” she questioned with a shrill note of panic in her voice.

“I have many things I must attend to. Go with Margery, she is very kind.”

“But -!” she continued to protest as she was set on the ground.

“Nire,” Lucian stated sternly as he bent down to face her. “If I am to allow you to stay here you must do as I say. Do you understand?” She fought back the tears in her eyes and bit her lip. She nodded. His gaze softened and he patted her head, with a stiff unsympathetic hand. “I will check on you this evening,” he added flatly.

“Promise?” the little girl asked through her tears.

“Yes, now go with Margery to get settled, I have many things to do.”

Margery knelt down to face the girl. “Your name is Nire?” she asked kindly. The girl nodded slowly, peering out at the woman cautiously from under her tilted brow. “Don’t worry, when he makes a promise he is sure to keep it,” she said reassuringly as she stood and offered her hand to the girl. Nire gave the hand a scowl, but took it and allowed the strange new woman to lead her into the huge stone castle that stood in front of her.

It was difficult for her to take it all in. The castle was absolutely huge. She felt incredibly small as she was lead by Margery through the huge hallways and corridors. "Isn't this where the Lord of Shadows lives?" Nire asked the silver haired woman.

Margery turned to look at the girl. "Yes..." she said curiously.

"Is he scary?" She inquired further.

It suddenly occurred to Margery that this little child had not yet made the seemingly obvious connection. "Do you like Lord Lucian?" she asked.

"Mhm," she said nodding, bringing her lips together and curling them under her teeth.

"Then he must not be all that scary," the woman smiled.

Nire stopped walking and looked for a moment as though she were deep in thought. She then returned her gaze to Margery, and simply stated "Ohhh." The two continued to walk in relative silence as the young girl looked in awe at the new world around her. "It's bigger than my whole village..." she stated. Margery laughed.

They ascended a spiral staircase and Margery opened a wooden door. "This is where you may stay for now, young lady," she said as she lead the small girl inside.

"It's bigger than my whole house!" she exclaimed dramatically, her jaw dropping to the floor. "Margery?" the girl asked as she climbed onto the large bed, bouncing to test its softness.

"Yes dear?"

"My aunt's name was Margery, but everyone called her Marge. Can I call you Marge too?" she inquired.

"Of course you may," she responded with a smile. "Now, what is your favorite color, Nire?" she asked as she knelt down by the side of the bed.

"Green," the girl said very matter-of-factly.

"Alright, well we will make sure this room is full of greens then," she said. The room had been empty for so long after all, it could stand to have a change in atmosphere.

Nire smiled, but then her face became crossed with concern, and she began to look around. "When will Loo-seen be back?"

Margery chuckled at the poor pronunciation. "I'm sure he will come see your before bedtime." The woman reassured her with a gentle smile.

"I'm five." Nire stated. "How old are you?"

Margery had stood and gone to the armoire on the opposite side of the room, checking its contents for something in a child's size. She hadn't expect to find anything, and she didn't. "I am fifty three," she said as she turned back to the child.

"Wow really? You don't look fifty, that's really old."

The woman laughed. "Well it's not very old for me, I am a Midblood."

"Do all Midbloods look like humans? I don't know if I have ever seen one before," she inquired, tilting her head to one side as she spoke.

"Well, I didn't always look like this," Margery started. "Why don't I run and get you a proper nightdress and something to eat, and then I will tell you that story when you settle for bed."

"What should *I* do?" the girl asked, hopping off the bed.

"Well let's see... how about I run you a quick bath, I bet you are dirty from your trip."

"Okay," the child responded pleasantly. Margery walked into the adjoining bathroom, and Nire followed closely behind her.

"Wooooow..." The little girls voice trailed off. "That is a *BIG* bathtub." Margery glanced at the child, who stood wide eyed and mouth open, staring at the large, in-floor bath. Chuckling to herself, she walked over towards the water pump and opened the spout, allowing pre-heated water to run into the tub.

Upon seeing the steam rising from the water, which seemed to be flowing out of nowhere, Nire's expression of awe enhanced further. "It's already hot!" she exclaimed. "Where's it come from? Who makes it hot?" her questions spilled out as quickly as the bath filled.

"It's heated down in the well room, by a large furnace, and it comes from a aquifer beneath the city."

Nire stared in disbelief. "But how... how does it move?"

"There is a pump in the well room, the furnace that heats the water, also moves the pump."

Nire didn't really understand what she was being told, nor had she any idea what an aquifer was, but she accepted the response, and nodded. Margery closed the spout. The water had only filled the bath about a foot, and the entire depression was a good four feet deep. Halfway up, on the two sides of the tub that did not come in contact with a wall, was a step for sitting. Nire would not be needing that.

Margery helped her out of her dress, and down the step into the warm water. Placing a basket of scented soaps on the step next to the child, she stood and headed towards the door. "I will

be back soon, get good and clean now," She instructed her. Nire nodded as she splashed around in the bath, a little smile on her round face.

Margery turned and eased the door closed slightly, leaving it open only a crack.

After a time of playing and cleaning, Nire decided she was finished and climbed cautiously out of the bath. There was a towel sitting on a bench just opposite the tub, so she walked over quickly and wrapped it around herself. Heading towards the door she peeked out from the bathroom. "Marge?" she called out. She wasn't back yet. Opening the door the girl walked out into the bedroom and took another look around. Everything was blue and tan at the moment. A blue rug lay on the floor, blue sheets covered the bed, and blue curtains were draped from the far wall.

Walking over to the curtains, she could see a yellow light peeking through the drapery. She pulled back the curtain just enough to look through, and a warm evening light flooded the exposed patch on the floor. The girl gasped as she peered out to the world below her... far, far below her. She knew they had ascended many staircases, but she had no idea how high up she really was.

Down below she could see the curtain walls that surrounded the castle, and the tops of trees just beyond the wall. The forest stretched on forever into the horizon, and the sun hung just above the tree line in the distance. The entire world was washed with a warm orange glow as the sun began to set, and Nire stood staring out the floor length window for much longer than she realized.

When Margery returned, the sun had set and a full moon had begun to ascend into the night sky. Nire stood in the dark room, still staring out the window. "I have a few things for you," Margery began as she came through the door. Finally breaking her gaze out the window, Nire turned to look at the woman as she entered the room.

She was carrying a number of cloth items draped over one arm, and a tray. The tray was wooden, and on top of it were a few dishes, covered by ceramic lids. She walked over to the bed and set the tray on the trunk that rested at its foot, then laid a beige night dress on the bed and headed towards the armoire.

"Goodness, it got dark quickly," Margery said, approaching a small table that sat next to the door. Reaching down she took a pinch of something shiny in her hand, brought her hand to her lips, and blew. Nire watched in awe as the glittery substance turned into small glowing orbs, and ascended towards the ceiling. Attaching to sun markings that were carved in stone near the top, the orbs then grew in size, lighting the room.

"Wow..." the child said in a whisper, looking up in amazement.

Margery let out a small chuckle as she hung the other items in the armoire.

Nire walked with half wet hair over to the bed, dropped the towel and picked up the nightdress. Closing the doors to the armoire, Margery turned to help the girl pull it over her arms

and head properly. She tied the string in the back of the collar, and picked up the girl to set her on the bed.

"I have some supper for you," she began. "I was not sure what you liked best, so I picked out some things I think you will like."

Nire stared at the plates as Margery uncovered each one to reveal its contents. She didn't recognize a single thing, except for one. "What did you eat at home?" Margery asked her, noticing her expression.

"Bread, mostly," she stated. "Momma would sometimes cook vegetables when the garden bloomed, like churka."

Churka was a cheap, nutrient void vegetable that grew in abundance in the dry southern soil, it was barely any better for a human than grass. Margery tilted her head. The girl had been wearing a good dress, and she had not yet inquired as to why she had been brought to Eastcastle.

"Well then, I am sure there will be something here you will like," she offered. "Why don't you give them all a try, and eat the ones you like best."

"What's that one?" Nire asked, pointing a tiny finger to a small dish that was left covered.

"That is a surprise, for after supper," Margery mused with a grin.

The child ate nearly everything Margery had brought up. As soon as she had taken her first hesitant bite, she quickly lost all reserve and devoured the meal. Margery then lifted the lid off the final plate, and revealed a small cake, with honey frosting and a dark colored berry on the top.

"Is that a cake?!" Nire nearly shouted.

Margery had to stifle a laugh. "It is," she responded.

"I've never had a cake before!" the little girl exclaimed. "Momma said when she was a girl she got to have a cake once, and that it was the best thing she ever tasted." Nire stared at the pastry, almost too stunned to try it. When she did, she took a small piece carefully on her fork and put it slowly into her mouth, not wanting to miss a single flavor.

The sweetest thing she had ever tasted was a piece of dried fruit, which was an occasional treat her father would bring home. This was a thousand pieces of dried fruit... no, it wasn't even comparable. She stopped and put her fork down.

"Don't you like it?" Margery asked.

"Can... can I save it and have some tomorrow too?" she asked, not wanting to squander this amazing treat all in one sitting.

Margery let out a laugh. "You can have a whole *new* cake tomorrow," she said.

The child's eyes went wide. "Really?!" Margery nodded with a smile. Immediately the girl picked up her fork and consumed the remains of the small pastry, licking the plate afterwards.

"Alright dear, I think it's time you settled for bed."

Nire nearly nodded in agreement, but then stopped. "What about Loo-seen?" she asked, a sudden ring of fear in her voice.

"I'm sure he will be here soon," the silver haired woman reassured her. "How about I tell you that story while we wait?" Nire nodded and crawled up to the top of the bed. Tucking the girl in, Margery sat next to her and began to speak.

"When I was a little girl, not much older than you are now, I had bright, fire red hair, and orange skin like the evening sun." Nire's eyes widened as she pictured the woman with such bright colors. "My eyes were red too, just like my hair, and my mother called me a little ball of fire. One day I was down in my mother's laboratory while she worked, she was quite skilled in the Pure Magics, and Alteration was something she practiced often.

"She was focusing very hard on her magic as I tried to find small things to entertain myself with. I was just about to go outside, when I spotted a butterfly come in through the high window. Mother was just about to complete her spell, which would remove from one item, and put into another. She had done the spell many times before, and I had seen that whatever object she removed something from, always broke.

"The butterfly began to fly towards my mother's working table. Her eyes were closed, and she was deep in concentration as the butterfly landed directly in her work area. Not wanting the butterfly to be hurt, I quickly jumped up and cupped my hands around it, to move it away before my mother completed the spell. I wasn't quite quick enough, and got caught in the beginnings of the alteration. My mother, noticing that I was in the way canceled the spell immediately, but the presence of both myself, the butterfly, and the objects caused... somewhat of a disruption, and there was a sudden explosion of magic."

Nire's attention was so focused on the story that she hadn't noticed the other person in the room, and Margery continued.

"After the explosion, I woke up sitting next to the wall, my mother calling out my name. I looked down at my hands, which were a pale peach color, and when I opened them I could see a bright orange and red butterfly, as vibrant as fire. It lifted out of my hands, and flew up and out the high window. My pretty red hair and eyes had turned silver, and my bright orange skin had paled to an almost human color. The object my mother had been working on, was this," she said as she pulled a pendant out from the front of her dress, that hung on a gold chain. It was a bright orange stone, speckled with vibrant red facets that glimmered in the light.

"I wasn't allowed in my mother's laboratory anymore, but she gave me the charm she had been working on. I was lucky that my mother canceled the spell before its completion, or it might

have killed me," she said, looking at the pendant and tumbling it in her fingers. After a few moments of thoughtful contemplation she added a final thought. "That's why I decided not to work with magic," she said, returning her gaze to the little girl. "It can be very dangerous, and I have already lost a part of me to it."

Nire stared at the woman in awe. There had been no demons in her town aside from the lesser demons - imps and sprites that infested houses and gardens. She had seen a minor demon once, a traveler that came through town selling herbs for medicine. He had even transformed into his animal form for all the children, it had been a stoat.

But neither humans, lesser demons or minor demons could work with Pure Magics, and Nire had never known anything about how it worked, or what it could do.

"That is something I did not know about you, Margery," A deep voice stated from behind.

She turned to look at the demon that stood a few feet behind her. "That's because you never asked," she said jokingly.

"Loo-seen!" Nire shouted as she jumped out of the bed and ran towards the tall demon. Grabbing a hold of his leg she held tightly to him in the dark room. He bent down and lifted the girl, sitting her on a bent arm as he returned her to the bed.

"Did you eat a good supper?" he asked her, placing her back on the soft sheets.

"Mhm," Nire nodded.

"And you had a bath too, I see," he added, placing the covers over her. She nodded again. "Thank you Margery," he said, turning his head slightly to face her. He was really instructing her to go, and she knew the queue. Bowing her head slightly she smiled, and turned to exit the room.

"Now, this will be your bedroom, Nire. You will sleep here, and when the nurse maids come in the morning you will listen and do as they say, understood?" he asked seriously.

Nire nodded. "Where do you sleep?" she asked.

"I sleep in *my* room," he responded vaguely.

"In my house," the child began, "we only had *one* room."

"In this castle there are hundreds of rooms," The demon stated. "And this is the only one that belongs to you. Now it is very important you stay with the nurse maids tomorrow, it will be easy for you to get lost here," he instructed her sternly.

"I don't want to sleep by myself..." she said quietly, turning her head down. "What if I get scared, or have a bad dream?"

"Nire," the demon began. "When this room is dark there is not a single part of it I cannot see, or hear. If you are frightened, or have a nightmare, just go back to sleep. There is nothing here that will hurt you, and in the dark you are always safe."

She was not convinced. The demon patted her head and stood to go.

"Loo-seen?" she asked quietly.

"Lu-see-in," he corrected her again.

"I miss momma," she choked out, her little voice cracking.

"I know child," he said. Then he turned, and walked out the door.

If he had had any idea how to help the child, he would have. But her loss was something he could not replace, and as for comfort... well that was not exactly one of his shinning merits. He lost any sense for comfort long ago, so long ago it was difficult to remember. He could recall sadness, loneliness, and a want for comfort from his brothers. He experienced the pain of loss more than once, he had even cried.

Those experiences were so long ago however, that he scarcely understood them now. He had learned to deal with loss during the great wars, and he had learned to be his own comfort. He had also learned that to avoid loss, it is best to simply not need that which can be taken from you.

The demon remembered his first sense of loss... it was in a time so distant from now he could barely recreate a visual reference of the memory. He wasn't even exactly sure he *had* a visual reference to begin with. He had not always had the sense of vision, at least not in the way that humans experience it. No, he had begun in a much different way. His sight was a simple knowing, and what he knew was the darkness.

He walked evenly up the stairs towards the east wing where his chambers were, flashing his consciousness to the dark bedroom where the human girl stayed. She was not yet asleep, tossing and turning in the bed restlessly.

He could comfort her, he supposed. He could easily allow her to stay with him, and indulge her need to have a stable consistent person in place of her parents. But he was *not* her parent, and he had no intention to be. Children have a need for their parents, and their parents have a need for them. There were others in the castle who could be stable and reliable, others she could grow to need.

She would not however have a need for him, and her dependence on his presence would be weaned. It was necessary more than she knew, that a distance be kept between them. He already felt a small liking for the girl, as irritating as she was, she could also be rather endearing. Eventually she would come to rely on the other members of the household, and he could return to life as usual.