

The Depth of Shadow - Chapter 3

As the cool morning light bathed Eastcastle in its hazy blue glow, the residents slowly woke, and the staff rushed throughout the castle executing the morning chores. There were fireplaces to be lit, breakfasts to be served, and a small human girl sitting quite alone, wondering what to do.

The bedroom door knocked, and two women entered. Nire did not recognize either of them. They were both older human women, and one of them carried a tray. "Hello Miss. Nire," the older woman said in a strange accent. "My name is Elra and this is Jinny, Margery asked us to attend to you this morning."

"Where's Marge?" the girl asked, glancing between the two women with her covers clenched tightly in her fists.

"Miss. Margery is quite busy in the mornings, she is second to Mrs. Gren and they must oversee the majority of the household. Jinny has breakfast for you little Miss., when you are done we will get you bathed and dressed, and then we have many chores to take care of before the evening."

"Where's Loo-seen?" she inquired next, her voice slightly strained.

The two women exchanged glances at the informal use of his name. "His Lordship is also very busy this morning, there are many things for him to attend to after such a long absence."

The girl's eyes were red, and she swallowed, biting her lip. It had been a long night, and dealing with so many new people was difficult for her to handle. She liked Margery well enough. She would have preferred Margery, given the choice. However, she didn't want Margery, and she certainly didn't want these two.

Without warning, the small child suddenly hopped out of the bed, and bolted for the door. The older woman was caught so off guard she just stood there and blinked. Jinny made a grab for the girl but had been too far away, and nearly dropped the breakfast tray.

"Nire!"

She could hear the woman with the strange accent calling after her, but she ran down the spiral steps, her night dress gathered up in her hands so as not to trip. Footsteps began to follow her.

Down the hall, passed many, many doors she ran, eventually losing the sound of the footsteps behind her. Her run slowed to a jog, then a fast walk, and finally she took small, even steps down the large hallway. Having no idea where she was, she looked around for some sort of clue, or anything that might tell her where to go.

She knew that she shouldn't go *upstairs*, so when she found a staircase she decided to go down. Down, down, down... there were a lot of stairs. After two flights that seemed like an eternity, she decided she must be all the way at the bottom by now, and the other stairs must go to the basement. Shortly after she had begun to walk down the hallway however, she realized that she had been wrong.

The hallway had come to a corner, and at the end she could see quite clearly out the long windows that lined the far wall. As she approached she peered out through them, and the same treetops she could spy from her own window were visible here too. She had not come down very far at all, she realized with a slight droop in her shoulders.

Just as she began to turn and head back towards the stair case, she heard a sound from down the hall. It was a voice... a slightly muffled male voice; deep, even, and confident. It couldn't be far away, so she moved quickly along the window lined hallway. Putting her ear to the nearest door to her right, she could hear the voices inside.

There were numerous other voices in the room as well, but that was not the important part. The deep familiar voice that rolled through the stones in the castle walls like water, was the only thing she was interested in. Opening the door just enough to squeeze through, all conversation halted at the sudden intrusion. One side of the table looked over their shoulders to the left, and the other side of the table to their right, at the quiet sound of small feet padding the floor.

The eyes in the room trailed the child as she hurried behind the backs of chairs in silence, some members standing slightly to see the girl, others turning in their seats.

The sound of small feet on the floor had stopped, and the tall gray demon that stood at the head of the table looked down at the girl, who was still in her nightdress. He had opened his mouth and was about to speak when he noticed the look in the girls eyes, which appeared to be ready to burst into tears at any moment. Taking a breath and closing his mouth, ignoring the questioning looks from the other members of the conference, he bent slightly and picked up the child. He then took a seat and placed her on his lap.

"Continue," he ordered, his expression clearly daring any one of them to make a comment. Hesitantly, the other members continued to speak, and the girl promptly ignored them. The child was highly distressed, why, he did not know. However he had promised the girl he would not harm her, and he knew very well that harm could go much deeper than simple physical damage. He had asked her to trust him, and he was going to be sure that the damage caused to her by the other demons of the South, would not be continued.

Nire sat quietly in his lap as the meeting continued on. Laying her head against his stomach she quickly fell asleep to the drone of the boring conversation that she didn't understand. Some undetermined amount of time later, she woke to the sharp sound of knocking on the dense wooden door. The conversation halted yet again.

"What?" The large demon above her growled out, clearly annoyed by the second interruption.

"Margery, my Lord," the feminine voice spoke from the other side.

"Enter," He ordered, less irritated than before.

"Pardon the intrusion," she began "But I believe you may have an uninvited guest." The woman held her hands clasped at her front, and wore a knowing smile.

Nire poked her head up above the high table, and Margery raised her brow and broadened her smile. The silver haired woman walked swiftly to the opposite end of the room, and Lucian lifted the child from his lap and handed her to Margery. The girl made a sleepy groan in protest and closed her eyes tightly, but was nonetheless handed off. Lucian tapped her nose to get her attention.

Her eyes opened quickly to a very serious looking demon who was nose to nose with her. "No fussing. Go with Margery, we will talk later," He ordered sternly. Nire did not at all like it when he did that, and she made a face as she looked down. When she looked back up, Lucian had raised an eyebrow, golden eyes as serious as ever. The girl nodded, and turned to hold on to the silver haired woman.

Bowing her head to her employer, Margery backed up slightly before turning to leave and closing the door behind her. The walk was quiet for a time as they headed down the hallway. "Why did you take off like that this morning, Nire?" the woman asked gently, propping the girl up higher on her hip.

"I don't like Elra and Jinny," the girl stated quite plainly, her voice muffled by the cloth on Margery's shoulder.

"Why not?" She inquired further.

"I just don't."

"Were they mean?" she pried.

"No..." Nire's voice trailed as she turned her head to the side and lay it on the older woman's shoulder, watching out the windows as they walked. She knew she had no good reason to not like them, she just wanted to be with someone she knew. "I don't want new people every day."

Margery thought for a moment. She had taken some time the night before to discuss Nire's situation with her employer, who had informed her of the ordeal she had been through. The girl was clearly attached to Lucian, and having just lost her parents... her whole town... she was grasping at strings for someone to hang on to.

"Elra and Jinny are nice ladies," Margery began. "They both have had children of their own, and it won't be new people every day," she tried to reassure her.

"Why can't you do it?" the girl asked, gripping tightly to her neck.

"I have a very big job, dear, and I can't be taking care of you all the time," she explained. "I will still be here to take care of you, but when I am busy you need to let Jinny and Elra help. It's their job to take care of the children at Eastcastle."

The girl stirred and looked up. "There are other children here?" she asked with a newfound sense of hope.

"Of course. There are many residents here who have children who need attending to. They are also very busy, important people, so the nursemaids help look after their children during the day. You will be just like the other children here, only come nightfall, you will be having supper with me," said the silver haired woman with a sweet tone.

"You'll bring me supper every day?" she asked.

"Every day," she assured her with a nod of her head. "So will you behave for Elra and Jinny from now on?" Nire hesitated, but nodded. "Good. You caused quite a fuss when you ran off, you know. This castle is easy to get lost in, it's best not to wander." She looked down at the girl, to make sure she had been listening. "Anyways, dear, we have a little surprise for you," Margery let out a heavy breath. "Why don't I show you one of the things I was so busy with this morning," she suggested with a smile.

Nire nodded in agreement, and Margery slowed to set the girl on her feet. Walking hand in hand they headed back to the 7th floor of the north wing, and up the spiral staircase to Nire's tower room. Upon nearing the top of the stairs, Nire gasped.

The door to her room had been painted green, and the carvings that curved around the frame had been painted gold. Suddenly filled with excitement she let go of Margery's hand and rushed towards the door. Leaning her weight against it she pushed it open and stepped inside.

The blue rug had been replaced with a new one, filled with greens, whites and blacks. The blue drapes had been replaced with green ones, which now cascaded all across the far side of the room, even the areas that didn't have windows. The bed had been changed to match, and it seemed that the only thing in the room that had remained the same was the odd bluish tapestry that hung between the bathroom, and closet doors.

The girl brought her fists up and was practically bouncing from one foot to the other. Gasping she exclaimed, "Oh my shadows! I've never seen so much green!" The color that she loved most was particularly rare in the South. Very little flora grew there readily, and what did was more often than not a yellowed or ruddy color. Even in the garden her mother kept there was almost nothing green, and the only place she saw it regularly was when she was able to see her own reflection.

There had been many green things, and many green places she had seen on the journey to the East, and the fields had been like nothing she had ever imagined. Lucian had even bought her a green dress... but never had so much green been *hers*.

As the day pressed on, Nire tried her best to mind the two women who she had been left with again as they directed her through a number of weary tasks. When evening finally began to fall Nire had a slightly higher burst of energy, knowing that the daunting day would soon be at an end.

Margery had brought her supper, and Elra and Jinny had gone. She ate, and had *another* cake. She decided that the boring day was worth it, if she got a cake afterwards. Just as Margery was settling the child into the covers, a dark shadow began to waver behind her.

Without turning, Margery addressed the shadow. "I was just on my way out, My Lord, will there be anything else?" Nire looked at her with wide eyes, she'd not heard anyone come in the room.

"That will be all," a low voice came from somewhere Nire could not quite see.

"Very well then. Goodnight, dear," she said to Nire. "And to you as well, My Lord," she added as she turned to go.

Nire sat up, and Lucian stepped forward to sit on the edge of her bed. "How do you do that?" she asked.

"I told you before, I control the darkness, I can also move within it," he responded, shortly following with his true purpose. "Nire, you should not come looking for me in the castle," he said plainly.

"I know... Margery told me," she answered, putting her head down.

"Do you know why?" he questioned.

"Because I might get lost?" Nire said with some uncertainty.

"Yes... but there are other reasons as well. You will need to begin to depend on your nursemaids, and Margery," he instructed. "I cannot care for you anymore," he paused, noting the girls reaction. Her tiny hands had clenched into fists, gripping the bed sheets. "Life here is very different than it is when traveling," he continued. "There are things I must do, very important things-"

Nire interrupted him. "I'll be quiet, I won't bother you at all," she argued quickly. "I was quiet today..." she continued.

"Yes," he stopped her. "But I do not attend meetings all day long, Nire, and there are many things that I do that would not appropriate for you to attend. I cannot care for you here, Nire." Her

eyes lowered again, her hands loosened their grip on the bed sheets, and a few dark spots began to appear on the green covers.

The demon sighed. He should not have brought her here in the first place, but nonetheless it was already done. "Nire, you are here with me now, are you not?" she nodded. "And this is where you will stay; in this castle, in this room. I am never far away, and neither is Margery, we will always be close by within the same walls as you." His voice was rough, almost scolding, despite his attempt to sound more gentle.

The small girl held still. He placed a hand on her head before standing, and as he withdrew it Nire looked up, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Eventually sleep took the exhausted girl, and she found herself back with her mother and father. They hugged her, and told her they loved her. Then suddenly and without warning blood filled her vision. First it was her mother, and as her father cried out his screams were silenced. She saw none of it through the crack in the wooden cupboard, and she held her hands clamped tightly over her mouth.

A thud could be heard, and she jumped as she saw the hand of her mother fall open onto the floor, followed by the blood that pooled at her fingertips. Through the tiny crack in the door she saw a demon step over her mother, his blood red skin embedding a deep fear within her chest, and when he turned she could see his eyes, which seemed to glow a luminous green from deep within. Suddenly, instead of turning and leaving as he should have done, the red demon held his position, and his eyes locked with hers. A sick grin crossed his face as he headed towards the cupboard.

His eyes burned into her... The only time she couldn't bear the color green.

She screamed. Shooting out of the bed in a panic she ran to hide behind the tapestry just across from her bed. She crouched behind it, holding her knees to her chest as tears streamed down her face. Her heart pounded and hot blood rushed to her cheeks, she had to keep quiet... he might hear her.

As she pressed back against the wall she felt something move. Feeling with her hands, she pushed again. The space behind the tapestry made a depression into the wall, and then it *opened*. The stone groaned as the wall shifted, and inside was a hallway lined sparsely with candles. Fearing what lay beyond the other side of the tapestry, she slid through the hidden doorway and closed it behind her.

There were no doors, no windows, just stone walls as far as she could see. She began to walk forward, and at an unexpected sound behind her, she gasped and ran. The hallway seemed to go on forever; there were corners and turns, stairs and inclines, but there was not a single door. Just as she began to fear she would be trapped forever, an end to the hallway came into view.

It was a wall. The girl was nearly in tears, when she noticed something unusual about the wall. It appeared to be nothing more than the stone bricks that encased the entire castle, except for

one small exception. This wall had a *line*. Yes, a clear line that ran from the floor up, curving at the top and then heading straight down to the floor again. A line made by the edges of the stones that had been cut to shape. A line that very clearly resembled a *door*.

She walked closer to the wall and felt the line with her fingertips. There was no mortar between the stones. She pushed. Nothing. She pushed again, harder this time. Stone scraped against stone, and as she put all of her weight into it, the door slid open. She made herself as thin as possible and squeezed through the opening in the door, to find herself behind yet another tapestry.

Peeking out, she found herself in another bedroom, though this one was much larger than hers. Looking towards the dressers she spotted a familiar pair of black boots, and glancing towards the wall she saw a portrait, depicting the face of the boot's owner. Glancing in the other direction she spotted a large bed, sitting atop a dais on the far wall.

Bolting out from behind the tapestry she ran towards the bed quietly, and then using the post and frame managed to climb up, and in. The owner sat, somewhat startled.

"Lu....Lu!" The frightened girl stuttered

"Child -" he began, practically speechless and intending to scold her. But before he could finish she flew into his arms, and began to sob.

"He's coming to get me!" she cried violently.

"Wha- who is?" The gray demon asked, looking around, still somewhat out of sorts and not entirely awake.

"The demon that killed momma! He saw me in the cupboard and he's coming to get me!" She was sobbing so frantically her words were difficult to understand.

"No one is here, Nire," Lucian said, placing a hand on her head. As he looked around he spotted that the tapestry on the far wall had been disturbed. "How did you manage to find that door?" he asked curiously.

Her sobs had begun to quiet as she answered. "I hid behind the carpet on the wall, and the wall moved," she said, wiping her eyes.

"How did you know it lead here?" he inquired again, his eyes gleaming in the darkness as he looked down at her.

"I didn't," she responded.

Letting out a sigh, Lucian patted her head. "Did you have another nightmare?"

She nodded, "But he's going to get me..." she added, glancing back towards the door she had emerged from.

"Dreams cannot come get you, Nire," Lucan stated, quickly sweeping the space between her room and his with his mind, just in case. "And there is no one between your room and mine," he added. "You are quite safe, Nire."

She shook her head.

The demon lord considered his current position. Now that she knew about that door he would have to start wearing clothes to bed. As if it hadn't been irritating enough sleeping fully clothed while traveling, and nonetheless nearly just as awkward.

"Nire, you cannot stay here, go back to your room,"

Tears began to rush their way down her cheeks once again. "But he will *GET ME!*" she protested loudly, throwing her arms around his waist and holding tight.

For the love of all the realm, why couldn't she have found her way to Margery's room?

"Child, I am not clothed, you *may not* stay here," he tried being frank with the girl.

"So get *dressed!*" she shouted back.

He couldn't very easily argue with the logic of a five year old. It appeared that whether he wanted to be dressed or not was not the point. Letting out a sigh, he tried one last time.

"Nire...there is nothing in this castle that will hurt you, and no one is coming to get you."

She stayed clutched to him, quietly crying and gave no response.

"I swear child, you are going to end me," he stated flatly. "Get off and I will get dressed," he caved. *He caved.* He never caves. Children are a pestilence to ones resolve, he decided firmly. Nire hesitantly released her hold, and moved away enough for him to stand.

As he swung his feet to the side of the bed, Nire covered her eyes with her hands. It almost made him want to laugh. *Almost.* He was far too irritated to laugh, but it was nonetheless amusing. After donning a pair of trousers he walked back to the bed, and lay down.

Nire wiggled under the covers and closed the distance between them, snuggling up to his side. Rolling his eyes, the demon placed his arm around her. How long did it take for human children to grow? He had a feeling the next ten years or so were going to be the longest ten years he had experienced in ages.