

18+



M Li

Mitu

«Издательские решения»

Li M.

Mitu / M. Li — «Издательские решения»,

The system called their power a defect, their darkness — a threat. It taught them to serve, to sacrifice, to never ask questions. Then it declared them defective. But what if the monster inside isn't something to run from — but the only real thing about you? What if love isn't a reward for being «right,» but a choice — to look into another darkness and not look away? Book One of the Mitu dilogy. A mirror you're afraid to look into — but can't tear your eyes away from.

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Mitu

M Li

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Author's Note

To everyone who carries a monster inside. To those who fear their own reflection. To those who've been called broken, too much, damaged.

You are not alone.

Not all monsters are born in the Abyss. Some are made — in bright rooms with white walls.

This book is about lost souls who discovered that everything they knew about themselves was a lie. That their power is a brand. Their love — an obsession. And their most terrifying monster lives within.

The first step toward freedom isn't escape.

It's a question:

What if my darkness isn't something to run from — but something to listen to?

The author is tired of heroes.

Because they're a bit of a monster themselves.

Playlist

The albums that were playing while this book was being written:

Frayle — *Heretics & Lullabies*

NLO22—*Mirage*

Lubetsky — *Atmosphere*

Amanati — *NUDE*

Podval Capella — *FATHER*

Bad Omens — *THE DEATH OF PEACE OF MIND*

From the Archivist's notes

*I write down pain. It's the only thing that doesn't lie.
Especially when two people scream, but only one hears.
That one is me.*

Prologue

Darl pressed himself into the shadows and watched in horror as the scene unfolded between the girl and the elf.

The edge of her fingernail pierced his black skin — just deep enough for a single warm crimson drop to swell. Taerlim — that was the name of the one whose blood she licked from her own fingers.



Everything around them vanished. It was as if someone had cut reality away, leaving only a narrow strip of window — the one she pressed herself against while leaning into another man. Before him, there was only this:

A filthy tavern bathroom. Azara beside the elf, his hand braced against the wall. Her finger trailing down his chest. Her sweet whisper in his ear — drenched in lies.

“Delicious. Now I know your little secret. How nasty of you — trapping a poor creature and profiting from it, don’t you think?”

The girl’s eyes — those same eyes that had so often looked at Darl with interest — held no shame now. No embarrassment. Only focus.

She was hunting. But not for pleasure.

So that’s it. She didn’t make that deal for attention? Not for some kind of continuation?

The man turned away and leaned against the wall beside the window. Sliding down the cold, wet stone, he pressed his face into his palms.

Watching that elf look at his mystery — not like a sacred artifact, but like a body — made him want to vomit.

Love. That disgusting feeling, belonging to pale mortals and weak-spirited creatures. A tool for slaves and fools. But what an exquisite tool it was.

The beast inside him — white-hot, pushed past its limit — strained to sink its claws into their throats and tear them apart.

Tonight had shaken every principle he had. Every belief about his own world.

Did she actually enjoy this?

But his wounded pride began to give way to something else.

Unease.

What if there really was something foreign inside Taerlim?

That was enough.

Darl sprang to his feet — ready to stop her. But out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flash through the window. A formless, shifting entity. And he froze.

From the girl — no, from the viscous shadow that had taken her place — a dark, sticky drool stretched toward the elf’s mouth. Taerlim’s throat convulsed, choking and spasming, as she pulled out whatever had been living inside him.

There was no pity for the elf she had just been touching.

Only a sense of justice — rising from the deepest core of her connection to the Abyss.

Darl pulled back from the window. In quick strides, he crossed the space behind the wall and caught the dazed girl at the entrance.

Cold rain poured over their faces — as if mocking a situation already vile enough.

His grip loosened. He caught her gaze.

“Pathetic work for a goddess. But effective, I’ll give you that. Did you enjoy touching him again? Or are they all just tools to you — like me?”

“Don’t touch me right now.” She pushed him away and walked toward the tavern. “I don’t have the strength or the will to fight with you.”

But the man stepped in front of her, blocking her path, his voice rising.

“But you had the strength to erase my memory. I know everything about that night. How I drowned in you. How I wanted you. And then I woke up clean. As if my desire disgusted you so much you had to erase it. Kris — in a rare moment of honesty — decided I should appreciate your... generosity.”

The girl opposite him didn’t say a word. She just squeezed his hand in response.

In the silence of the night, his whisper cut through.

“So who are you, Azara? The one who saves souls? Or the one who takes them?”

And suddenly, before his eyes, it wasn’t her pale face he saw.

It was another.

Red hair spread across a dirty clearing. A body twisted in convulsions.

Three months ago.

Back when he had no idea that he had tied his fate not to a goddess — but to the most contagious secret this world had ever known.

From the Archivist's notes

*Fate doesn't knock. It doesn't need to.
It just opens the door and watches you choke on your own lies.
I've seen it so many times, I stopped closing my eyes.*

Chapter 1

Darl

Three months ago.

The clearing was unnaturally still. Even the wind avoided it, afraid to touch the carpet of bluish moss spreading along the edges. Somewhere in the distance, a crow cawed — and immediately fell silent.

And of course, everything went wrong.

Darl tried to hold back the fanged beast as it dripped poison onto his face. The stench of rot filled his lungs. Long, dark hair clung to his eyes, making it harder to see. But what worried him most was Kris — his friend, his protégé — lying on the ground, barely breathing in his own blood, yet still trying to get up. A hole gaped in his blue side, bone fragments sticking out. His silver hair was matted with dirt and gore.

A few weeks earlier, in a border tavern, two elves drowning in the stench of cheap rotgut had been talking about a goddess.

The Lord had been sitting in the corner, hidden under his cloak, when he overheard a nearby table.

“Heard about her?” one elf said. “They say the Light has a goddess who calms Abyss creatures like kittens.”

The other elf took a swig from a filthy mug and snorted.

“Bullshit. If she existed, the war would’ve ended a long time ago.”

Darl Artix — the Lord of Shadows — hadn’t paid it much attention at the time. Rumors were just rumors.

But when his armies were once again forced to retreat before creatures that, for some inexplicable reason, obeyed the Light, he remembered that conversation.

And so his and Kris’s brilliant plan was born. Find out what this girl was really made of.

As it turned out, the tavern talk had been about a sacrificial lamb — the Goddess of Balance, Azara — ready to give the last crumbs of her wretched existence for her people.

The plan was simple: lure her with rumors of an Abyss monster that had escaped at the border and torn apart a few ordinary folks. The King of the Light’s pawn — too squeamish to even stick his nose out of his gilded cage — would surely send her to check it out.

Checked her out, motherfuckers.

The creature that emerged from the Abyss was not what they’d expected. The enormous, grotesque beast now tearing at Darl’s shoulder with its claws was something they’d never seen before.

Kris wheezed on the ground while the Lord of Shadows barely managed to defend himself. It had been arrogant and stupid to venture into a place soaked in centuries of filth.

The beast jerked to the side, and out of the corner of his eye, Darl saw her.

At the edge of the clearing, a red-haired girl was creeping forward — slowly, like a cat.

To his surprise, she didn’t flinch. Didn’t back away.

He watched in disbelief as she reached a hand toward the creature and whispered something in a language he didn’t even recognize — and his heart pounded even harder.

The beast crawled closer and pressed its snout into her palm.

Darl hadn’t expected much from the Goddess of Balance — certainly not this quiet, almost tender whisper directed at a monster.

There was no fear in her eyes as she looked at the creature. No disgust. Only understanding — something kin to the same void that had been gnawing at him from the inside for years.

That frightened him more than the claws still buried in his shoulder.

Because it meant: she wasn't from the Light.

She was from the same nowhere as him.

Kris's sob broke his thoughts. He tried to rise and, with the last of his strength, hurled his sword.

"Stop!" Darl shouted.

Too late.

The beast howled — a rattling, rasping shriek that echoed across the clearing. It reared onto its hind legs and lunged toward the caves, its stinger grazing the girl.

She crumpled sideways, clutching her wounded shoulder. Her bones twisted from their joints as a gurgling, choking sound rose from her throat — until she fell silent, unconscious.

Kris fell onto his back, laughing hysterically.

"It actually worked!" His eyes, clouded with pain, blazed with an unhealthy, feverish gleam. "I'm a goddamn genius!"

Darl stood over two bodies: one lifeless and twitching in agony — the other laughing in bloody mud.

He stepped closer to the girl and noticed the freckles scattered across her face — tiny as flies. Red strands of hair clung to her sweat-dampened forehead.

He didn't feel triumph.

Only a vague certainty: this meeting would be the beginning of something new. Something that might finally let him seize the advantage.

The days dragged on, agonizingly slow. The girl didn't wake up.

Darl stood at the top of his tower, his hands braced against the stone, watching black streaks slide down the glass like slugs. The scent of salt and jasmine drifted through the shutters, inviting him to step outside, spread his wings, and dissolve into the raging ocean.

But escape was an illusion — accessible only in thought.

In the distance, Antaris flickered. The city built with his sweat and blood.

He stared at its glowing lights, trying to forget how the creature had touched her palm.

What a disgusting thing to do — stooping to traps for the Light's petty lapdogs.

He didn't even believe his own contempt. That girl was no lapdog.

She was a door. A door leading to the place from which that monster had crawled.

The stone ledge crunched under his hands. He smirked, pushing away from the window.

Well, well. Looks like the rotten upper crust of the Light had an exceptionally valuable specimen tucked up their sleeve. So many losses, so many sacrifices, so much land destroyed — because of one goddess.

The crackle of logs in the fireplace created the illusion of coziness — fleeting and fragile. The nights when he could actually relax and let himself stop thinking could be counted on one hand.

Tonight was clearly not one of them.

A knock at the door. Moments later, Kris's pale head appeared in the doorway. He looked better than he had an hour ago — but only slightly. Holding his bandaged side, he walked inside and lowered himself into a chair, his face twisting in a grimace.

Darl, trying to unclench his jaw, hissed through his teeth.

"Who the hell do you think you are? Remind me — when exactly did we discuss the part of the plan where you mindlessly destroy our one chance to claw our way out of this pit?"

"Darl, I —" Kris didn't get to finish.

A heavy, clawed hand grabbed him by the throat and slammed him against the back of the chair.

"I'm the one talking right now, so be a good boy and listen." He loosened his grip slightly and leaned closer to Kris. "If your righteous' impulse ever overrides my orders again... I'll remind you — in vivid detail — how I gutted fighters in the bloody sands to earn my title."

He pushed away from his friend, walked to the table, and poured dark crimson wine into a goblet.

“That girl... She’s our problem now. Ours. We’re going to do everything — do you hear me? Everything — to make sure she doesn’t belong to the Light. We saw for ourselves what lives in the Abyss. Creatures beyond anything we could have imagined. If she can tame them... what’s to stop her from summoning something even worse next time?”

He held out the wine.

Kris didn’t look away. He seemed not to fully understand why his friend was so on edge.

“Dispatch from the capital.” Kris tossed a crumpled paper onto the table. “Smolder is moving troops to the border. If we move on the Citadel now, they’ll be at Antaris’s gates in days.”

Darl didn’t even glance at the scroll.

“I know.”

“And?”

“And we won’t move. Not yet.”

“So we need to win her over somehow,” Kris said quietly. “That could shift the balance of power completely. We wouldn’t just be getting rid of her — we’d be using her. And finally... finally gaining our freedom.”

This was why Darl valued his friend and right hand. Kris always saw the bigger picture — as if he were quoting the Lord’s own thoughts back to him.

His attention shifted to the map on the wall.

Antaris — a tiny dot on the border of the Shadows, squeezed between the sea and an army. Meanwhile, the Citadel — a separate organism — had stretched its threads across the entire continent.

“If we make one wrong move, they’ll crush us with numbers alone. You know they have twice as many fighters as we do. And we...” He traced a finger along the border, “...we have only walls and the hope that this girl is worth the risk.”

Suddenly, he felt a ripple in the heart of the fortress.

He smiled — a predator’s smile.

“Looks like someone’s finally woken up. Now, if you’ll excuse me — I need to go greet our dear guest.”

Kris stayed behind, alone with his half-empty goblet. The wine reminded him of blood.

He watched Darl’s retreating figure, then unclenched his hand from where it had been pinned against his throat. Slowly, he raised his fingers to his neck, tracing the marks where Darl’s claws had dug in.

Not wounds.

A reminder.

Outside the window, Antaris kept blinking its lights — a city built on a foundation of such reminders.

From the Archivist's notes

*You don't choose gods.
They're appointed by those who need sacrifices —
and then they wonder why the gods prefer to stay silent.
I would've stayed silent too.
Too bad no one ever asked me.*

Chapter 2

Azara

Goddess. A ridiculous name for a creature who'd never understood why it was breathing. A title given for rare abilities in these lands — it hardly suited her. But she hadn't been given a choice.

Every night, her mind replayed the same dream: a room decorated with frescoes, reeking of incense; a child's hands clutching parchment. The Keeper — his face constantly shifting — would loom over her and repeat the same words.

"Read. Your fate is to understand — so that others may think. You are our shield. Our light. Our hope."

Then, as if to hammer the thought even deeper, he would add:

"Don't fail."

Azara had understood this as a child: being hope was a debt you could never repay. The moment you stopped, you were no longer needed. The power that once gave warmth became a contamination — something you wanted to be rid of. And yet, she was grateful for the chance to be useful. It was the only way to be noticed.

Forced to earn not just her food but her very bed in the sanctuary, she quickly learned one thing: love wasn't given for free in this world, either.

Waking hit her like a wave of pain radiating from her shoulder. Her gaze met the rough stone of the wall. A slow, deep breath — and something that might have been a smile trembled on her dry lips.

Finally. Something real.

Her body burned, but her mind was already making a list: where she'd been wrong, where she'd shown weakness, how to fix it.

The main thing — don't let them see the pain. Otherwise, they'd be disappointed.

She bit her lip until it bled, swallowing a whimper out of habit. Her fingers, resting on the blanket, clenched the fabric, smoothing out non-existent folds.

Azara carefully slid off the bed and walked to the window, throwing open the shutters. Wind hit her face, carrying the salty scent of the ocean. From below came the distant sounds of life.

The view of the Shadow city from above gave her a strange sense of control — something she'd never known before.

So this is what it feels like, she thought. To hold other people's lives in your hands.

Antaris — surrounded on one side by high walls, on the other by the dark waters of the ocean — felt almost protective. The Keepers called it a city of outcasts, blind to what the Light did for them.

Sometimes her heart filled with pity for these creatures. Other times, there was no compassion in her at all — as if it were only pretending to feel, acting on autopilot.

For a moment, the light in the room dimmed. The space filled with a suffocating presence. A tall man entered.

He was attractive and repulsive in equal measure: long black hair, pale skin — like the walls of her own sanctuary — and piercing green eyes. He looked like a corpse risen from the grave.

Azara, for her part, had always been drawn to strange things. The monster in the clearing had seemed to her the height of authenticity. So she didn't bother measuring the man against her own ideas of beauty.

The Lord stepped closer. A fresh scent reached her lungs — like after a thunderstorm. Calming.

For a while, they stood in silence. Azara didn't dare break it first. She just clutched the edge of her dress.

“How is your wound?” His voice was hypnotically slow — like bait, just before you find yourself in a beast’s jaws.

The only honest thing in all of this was the torn flesh on her shoulder.

“I asked —”

“Let’s skip the meaningless small talk,” the girl said. “To be honest, I’m surprised I woke up in a cell. Not a smelly dungeon. So, thank you for that.”

“Interesting... the Light’s standards for greeting guests,” he drawled, raising an eyebrow.

“Prisoners.”

“Azara, you are not a prisoner. You’re our guest. You may stay as long as you need to recover. No one is holding you here by force. Unless, of course, you choose to stay.”

She smirked and finally unclenched her hands from her dress.

Would anyone have noticed if I hadn’t come back? she wondered. *Or would my cot in the sanctuary already be taken by someone newer. More needed.*

But she didn’t miss the main thing: he knew who she was. Which meant he wouldn’t let her go so easily.

“So the locked door and the barred gates downstairs — that’s a sign of hospitality?” She tipped her head back, meeting his assessing gaze. It made her deeply uneasy — as if she were standing at an auction, about to be handed over to the highest bidder.

“You’ll have time to return. But aren’t you the least bit curious about us?”

There it was. A chance to infiltrate their archives. To study them. And, if she was lucky, to use them against him. The only question was — why had he offered it himself? The Lord of Shadows’ logic wasn’t entirely clear, but for now, she decided not to dwell on it. The main thing was that this would be invaluable to the Light. Right?

And yet — no matter how much she denied it — she wanted to understand the nature of her connection to the Abyss. In the Citadel, she’d been forbidden to even think about it.

“I agree,” she said flatly, almost coldly. “I’ll stay until I’m better. The wound needs to heal.”

The man’s face flickered for a moment — he clearly hadn’t expected such a quick agreement.

Darl left as abruptly as he’d appeared. An hour later, food and a change of clothes were brought to her — a show of hospitality. She had no appetite.

Her thoughts kept drifting back to the creature in the clearing. A strange tenderness stirred in her. Except for her childhood, no Abyss creature had ever come that close. She hardly knew that part of herself — the one the monster had responded to. Now, she desperately wanted to feel that connection again.

Kin.

She couldn’t eat. The stuffy, dark room was starting to press in on her. So, changing into a dark green dress, she decided to go downstairs — before the doors, so generously left unlocked, could close again.

The castle corridors were lit only by a single lamp. *Shadows*, she thought. *Appropriate.*

She tried to move silently, but there was no one in the castle — which only made her feel as though the emptiness itself was watching her from between the stones. It was unnerving. She wiped her sweaty palms on her dress, noting details, trying to memorize the way.

Descending the spiral staircase, she nearly stumbled. Through the window, she caught a glimpse of a figure — and froze.

The second man. The one from the clearing. He looked different now, but she remembered the strange blue skin, the silver hair matted with blood.

He was walking toward an elaborate structure in the garden, glancing back frequently. Forgetting the pain in her shoulder, Azara gathered her skirts and quickened her pace, drawn by the shadow moving through the garden.

Her movements were still stiff. She could barely keep up. Stepping into the garden, she saw the figure disappear through a doorway hidden behind rose bushes. Marble columns stood in stark contrast to the grim castle, reminding her painfully of the Citadel.

The roses were waxy white. The air was heavy with the sweetness of petals and the coldness of damp earth.

Pushing through the thorny branches, she scratched her legs and arms on the sharp gravel but didn't stop.

The door was unlocked. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness. She stepped inside — and froze.

“Ava. I brought you your favorite flowers. Every time I look at them, they remind me of your eyes. You know, today I dreamed that you woke up. You were laughing. I wanted to erase everything around us and leave only that moment. But then I woke up...” A pause. “More and more thoughts are eating at me. Bad thoughts. I don't want you to hear them.”



In the center of the small, dim room, on a stone altar, lay a girl. Many would have called her perfect — and they would probably be right. Her pale skin glowed in the moonlight filtering through the stained-glass window. Golden hair spilled over the stone.

To Azara, she seemed *too* beautiful — beautiful in the way a monument was. Frozen in eternal reproach to the living. She wanted to look away, not to defile something so sacred.

Her gaze shifted to the man. His irises glowed faintly in the moonlight — thin silver lines. But that wasn't what caught her attention. It was the tears on his cheeks — tears he didn't even seem to notice — as he touched the sleeping angel's face with a trembling hand.

Not a demon, she thought with sudden certainty. *Something ancient*.

"Are you just going to stand there?"

The voice echoed off the walls — clearly not meant for the sleeping girl.

Azara flinched and bolted for the exit, scraping her hands against the stone walls. She tried to catch her breath, but her throat was tight, clogged with something thick.

A shadow fell over her before she heard the footsteps.

"Had your fill?"

Fingers dug into her wounded shoulder.

She grabbed his hand in return — to keep herself grounded.

"I'm sorry... I didn't mean to —"

"You're all the same, you chosen ones." He cut her off. "Sticking your noses where they don't belong. Thinking everything is allowed. Thinking you understand. That you can heal. But no. You just leave filth behind you everywhere you go. Just like your king."

In that moment, she saw it in him. The same deep, incurable fracture she carried in herself.

The next words came out before she could stop them.

"You think I don't know what it's like?" She laughed — and there was nothing holy in it. "Pretending to be alive? I do it every day. It doesn't help, does it?" Her eyes, clouded with pain, suddenly became piercingly clear.

His grip on her shoulder tightened. Then, as if burned, he jerked away. His face twisted — revulsion, panic, and something else. That he had been understood.

Into the silence, thick with the stench of rotting roses, the Lord of Shadows stepped soundlessly.

From the Archivist's notes

There are wounds that don't heal.

There are wounds that become home.

*And I've learned that the only difference between a man and a beast
is that a man can choose which shit to live in.*

Chapter 3

Kris

Darl emerged from the trees like a ghost, his cold gaze fixed on Kris — deliberately sliding past the pale building behind him. Even though it held their shared guilt.

The Lord stepped toward the girl and helped her up without a word. Had he heard their argument? Kris didn't care. All he wanted was to run.

He turned and fled, leaving the garden and its questioning stares behind.

It's going to be my fault again, flashed through his mind. *In Darl's eyes, it's always my fault.*

The road twisted and turned until the sound of the ocean drowned out the voices in his head — voices that only fell silent at the water's edge. It was easier to breathe, at least for a while. But those moments were painfully rare.

The shore met him with slippery boulders that immediately stained his clothes. Not that it mattered anymore. Now, the outside matched the inside: salt biting into the scratches left by the garden roses. Burning.

Kris clenched his teeth, inhaling the scent of seaweed — the same smell that had hung in the air the last time Ava opened her eyes.

The abscess in his chest wasn't a metaphor. It scratched at him from within, like a living thing desperate to break free.

Avalita. A name forbidden within these castle walls. The moment he'd seen her in the Citadel, Kris had known: there was no going back to his old life. An angel. Something he hadn't known how to value in time.

A pure creature who had become his everything — and then shattered into pieces the day Darl first used his beast's power. Every new conflict between the Light and the Shadows left thin, web-like cracks on her heart. Kris had begged Darl to stop, but the Lord — consumed by his hunger for freedom and power — hadn't listened. Now, he pretended she had never existed.

Her skin, once shimmering like mother-of-pearl in the sun, now resembled pale, smooth wax. In the moonlight, Kris sometimes thought he saw a tear rolling down her cheek — but it was only moisture seeping through a crack in the ceiling. She couldn't cry anymore. She could only be preserved — like an ideal they had all poisoned together.

Kris came to her every day, trying to reach her, to beg for forgiveness. She faded slowly. And he kept remembering that day: waiting for her at the altar, watching her walk toward him in her silk dress — and then the snap. Quiet. Dry. The moment the world stopped being what it had been.

Kris kicked a stone, watching it disappear into the raging waves.

"Forgive us," he said, clutching her pendant — the one he always carried with him. Proof that something inside him was still alive.

A figure flickered at the edge of the slope. Red hair tossing in the wind, a dress clinging to thin shoulders. She was staring at the water, motionless. Unaware of him.

His first thought was of Darl. Of course, he was somewhere nearby. Watching. Not interfering. The Lord of Shadows, motherfucker, standing there while his prisoner admired the cliff.

Screw it, Kris thought. *I'm not just going to sit here. What if she actually jumps?*

Stones crumbled beneath his feet. Wind whistled in his ears as he made his way up. When he finally reached her, he sat down beside her without asking permission.

"If you're thinking of throwing yourself off," he said, staring at the horizon, "better do it from the tower. Here, you'll just scratch your face."

Her mismatched eyes showed no surprise. No anger. Only silence — the same silence as the sea.

“You first. I’ll follow.”

A smile tugged at his lips. Not offended. Understanding.

“Is no one looking for you?” he asked casually. “No one at all?”

“I fed them all to the monsters. So, the position for a friend is open. Interested?”

He rolled his eyes but didn’t leave.

“First time by the sea?” He could see the way she watched the waves. With something like reverence.

“This close,” Azara whispered. “Yes.”

Her gaze was fixed on the horizon — where the sky met the water. It looked like the end of the world. Or maybe the beginning.

“I watch it every time,” Kris said. “And I feel like a speck of something bigger. Like nothing matters anymore. And I just want to dissolve into it.”

“So I’m not the only one without friends?”

He just shook his head, then stood, brushing off his pants. He looked down at her — no pity, no mockery. He still didn’t understand what he felt for this girl.

“Now I see why,” he said. Then, after a pause: “Don’t stay out too long. Dinner will be ready soon.”

He walked down without looking back. But out of the corner of his eye, he saw her silhouette still there. In the bushes above, a shadow stirred.

Kris smirked into his collar.

Keep watching, Lord. Keep watching.

Three moons flickered in the sky, lighting his way. Somewhere in the castle, new lights were kindling. But his mind was fixed on only one thing: what kind of story did this girl have, that she could understand him?

Trying to avoid both Darl and the garden — where Azara had now become a frequent visitor — Kris started spending his days in the archives of the main tower.

One day, he discovered to his dismay that he wasn’t alone there. Darl had given Azara access — supposedly out of boredom. But Kris knew the truth: he wanted to study the nature of her powers. To show her that here, she could be accepted.

Used.

Kris sat on a bench in the dusty hall, where centuries of history reeked of decay. On the shelves, like dried organs in jars, stood tomes bound in leather — the origins of which he preferred not to think about.

The girl ran her fingers over the lines with a morbid fascination, and Kris watched her gaze move across the letters. A familiar revulsion stirred inside him. Reading made him think. Made him return to Ava. To that day when the light had gone out in her eyes, and the words in the books had blurred, losing their meaning.

But he noticed something interesting: Darl had started checking reports in the library instead of in his own wing. And always at the same time the girl was studying the scrolls. Coincidence? Of course. Or maybe he just happened to be in the corridor whenever Azara returned from her walks. He watched her back far too long as she disappeared into the darkness of the archives. A hungry, almost animal gaze.

His thoughts were interrupted by the girl’s surprised exclamation. He stood and walked over.

“Did you find something like The Goddess of Balance is ancient evil and must be destroyed?” He leaned over and read the entry she was pointing at.

The Codex of Silent Pages. The Soul as a Mirror — and a Connection to the Abyss.

Azara looked at him, her mismatched eyes narrowing.

“Confiscated from the Citadel’s library. Which means it’s somewhere here. Sounds impressive. Shall we look for it?”

Kris ran a hand thoughtfully over his silver braid and shook his head.

“I don’t remember having a book like that.”

He walked deeper into the archives, pressed a seal in the center of the wall, connected to the system, and scanned the space for the book.

“No. That codex isn’t in the catalog.”

“Allow me to help.”

The sound came from the darkness — like claws scraping against glass. On the wall where a moment ago there had been only a shadow from the candelabra, a shape now stirred. A long-eared fox, woven from darkness.

They had seen this creature in the archives before — a ghost of knowledge, a silent guardian. But it had never spoken to them.

It pointed an almost transparent paw at the book’s title.

“You’re looking for the Silent Pages,” the fox stated — didn’t ask. Its hollow eye sockets were fixed on Azara. “But you’re not asking about the book. You’re asking about yourselves. Why you feel what others don’t. Why darkness reaches for you — and you for it. The book won’t give you answers. It will only show you the questions you’re afraid to ask.”

Kris crumpled the corner of a paper in his fingers, staring at the fox.

“What kind of riddles are these?”

“They’re not riddles,” the fox tilted its head. “Just the truth. You’re searching outside for something that’s likely already inside you. Kris, you’re asking about a book — but what you really want to hear about is the soul trapped between ‘was’ and ‘is.’ Her soul isn’t dead — it’s lost. Tainted. And to cleanse a soul, you must reflect it back to its original purity. Perhaps your guest can help you. Who knows?”

The corners of its ethereal mouth twitched in what might have been a smile — exactly like an old actor playing a well-rehearsed role. Satisfied with the effect, the ghost dissolved into the darkness between the shelves, leaving behind only the faint scent of old parchment.

Kris stared at the wall where the fox had been, barely hearing the girl’s thoughts.

And then — a thought.

Too convenient. Too timely. As if...

Paranoia? No. It was his last attempt to cling to the familiar, safe emptiness he was so tired of. He wanted to believe in the deceptive light of the chance flickering in the strange shadow’s words, even though his mind screamed danger.

After so many years — a sign at last. Fate hadn’t brought them together on that damned clearing by accident. It had extended a bridge across the abyss.

Kris stepped forward, forbidding himself to look back.

From the Archivist's notes

*Freedom is when no one writes you down in the records.
But the worst thing is to be left alone with the one who watches from inside.
I know. Because I am that watcher.*

Chapter 4

Azara

She woke from a nightmare and sat up, gasping for air. In the sanctuary, she used to light a small lamp — a tiny island of light in a sea of rules. Here, there was no lamp. No rules. Only darkness, breathing in time with her fear.

Her body curled into a ball on its own. She wrapped her arms around her knees, trying to calm her heartbeat. It was at night that something inside seemed to call to her — trying to reach her. The Abyss, unlike the girl, never slept.

Gradually, her pulse steadied. She opened her eyes and watched the three moons light up the room. Another difference: in the Shadow lands, the sun never shone. And strangely, that was calming. Nothing could cast a shadow here anymore.

There was a knock at the door. The Lord was inviting her for a walk — and she couldn't refuse.

He was constantly busy at the border, where an already unstable world was cracking at the seams. As a result, they rarely crossed paths — which was something of a relief. His presence shifted the air in the castle, made it thicker. Heavier.

To her surprise, Darl and Kris had thrown themselves into the search for the book. Kris's motives were clear enough, even if she didn't know the full story of the girl in the crypt. But Darl... she could only guess about his goals. None of her guesses were particularly bright. One thing was clear: here, just as in the Citadel, she was trapped. Only now, at least she had a choice about *which* trap to sit in.

Her first time out in the Shadow city. She was curious. She smoothed down her black velvet dress — so different from what she usually wore — and smiled with satisfaction as she let her hair down. It streamed over her shoulders like fiery serpents, giving her an illusion of freedom.

The moment she stepped out the door, she ran straight into him. She winced — her shoulder twinged — and muttered, meeting his eyes:

“Lord.”

He stepped back abruptly and looked away. Darl had changed since the day they first met. No matter how hard she studied him, she couldn't find any external differences. But what struck her most was this: even though he held power, he never wore any insignia. Simple black coats and a cloak. It contrasted sharply with the King of the Light, Smolder — whom Azara had rarely seen but distinctly remembered as dripping with gold.

“I thought you might refuse,” he said. “There's a celebration in the city today — Liberation Day. I wanted to show you the fair.”

His behavior and his invitation — which had seemed strange from the start — now made sense. He wanted to show her a celebration of her own defeat. To show her what the world she'd been fighting against had become.

The city hit them like a wave of real life — unpolished, arrhythmic, almost aggressive in its diversity. Antaris was carved from dark stone, but its streets teemed with colors, sounds, and creatures.

The air smelled of ocean and honey. Fragments of colored glass — leftovers from fireworks — crunched underfoot.

Azara stopped at the edge of the main square. A sylph glided past, its wings shimmering like an oil slick. Nearby, a gnome haggled with a kobold — a small, foul-furred creature with burning eyes. A flock of lumenites flew overhead, trailing silver ash.

“There are... so many of them,” she whispered, her voice lost in the hum of laughter and noise.

“You wouldn’t see this in the Citadel,” came a voice close to her ear.

“They believe magic should be pure. Without... impurities.”

“Magic is impurity, Azara.” He stepped forward, parting the crowd with a single glance. Everyone recognized him — but to her surprise, they didn’t bow or tremble. They nodded quietly, respectfully. Gratefully. “It’s in the blood. In the earth. In your breath. Your Keepers try to castrate it, pack it into rituals. But it always breaks free. Doesn’t it?”

He nodded toward two young half-elves who were launching sparkling bursts of energy into the air by the fountain. Useless. Beautiful.

Her hand shot up instinctively to stop them — then she forced her fingers to relax. She lowered her arm, feeling the spasm inside her fade.

So this is what it could be like.

She was used to magic being a burden. A duty. A weapon. Here, it was simply life.

The locals kept glancing at her. As if they could sense she didn’t deserve to be here. They couldn’t possibly know her, but that didn’t make her feel any less disgusted with herself. The executioner of the ones they loved.

Azara had never taken part in the war directly. She channeled her power from afar. And every time, she felt shame at her role in the nightmare.

A furry hamster with a lizard’s face shot past her. She jumped back, instinctively grabbing Darl’s arm. She felt heat in her palm — and realized she was still holding his hand. His fingers were calloused, rough with old scars.

He pulled back reluctantly — but not before squeezing her hand a little tighter.

“I thought they’d all been destroyed!”

“No. In our city, everyone has the right to exist. To be free.”

Azara tilted her head, narrowing her eyes.

“Even a Keeper from the Citadel?”

Darl shook his head.

“Beasts don’t belong here.”

“So freedom is only for your kind?”

He didn’t answer. His reaction told her she’d touched something much more raw and painful.

In the middle of the square, a blade sharpener was at work — sparks flying in every direction. Children shrieked and dodged, only to dart back in again. Azara couldn’t help but smile.

“We don’t have this,” she said quietly.

“Have what?”

“Children who just play. In the Citadel, discipline is strict. Especially in the orphanage. You’re either a future Keeper or a servant. No time to play.”

He didn’t respond. But when a boy ran past and nearly knocked her off her feet, Darl caught her elbow out of instinct. He only let go when she had steadied herself.

“Thank you,” she said, watching the boy run off.

“It’s nothing.”

The farther they walked, the denser the space between them became. The silence grew tangible. She kept catching his gaze — as if he were trying to decode her. And she... she could feel his magic. It coiled around him like a quiet wake, reminding her of the scent of a thunderstorm.

She had always loved thunderstorms.

“You never asked me why I agreed to stay.”

“Go back to them? Or find out why you felt recognition in that Abyss creature.” He paused. “Azara, you’re looking for answers, even if you’re afraid of the truth. Your magic isn’t ‘pure.’ We both know that. It’s like a scar you wear with pride — forgetting what kind of pain gave it to you.”

Everything that evening felt like a reflection of her own rotten reality. A dream in which she could simply be accepted.

She knew for sure: she couldn't.

They stood there, inches apart, separated by the abyss of their positions. She wanted to step back — but couldn't. He wanted to touch her — but didn't dare.

Then the bell tower struck, announcing the start of the celebration. The sound shattered the moment. They both flinched, and the spell was broken.

"Come on," Darl said, his voice cold and level again. "Let me show you how the Shadows celebrate their right to live."

He handed her a warm cloak.

"It's getting chilly. Put this on."

Did he bring this for me?

Every gesture. Every glance. A thin thread he was weaving around her. This must be how a fly felt before the black spider caught it. But flies didn't ask why the spider wove its web.

When the street performance ended, they left the square. The noise faded into the occasional call of merchants and the laughter of stragglers. Ahead, in the shadow of an old elm, stood a stone fountain — long unused, its basin full of rainwater and floating petals.

Darl stopped first. He leaned back against the rim, pulled something from his pocket — a simple, smooth, sea-worn pebble — and tossed it silently into the water. Ripples spread, breaking the reflections of the three moons.

Azara stood a step away. She didn't know if she could sit, if she could stay, if she could even breathe next to him when he was so... calm.

"Sit," he said without looking. "I won't bite."

The fountain's edge was cold through her dress, but she didn't move. Next to him, it didn't seem to matter.

Somewhere in the distance, a drunken group was singing. A dog barked lazily in response. But here by the fountain, it was quiet. Almost like the sanctuary at night — but without the crushing walls.

"I thought everyone in Antaris just fought and hated."

"We trade — loudly. We fight — when we have to." Darl smirked. "We celebrate... rarely. That's why we value it."

In the half-darkness, his face looked like a stone sculpture — sharp shadows, sharp cheekbones, and only his green eyes alive.

"And you?" she asked. "Do you celebrate?"

He didn't answer at first. He stared into the darkness, at the city lights below. Then he turned to her — and she felt as though he wasn't looking at her face, but at something deeper. Where even she was afraid to look.

"Right now," he said. "I think I do."

Her heart skipped a beat. She dropped her gaze immediately.

They walked back to the tower in silence. Just outside the city, Darl was drawn to a weapons stall and stepped away from her. At that moment, a boy — the same one who had been hovering near her all day — darted up to Azara, shoved a note into her hands, and sprinted toward the gates, disappearing into the streets.

The Citadel is waiting.

She exhaled with relief.

She was still needed.

From the Archivist's notes

*Excessive strictness eats away at the soul faster than any acid.
In its place, a lump of rage grows where the heart used to be.
I could write a textbook about it.
But who needs a manual on how to kill a soul?*

Chapter 5

Azara

Love is a contract in which one side always pays more. I learned to pay first as a child.

She stood in Darl's study, watching him pace slowly, his hands clasped behind his back. His shadow, stretched by the candelabras' light, slid across the walls — alive and condemned to eternal motion.

"Why?" He turned to her. For a moment, his pupils turned vertical.

She'd barely slept since the note. She'd been trying to come up with a reason to go back. She knew they wouldn't hold her by force — it would break the fragile truce. But she didn't doubt they had other ways to make her less needed. Less intact. She didn't want to find out.

"The book," she said, forcing her voice steady. "If the Codex of Silent Pages was once confiscated from the Citadel, that's where we should start looking. You don't have access to our archives. I do."

Her fingers fidgeted with the edge of her sleeve — where the scars hid beneath the fabric. Darl followed the movement and frowned.

There was some truth to it. Not all of it, but enough to sound convincing. In reality, they'd never let her into the restricted sections. Anything concerning the Abyss was forbidden in the Citadel. Especially for her.

The Abyss. She knew almost nothing about it. Only that it was dangerous, that it held ancient creatures that must never be disturbed. And yet, she had seen some of them in the Light's dungeons.

"Let's say I agree." Darl turned sharply to the window. His back was tense. His hands locked behind him. "But you're still needed here, Azara. What guarantee do I have that if you go there, they'll let you come back?"

She'd been right. He didn't say it outright, but his meaning was clear: the Shadows had sunk their roots into her. They had no intention of letting go.

Not a guest. A prisoner.

"You won't go alone."

"I didn't ask for a guard."

"I'm not offering," he said flatly. "It's a condition."

"Then send Kris with me. He'll keep watch."

The Lord's face flickered unnaturally. He turned to face her fully.

"Absolutely not. He can't — "

"I agree."

Kris stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame. His face said he'd heard everything.

"It's about time someone paid that gilded stable a visit."

Something in the way their glances crossed unsettled her. But Azara's mind was already elsewhere. She was going home.

As for Kris — he wasn't a problem. She'd slip away.

"Fine. You'll accompany her. And don't even think about setting foot in the capital."

Kris didn't wait for him to finish. He turned and walked out, muttering his agreement under his breath.

Azara moved to follow, but Darl stopped her.

"Azara. Take this."

He stepped to the oak table and pulled out a scrap of red fabric, holding it out to her.

She took it, studying the coal-black threads woven into serpentine patterns. Without thinking, she brought it to her face and inhaled — smoke and that strange freshness. His scent.

“It’s...”

“So you don’t freeze,” he muttered, turning away. “I hear it’s cold in the Citadel.”

Kris, still in the doorway, twitched his jaw but said nothing. He left.

“I’ll be waiting for you.”

For you. She nodded quickly, tucked the cloth into her bag, and practically fled into the corridor.

The road to the Citadel led through the Black Forest. They’d been riding for days, barely speaking. The silence was growing heavier. Azara leaned close to her horse’s neck, running her hand over its warm skin, whispering meaningless soothing words. Then she pulled up beside Kris and broke the quiet.

“Tell me. Why did you agree?”

“Always sticking your little freckled nose into things that aren’t your business. Try saying thank you instead.” Kris rolled his eyes, but there was no real bite in his voice.

“Thank you. And... I’m sorry about what I said in the garden. I shouldn’t have.”

She’d been carrying that guilt for a while. Now she finally had the chance to say it.

He waved a hand.

“Forget it. Already did. How was your walk?” He tilted his head, his eyes glinting with amusement.

She sometimes caught herself thinking that Kris could be handsome — if it weren’t for the perpetual shadow on his face. A fighter’s build, but without the usual warrior’s roughness. He drew you in like a quiet fire — not burning, just reminding you of warmth.

“Not bad. Is he always like that?” She wet her dry lips and tucked a strand of red hair behind her ear, trying to sound casual.

Kris snorted.

“Like what?”

“You know... quiet.”

“Ah. That.” He shifted in the saddle. “Look, I’ve known him a long time. But sometimes I feel like I know less about him than I did on day one. He’s like the ruins in this forest — from the outside, you think you understand. Then you step inside, and you fall through the floor.”

A pause.

“But if you’re trying to ask whether you like him...”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“Sure it isn’t.”

In the distance, the golden spires of the Citadel appeared. A shiver ran down her spine.

The sunlight burned her eyes after the eternal twilight of the Shadows. She walked along the sterile streets, stepping aside for nobles in expensive clothes. Kris stayed behind at a tavern on the outskirts — she had the uneasy feeling that he’d come under some pretense, that he had his own business here.

Compared to Antaris, everything here felt artificial. No colors, no sounds. Just marble, gold, and statues with empty eyes. It all looked so... dead. No — not dead. Preserved. Like the body in the crypt.

At the sanctuary entrance, they stopped her and contemptuously ordered her to remove her dark dress, giving her a thin cloak instead. She walked across the cold stone, catching glimpses of her reflection in the polished floors — a stranger’s face, a stranger’s body. Everything wrong.

The High Keeper sat by a small altar, his wrinkled hands folded on his chest. His icy eyes fixed on her. He beckoned.

She knelt and touched her lips to the rough fabric of his robes, inhaling the scent of age and death. She squeezed her eyes shut.

Just do it. Don't think. Do it.

"How are you, child? We were beginning to worry." His voice echoed off the walls — sterile. Flat.

"The Keeper... won't she be coming?"

He just shook his head. Azara continued:

"I was injured. The Lord offered to help. I found information there about a book. I think it might hold answers about people like me. About the nature of my powers. Finally, we could understand — and use them."

"Thinking isn't your concern."

The old man reached out and ran his fingers through her copper hair. Then he tightened his grip, lifting her chin. She shuddered but swallowed it down. She knew: beneath that decrepit shell was a force that could snap her spine with a single movement.

"You didn't show them your abilities, did you?"

Flaws.

The skin on her forehead burned with the tension, but she managed to shake her head.

"The book. What's it called?"

"The Codex of Silent Pag — "

She didn't finish. The Keeper half-rose, his face contorting briefly before returning to its practiced calm.

"You must find it first. Remember: the Abyss is our ruin. There's nothing of the Light in it. As for the book... we'll destroy it."

His words hung in the sterile air, drowned only by the cloying scent of incense.

Azara fought down a wave of nausea. She sat frozen.

Destroy. Not the book — me. Erase me. Burn me. There's nothing of the Light in me.

"If you fail," he said, trailing a finger lightly across her cheek, "we'll have to visit them ourselves. I've never been to Antaris. I wonder what it's like there... markets, schools, perhaps. But you'll manage, won't you, sunshine?"

She nodded without thinking. And immediately felt sick — as if another blow might tear her heart through her ribs.

Then he raised his hand. Slowly. Almost like a blessing. His fingers touched her crown and traced a heavy, smooth path from her forehead to the back of her head. The gesture people use to pat a trained animal after it obeys.

She bowed, touched her lips to the hem of his robe, stood, and turned toward the door. She had to leave. Get away from the smell of burnt herbs.

"And as for your companion... he's in our dungeon."

Azara froze.

"Kristian Marris attacked a nobleman in a tavern. Honestly, I'm surprised he dared show his face in the city after seducing the king's daughter and running off with her."

The king's daughter? She'd never heard that. The name Avalita flashed through her mind.

"He knows where the book might be," Azara said. "Without him, we won't find it."

A lie. But she didn't want to leave him there. Not for a second.

The Keeper narrowed his eyes.

"Defending the enemy?"

"A tool."

He smirked and nodded.

"Take him. He's lucky the guards haven't reported this to the king yet."

She bowed again and left — but at the door, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand in disgust.

Somewhere deep inside, buried beneath layers of duty, something feral stirred and growled. She slowed her step, afraid to show it.

The stairs to the dungeon seemed endless, reeking of iron and damp. It smelled the same as that place in her childhood — the first time she'd been locked in a dark room.

She kept walking, but her mind was trapped in a single memory. The first time her power had shown itself.

A little girl at dinner, saying out loud: *There's no good or evil. They're just two sides of the same coin.*

Varit — a curly-haired boy — ran and told the elders. Their punishment: the black room. Alone. Crying in the dark.

Then something moved in the ceiling corner. At first, just a scratching sound. Then it descended — leg by leg, each joint clicking. When it unfolded, she saw it: a huge, wiry thing with chitinous pincers, watching her with two pairs of bottomless eyes. Its body slick with slime.

She screamed. Beat the locked door. Begged.

Behind it, Varit and the other orphans laughed.

Finally, she crawled into the corner, covered her head, and decided: *If I can't see them, they can't see me.*

Then it touched her.

The flat, warm surface of its claw.

She looked up. It wasn't attacking. It seemed to be trying to comfort her. Trembling, she reached out and touched its furry face.

The door burst open. Varit stood there.

"Why so quiet, little beast?"

She didn't have time to react. The thing lunged — tore his face open. A Keeper appeared. It turned toward him.

"Stop! Don't touch him!"

It obeyed. And paid with its life.

Azara blinked, shaking off the vision. The creature hadn't meant any harm. It was only protecting her.

Just as she was now — going to protect Kris. Even though she barely understood why.

"Here to stare? Or are you going to help?"

Kris sat on the stone floor, pressing a bloody rag to his lip. His face was bruised and scraped — but his knuckles were clean.

"Did they beat you?"

"Welcomed me. Reminded me who I am."

"Get up. We're leaving."

The walls were closing in. Her mind was swimming.

She grabbed his arm and hauled him to his feet. Shadows writhed in the corners — or was it the Abyss pulsing in time with her heart? A low, insistent call rose inside her.

She squeezed her eyes shut and dug her nails into her palm. Kris asked nothing. Just nodded toward the exit.

"Let's hurry."

On the road back, she finally let herself breathe.

"You didn't tell me Avalita is the king's daughter. That would have been useful to know before we started trying to save her."

"Did you ask?" He looked away.

"No one in the Citadel even knows the king had a daughter."

“Has,” he corrected. “Not had. Has. He disowned her like a leper. Smolder could have taken her back. Sent an army. Burned our borders. But no. He just crossed her out like a mistake in a scroll. Honor, to him, isn’t saving his daughter. It’s saving face. And now she’s there, in that crypt. Neither alive nor dead.”

“Why did you love her?” Azara asked. “Because she gave up her people for you? Because she sacrificed herself? For what, exactly?”

“Azara... you don’t love someone for a reason.” He paused. “Avalita is my Zalimema.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“There’s this flower,” he said, not looking at her. “It grows in the mountains, where ice turns to lava. They say it blooms only once every few thousand years — on the night when the three moons align. Silver petals with crimson veins, like blood running through them. And at its center, light trapped like crystal.”

He was quiet for a moment, running a hand over his face.

“Many hunt for that flower. But when you get close — when you reach out, when you breathe its scent — you die in agony. The petals release a poison with no antidote. It stops your heart. And you feel everything. Right up to the last second. How your body betrays you. How your lungs stop. How the world shrinks to one question: why did I come so close?”

His silver eyes burned. She caught her breath.

“I breathed that poison,” he said. “And I don’t regret it. Because she’s worth dying for.”

Is that even possible?

She looked at him — bruised, broken, still fighting for the right to exist. Something stirred inside her. The same feeling she’d had when the creature touched her hand. In the black room. And on the clearing.

“I’ll help you,” she said. Surprising even herself.

“You’re... serious?”

Instead of answering, she reached out and squeezed his trembling fingers. He squeezed back.

“This is strange.”

“What is?”

“They let me in without questions. Without checks. Like they were expecting me. That’s not how they work.”

Azara frowned, remembering her own cold audience.

“And they let me out too easily. Maybe because I was the one who asked.”

“Could be. Maybe her daddy finally came to his senses.” Kris laughed — but it sounded forced.

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