

The Girl of Light and the Boy of Shadow

She had only ever seen him once, years before she had been enlisted to kill him, and to a child of Seraphina's age, that was certainly enough. Hiding behind her mother's legs, she had been surveying the hall around her. Bright images painted the walls, each jumping out to her in vibrant shades of every color imaginable. Before Seraphina could begin to comprehend the artistry, as much as she could at seven, a man hurried her and her mother into the banquet hall.

"I will *not* be rushed. Do you understand?" Her mother, Lunelle, gracious goddess of light, coldly turned around to see the man who had nudged them into the room, but he was gone, vanished to parts unknown. Seraphina looked around yet again, now exposed to the eyes that roved over her as if she were a prized pig.

The girl retreated to the safety of her mother, latching onto her legs while her eyes filled with tears. "No time for that," her mother whispered. Always so curt, so matter of fact. In her mother's world of light, there was no room for imperfection.

The door suddenly burst open, and a tall man stepped inside, sending the room into a blanket of cascading shadow. Seraphina looked to her mother, a glowing beacon in the darkness. The guests went silent, their eyes falling on a small figure holding onto the hand of the man cloaked in shadow.

It was a boy, no more than a year or two older than Seraphina herself. The child, with his golden hair and soft features, stood out like a sore thumb next to the brooding man who had cast the banquet hall in darkness. Tendrils of inky black smoke curled out from the boy's feet. He shivered underneath the stares of the crowd, but the boy stood tall, despite the evident terror in his eyes.

Their eyes met, linked by some unknown premonition for their future. Seraphina knew then that she would be stuck with this boy, whether she liked it or not. And she certainly did *not* like it. As much as her mother, with her impossible expectations, scared Seraphina when she allowed herself to admit it, the darkness was a different story entirely. It *terrified* her. Katerina had been taken in darkness, and in darkness her life had been snuffed out.

Although she was young, Seraphina understood the gravity of Katerina's death well enough. Her mother, Azalea, the usually reserved goddess of passion, had completely changed in the wake of her daughter's murder. Where she once embodied the softer sides of her namesake, she was now colder, calculatedly cruel.

Still, Seraphina had heard her sobbing once, when she had shown up unexpectedly one night at Seraphina's home, the Light Citadel. Her mother had told her to go to bed, and Seraphina had surreptitiously disobeyed, wanting to eavesdrop on what her mother claimed was "adult business."

And, even though she was fully aware that the man and his son before her had nothing to do with it, Seraphina still blamed them wholeheartedly. Had his father not been so focused on fighting with her mother, then maybe Katerina would still be alive.

Azalea's absence from the event was not lost on Seraphina. The giant, gaping hole left in her wake had been hastily filled by her second eldest daughter, Daphne, just four. She fiercely held onto the hand of Azalea's wife, Selene. Seraphina wondered if the little girl understood the weight she now had to carry, not dissimilar to the expectations she now had to uphold.

"Well... that's one way to make an entrance, Cyrus." Lunelle turned her full attention to the man and his son, stepping towards them in swift, graceful movements.

You do know it's *my* daughter's betrothal, too?" Her words broke through the silence that had encapsulated the space. She thrust her arms out in either direction, palms up. Light shot from her fingertips, returning the room to its former pale, rosy glow.

"I don't have the energy for your bickering, Lunelle. Let's just get this done so I can return home with my son. You've already taken so much from us, please don't take any more of the time I have left with him." The shadow of a man spoke gruffly, wheezing out the words with much effort.

"What's wrong with him? Is he sick?" Seraphina whispered to her friend, Dimitris, who had taken up the space next to her where her mother had been just moments before.

"He's dying," he whispered back. "I heard my dad saying one of his mortal attendants poisoned him!" Then Dimitris added, "And *I* heard there is no cure."

Seraphina gasped, returning her attention back to the scene before her. Little things started to make sense. The way the man hunched over slightly as he spoke; the tired look in his eyes. But how could one of the most powerful deities among the original eight be taken down by a little poison?

She guessed the same could be said for Katerina. Though she was so young, she was still a goddess, and from a powerful line at that. Maybe that was what had scared the original pantheon so badly. Not the death of Katerina herself or Cyrus' poisoning... but what they stood for. That not only could some of the most powerful beings in all of creation be killed, but killed by none other than the frail mortals who were supposed to unquestioningly worship them at their feet.

The man and her mother were still speaking, but now in hushed, low tones. His eyes suddenly went wide, and he pulled back from Seraphina's mother. Lunelle grinned, clearly

satisfied with whatever she had said to get him so rattled. “You wouldn’t...” rasped the man known as Cyrus.

He shook his head, then sighed and flicked his wrist. Almost as quickly as it had come, the remaining darkness that was scattered along the floor disappeared completely, consumed by his form and that of his son’s.

Lunelle stepped in front of Cyrus; a defeated look plastered across his face. An eerie smile contorted her mother’s features as she grinned, “Alright, everyone! Who’s ready for this betrothal?”

Walking along the hall now at the age of twenty-two, the pictures on the walls meant much more to Seraphina as she ran her fingers across them. They were no longer just a series of murals filled with vibrant colors as she had seen before. Now, they told a story. A story that had haunted Seraphina for nearly all her life...

Amid the chaos of the ancient wars, there were eight. Eight original gods and goddesses who rose above the rest and were now to whom all other deities were ruled. Each stood for a natural phenomenon, constantly at war with its fundamental opposite; for when one rose, the other had to follow. There was life and death, light and darkness, order and chaos, and of course, passion and hatred.

The omnipotent eight were fickle during that age of darkness, constantly at war with each other, leaving nothing but ash and rubble in their paths. As if in punishment for their actions, the world began to die, rotting away with each battle that unfolded. The people of the world cried out, begging for the leaders to whom they prayed, day in and day out, to help end their suffering.

After their calls were left unanswered, the people withheld offerings from their deities, refusing to worship until the bloodshed had ceased. When their attempts yet again failed, the people stole the heir to the throne of passion, whisking her away to the mortal world down below amid the darkness of night. The child, Katerina, unable to fight back, was murdered with an ancestral blade.

In the aftermath of Katerina's death, Azalea led a strike, swift and ruinous. In the goddess of passion's rampage, grief-stricken over the loss of her daughter, millions were murdered and reduced to embers.

Finally seeing the violence that had been wrought due to their carelessness, a truce was drawn, and a marriage arranged. The children of the most powerful fundamental opposites, light and darkness, were then destined to be wed once they came of age, bringing the two ruling houses together at long last after centuries of animosity and ending the bloodshed once and for all.

The hatred that Seraphina had once felt for the boy and his father had changed throughout the years. She had blamed them for Katerina's death, and though the boy had only been a child as much as she was during that time, she had blamed him, too. In the years following her betrothal, however, she had realized that it was stupid to do such a thing without expecting equal weight to be placed upon her mother and the rest of the original eight. They had *all* failed Katerina. Every last one of them.

Now she hated this boy of shadow for a different reason entirely. This marriage meant the end of her life as she knew it. No longer would she be able to roam the hills during the springtime or walk disguised among the small humans who worshipped her. She could forget about her lofty dreams of traversing the innermost corners of the world, free of her godly duties

for just one moment. She was now expected to be a dutiful wife and ruler alongside the omnipotent shadow-God himself, which, to Seraphina, was basically a death sentence.

“Kill him.” Her mother’s words echoed in her head. They had been spoken in passing months prior, Seraphina’s mother’s face slightly grazing hers as she bent to whisper them to her daughter. To anyone else, the idea would have come as a shock. A goddess of light, revered for her merciful actions in the wake of Katerina’s death, had just told her very own daughter to kill her betrothed. Seraphina, however, knew better. Her mother was flawless, *too* flawless. She would never allow her daughter to be cast away to some kingdom of eternal darkness. It would hurt her image.

But breaking the betrothal would certainly send the world into chaos, leading to nothing more than complete and total annihilation of everything the original eight, along with the remaining humans scattered across the globe, held dear. So, then what was the next best thing? Follow through, and when the time was right... stab him in the heart.

Though Seraphina didn’t think of herself as prone to violence, she also couldn’t fathom the idea of marrying such a brute as those who came from the family of darkness. Seraphina felt she could play the grieving widow part well enough. She’d put on a show of perfection practically her entire life. And she’d heard the stories surrounding the god of darkness, time and time again. And yet, Seraphina couldn’t shake that look the boy, who was soon to be her husband, had given her all those years ago.

A voice spoke up behind her, suddenly snapping her back to reality. Seraphina realized her fingers were brushing along the final image of the mural along the length of the hallway. There she stood, face to face with a figure bathed in light, its hands clasped together with another cloaked in shadow.

“You should be getting ready.” Dimitris stepped closer, resting a cold hand on her shoulder. “You know your mother keeps a tight schedule.”

Seraphina turned, facing her oldest friend for what might be the last time before she was to be locked away in darkness. A tear slipped down her cheek, and Seraphina was immediately embarrassed, but more tears began to fall anyway.

Dimitris placed his thumb on the side of her face, wiping them away. “No time for tears. It will all turn out well, I promise.” Seraphina had always liked the way Dimitris spoke. So proper, she’d say when they were children. It made sense, given his upbringing in the world of order. Why he had ever decided to be her friend, she who could barely keep herself together long enough to fool her mother, Seraphina hadn’t the slightest clue.

“I’m alright. I promise.” She was lying, and not doing a very good job at it. Seraphina paused, a quick, honest anger filling inside of her. “No, I’m *not* alright. I’m done pretending like everything is fine. I may never see you again, see *any* of them again! How is that fair?” More tears were escaping now, hot and burning.

“This is not the end, I’ll make sure of that,” Dimitris said, ever the levelheaded peacemaker. He quickly added, “Plus, a puffy face is never good for a wedding.”

Seraphina gave him a half-hearted attempt at a smile. “Thank you,” she whispered. She needed to pull herself back to the present, and quickly. If her mother saw her like this...

A little girl suddenly ran past her, carrying a wiggling furry ball in her arms. “Helena!” Seraphina called after her sister. After being ignored completely, she thrust her hands upward, mimicking a form her mother had used all too often growing up. Just as she had seen Cyrus, lord of darkness, consume the shadows that he cast out, Seraphina did the same. She sucked the light out of the room, sending the hallway into a pitch blackness that stopped Helena in her tracks.

“Please! I just need to get her out!” The girl’s voice could be heard in the darkness, panicked and breathless.

At her sister’s insistence, Seraphina allowed the light back into the room. When her eyes refocused, she saw Helena, now turned towards her. She clutched a grey rabbit to her chest. “Did you steal that from the kitchen?” Asked Seraphina.

“They were going to kill her!” Exclaimed a distressed Helena.

Dimitris stifled a laugh, which was met by a disapproving glare from Seraphina.

She met her little sister in the middle of the hallway and kneeled so that they were more eye level. “You know if mother catches you...”

“I know. I just couldn’t let them hurt her.” She wouldn’t look Seraphina fully in the eyes. She’d always been a little hero, but this was different. Now that she thought about it, her sister had been acting differently in the last few weeks.

“Are you sure this is about the rabbit?” Seraphina asked inquisitively.

Helena sniffled.

“Helena? I’m serious. Is this about mother? Has she been hard on you again?” She placed her hands on her sister’s shoulders, hoping that would get her to calm down and open up.

“I don’t want him to take you,” Helena mumbled.

Oh. Seraphina was stunned for a moment. She'd been so consumed by how she was feeling that not once had she considered that Helena would be feeling much of the same things. She was just a child, after all.

She pulled Helena towards her, encasing her little sister in a tight embrace. The words Seraphina said next were soft, barely audible above the beating of her own heart. “He won’t take me away, I promise you.”

A crash around the corner broke up the moment. “Hurry. It might be mother.” Seraphina shooed Helena away, allowing her an escape with the rabbit still in her small hands.

Helena nodded, determination lighting behind her eyes. She turned and sprinted down the hallway.

“Make sure she doesn’t get caught, Dimitris.” Seraphina whispered as Helena disappeared around the corner and out of her line of sight.

Dimitris dipped his head, and soon he was gone too.

Seraphina returned to the final panel of the mural, inexplicably drawn to it. She steeled herself, a decision now planted firmly in her chest. She would kill her new husband, if not just for herself, but also for Helena. For Katerina. For all the little girls who had ever felt helpless at the hands of a powerful man.

Someone rushed past her, nearly knocking Seraphina over. “Hey!” She yelled down the hallway, but the attendant picked up his pace instead.

“Okay, wait. I’m sorry, alright? I promise I won’t tell my mother!” Seraphina tried again, hoping her words would alleviate the situation. *There goes making friends on your last day of freedom.* The man was running now, nearly at the end of the hallway. Seraphina, hoping for one last adventure, even if it was this mundane, started running to catch up.

The man took a few turns and, unable to shake Seraphina, burst through the doors that led from the servant hall out into the massive garden that surrounded almost the entirety of the god of life’s ornate palace. He jumped into a collection of neatly sculpted, geometric bushes. A loud rustle of leaves erupted from where he had landed, making his hiding spot incredibly easy to find.

“I promise I’m not going to hurt you,” said Seraphina, trying to catch a glimpse of the odd man who had just jumped into the bushes for reasons unknown.

“I’m sorry, your godliness. I shouldn't have run into you.” His voice was deep, almost as if he was trying to conceal what he actually sounded like.

“It's okay, trust me.” Seraphina paused, hoping that would suffice, then quickly added, “Why are you in the bushes?”

“Um. I... I’m hideous. Yes, that’s it. I’m a hideous creature who is only allowed in the servant's quarters, but I just couldn't help myself and had to explore.” The man in the bushes sniffled dramatically, then sighed, “Now look where *that* got me.”

Seraphina giggled. She soon realized that was the first time she had truly smiled in weeks. “What brings you to the palace?” She asked. Silence greeted her in response,

“Oh... Right. The wedding, of course. How could I forget?” In all the excitement, Seraphina had let herself get caught up in the chase and slightly odd conversation rather than her impending doom.

“Especially since it is *your* wedding after all.” The man finally responded, dropping the facade in favor of his real, lighter voice. It sounded familiar, though Seraphina couldn't seem to place it.

“Yes. You are... Wait, how do you know that I’m the bride?” Seraphina had been sequestered away from the mortal world since she was betrothed, her parents fearful that something would happen to her before she became of age. Aside from occasional moments of sneaking out into the mortal world under disguise, Seraphina was effectively god-homebound for a majority of her life. Today had been the first day she was officially allowed around mortals in ages. How would a mortal attendant know what she looked like?

A sound escaped the man's lips, then he sputtered. "The servants talk!"

The continued mention of her fast-approaching wedding caused the air in her lungs to hitch in her throat. The sun was quickly setting, and at dusk, she would be wed.

Sensing a shift in the atmosphere, the man said, "You... don't sound too excited for the wedding of the century. How come?"

"It's nothing. Just my life is over and all." At Seraphina's words, a surprised sound could be heard from the bushes. Seraphina wished she could take it back. She shouldn't have been telling her woes to a random mortal hiding in the garden, but what she'd said was the truth. Her life was irrevocably over.

"If it makes you feel any better, your godliness, I'm not having the greatest day either." There was a tenderness in the man's voice, like he truly wanted to comfort her rather than placate the goddess who could destroy his life within minutes.

The change in subject pleased Seraphina greatly, easing some of the tension that had been building inside of her. "How so?" She countered.

"Oh, well. You see, your godliness, I seem to have lost my shoe somewhere in this bush." A rustle, and a shoe suddenly came shooting out of the bush and across the garden.

Seraphina doubled over, laughing uncontrollably, and chuckles could be heard from inside the bush as well. "You are *interesting*, you know that?"

"I try my best," he responded. Though Seraphina couldn't see the mystery attendant's face, she could visualize the satisfied smile that was surely spreading across his features.

Seraphina blinked, the memory of the man's voice suddenly rushing back to her. "You!" She shouted, incredulous. "From the village!"

Silence greeted her.

“I know it's you. Don't try to lie to me now. I'm not going to be fooled so easily.”

Seraphina took a step towards the bush.

Last week, on a day when she was feeling more despair than usual over her upcoming wedding, Seraphina had escaped to the mortal world, disguising herself. In a small village, sequestered far away from the hustle and bustle of civilization, she'd met a man with high cheekbones and auburn hair. Under the cover of night, they'd bonded over their loneliness and of the things in their lives that couldn't be controlled.

A nervous sigh could be heard from the bushes. “You must be mistaken, your godliness.”

“You really helped me, you know. I considered running away that night, but you helped me realize I could take control of my fate instead of just running away from it.” Seraphina reached her hand into the bushes. Soft fingers grazed hers, ever so slightly.

A woman suddenly came rushing out into the garden. She had sweat dripping down her forehead as she exclaimed, “Miss Seraphina! You must come inside at once so we can dress you for the ceremony.”

The woman was Seraphina's lady's maid, a lower-tiered goddess who had been caring for her since she was a child. She quickly ushered Seraphina inside, leaving the man in the bushes behind her for good.

Getting ready for the wedding was excruciating. The attendants kept pushing and pulling on just about every part of Seraphina, from weaving flowers into her dark hair to tying her up in her white gown of crystals. Per tradition, she would wear the color of her godly line. White, for her mother Lunelle's blinding light.

Soon, it was time to walk down the aisle. Seraphina took a breath, preparing for the worst. Then... she saw him. At the end of the room, eyes on her, was the boy from the betrothal.

He was much taller now and took after his mother, broader shoulders and thicker set. His height certainly came from his father, though he still had the same blonde hair and soft features as before.

Seraphina thought she must have blacked out, because all of a sudden, she was at the altar, standing beside him. She had learned long ago that his name was Elijah, and long ago she had decided that she hated him. Now she had an updated face to pair with the name.

The god of life officiated the ceremony, droning on about how his inclusion signified a lifelong truce through the couple's commitment to each other. Seraphina had always thought he was a bore, but now his talking unsettled her. She began to go through the motions, repeating phrases when asked. She couldn't stop thinking of the knife hidden underneath her dress.

A familiar voice broke through Seraphina's thoughts, causing her to whip her head around in surprise. The voice of her soon-to-be husband, whom she *thought* she had only ever met once, was eerily the same as the mystery attendant from the garden, and in turn, the man from her disguised night in the village.

He stood still, either not realizing that she knew or choosing to ignore her reaction entirely. The "I do's" were said, and Seraphina bowed her head, as was tradition among the gods. Elijah followed suit. As they walked back down the aisle, now side by side, a shocked and all-around irritated Seraphina whispered, "Hideous, really? What is wrong with you?"

Elijah's face turned red, but he again decided not to face her, opting for a general sweep of the room instead. The pair parted soon after exiting the room, and Seraphina was left with her swirling thoughts yet again.

Travelling to her new home, or more accurately, her new *prison cell*, took only a few hours to complete. The final ceremony would be held there, in the shadowy throne room

Seraphina had only seen in her nightmares. Throughout the journey, Seraphina's head was spinning. *How could that man be the boy she had met all those years ago?*

Once they arrived, Seraphina was rushed into a dark bedroom. A man was already inside, standing with his back turned towards her. It was *him*. Seraphina went numb, every inch of her body tingling. Her fingers itched for the knife she had strapped to her leg. *For Katerina. For Helena... for me*, she thought. She slowly ran her hand through the slit she had cut inside of her dress's pocket earlier in the evening when her lady's maid wasn't looking. She eventually reached the knife and slipped it into her palm.

Seraphina quietly approached the man before her. She raised her hand high, preparing to strike him in the back with her divine weapon, driving it straight through to his heart. He was now so many things to her, and soon he would be none. Her husband, the silent boy from their betrothal, the auburn-haired man she met in the village, the attendant from the garden....

He turned, grabbing onto her wrist, the knife in Seraphina's grasp clattering to the floor. Elijah jutted his foot out for good measure, sending the weapon skittering across the wooden floorboards. "I don't want to hurt you," he whispered, an air of melancholy in his voice.

Was he... *sad*? No, that couldn't be it. This man was the heir to the most powerful darkness imaginable, the kind that consumed everything in its wake. He was supposed to be emotionless; that was what Seraphina had been told. And yet, he wasn't, at least not when she had spoken with him in the garden earlier. Or, come to think of it, when she'd embarrassed him at the altar.

"Please, help me," he said softly.

"Why did you lie to me? Why did you hide?" Seraphina wanted to ask him a million questions, but those were the only two that escaped her lips.

Before he could answer, Seraphina suddenly noticed something sticking out of Elijah's pocket. It was the obsidian-colored hilt of a knife, not dissimilar to hers that he had just set flying across the room. She stumbled back, knocking the room's contents over in the process.

At her look of terror, Elijah seemed utterly dumbfounded. He then noticed where she was looking, and his eyes grew wide. "OH! I didn't... I'm not. At least, not now." He stopped rambling for a moment and heaved a sigh, "Wow Elijah. Nice going there."

Elijah took a step forward. Seraphina matched it with another step back. He held his hands up, reached into his pocket for the knife, a wicked, jagged blade, and threw it behind him. Elijah didn't bother to see where it went, allowing Seraphina to watch the knife land underneath the armoire next to the bed.

He's wanting me to trust him, thought Seraphina. That caused her to take pause. Maybe he really was serious about all of this.

"It seems both our mothers had the same idea, huh?" Elijah awkwardly chuckled after his comment was met with silence. At least Seraphina had decided to stop backing away from him, though she remained firmly rooted in place a good distance apart. "If it's any consolation," he shifted uncomfortably, "at all. And I mean at *all*. I hadn't really convinced myself to go through with it, even though my mother was pushing."

Elijah looked down at the ground, running his fingers through his honey blonde hair, clearly realizing that what he had said had *not* made things better. "I'm sorry. I'm not good at, well, people. My mom kept me pretty locked up once dad died."

He quickly added on, as if he couldn't stop his words from coming out of his mouth. "I wasn't really the greatest before, though, come to think of it." A sheepish look flashed across Elijah's face.

At least stunted social skills were something they had in common. Seraphina smiled, easing some of the pressure within the room. “Okay,” said Elijah. “What I meant to say was that everything changed when I met you in that village. I knew then that I couldn’t go through with it. And then today, I just... I had to see you. Is that, well, odd?” He rubbed a hand along the back of his neck, and Seraphina could see that Elijah's ears were turning pink.

“It’s not weird,” Seraphina said awkwardly. She understood where he was coming from. She *had* just tried to kill him mere moments ago, but their conversation had made her question herself. “Can I ask where this is going?” She was starting to get a little impatient. Their families would be gathering in the throne room by now.

“Right,” Elijah bobbed his head, his expression turning serious. “This isn’t right, and you know it. Neither of us should have ever been promised to each other, and you shouldn’t have had to feel like you needed to kill me to escape it.” Elijah shuddered at the word *promised*, as if he had grown up feeling that same hopelessness that Seraphina had been blaming him for.

Now *that* took Seraphina by surprise. She wanted to refuse him. To go back to her life, even if it was seeming more and more like a gilded cage, as she reminisced on all she had missed out on throughout her childhood. But another part of her, the little part that still had hope, wanted to believe Elijah was trying to help them both.

“What do we do about it, then?” Seraphina took a few steps forward. She looked up at the man who was now her husband, whom she had despised for nearly all her life, but now was maybe her only shot at freedom.

“Let’s show them that they don’t own us. Whatever happens next, that’s for us to decide. Deal?” Elijah held out his hand; a look of resolve plastered across his face.

“Deal,” said Seraphina. She laced their fingers together, leaving the room united. *It's now or never*, she thought to herself.

When the pair arrived at the throne room, hand in hand, a hush fell over the crowd. Both families seemed utterly shocked that Seraphina and Elijah were still alive and well. “I guess they had the same idea, too, huh?” Seraphina whispered, copying what Elijah had said to her in his failed attempt at normalcy. Elijah coughed, trying to hide his smile from the people assembled before them.

Seraphina refused to look in her mother's direction as she passed by. *Not now*, she thought. She wanted to face her at the front of the room, declaring once and for all that she wasn't some pawn to be used in her mother's game of perfection. But, there were certainly signs. Her mother's all-encompassing light, for the first time, flickered at the sight of her daughter. The room dimmed for just a moment, but Lunelle shook her head, returning the room back to normal.

Once Seraphina and Elijah reached the end of their procession, they turned, holding their hands up for all to see. “From this day forward,” said Elijah.

“The worlds of light and dark are one,” finished Seraphina. Then, to Seraphina's utter surprise, Elijah added, “For Katerina.”

The room, which had remained rather quiet up until that point, stirred. They loudly called back, “For Katerina!”

Seraphina was stunned. Everything about him, from the clumsy way he acted to his honoring of passion's lost heir, all went against what she had ever thought he would be. Lunelle seemed rather stunned as well, and when her eyes met with Seraphina's, a quiet understanding passed between them.

Elijah gestured towards the two dark thrones that awaited them. He helped Seraphina up the steps into her own, then settled into his. *For Katerina.*