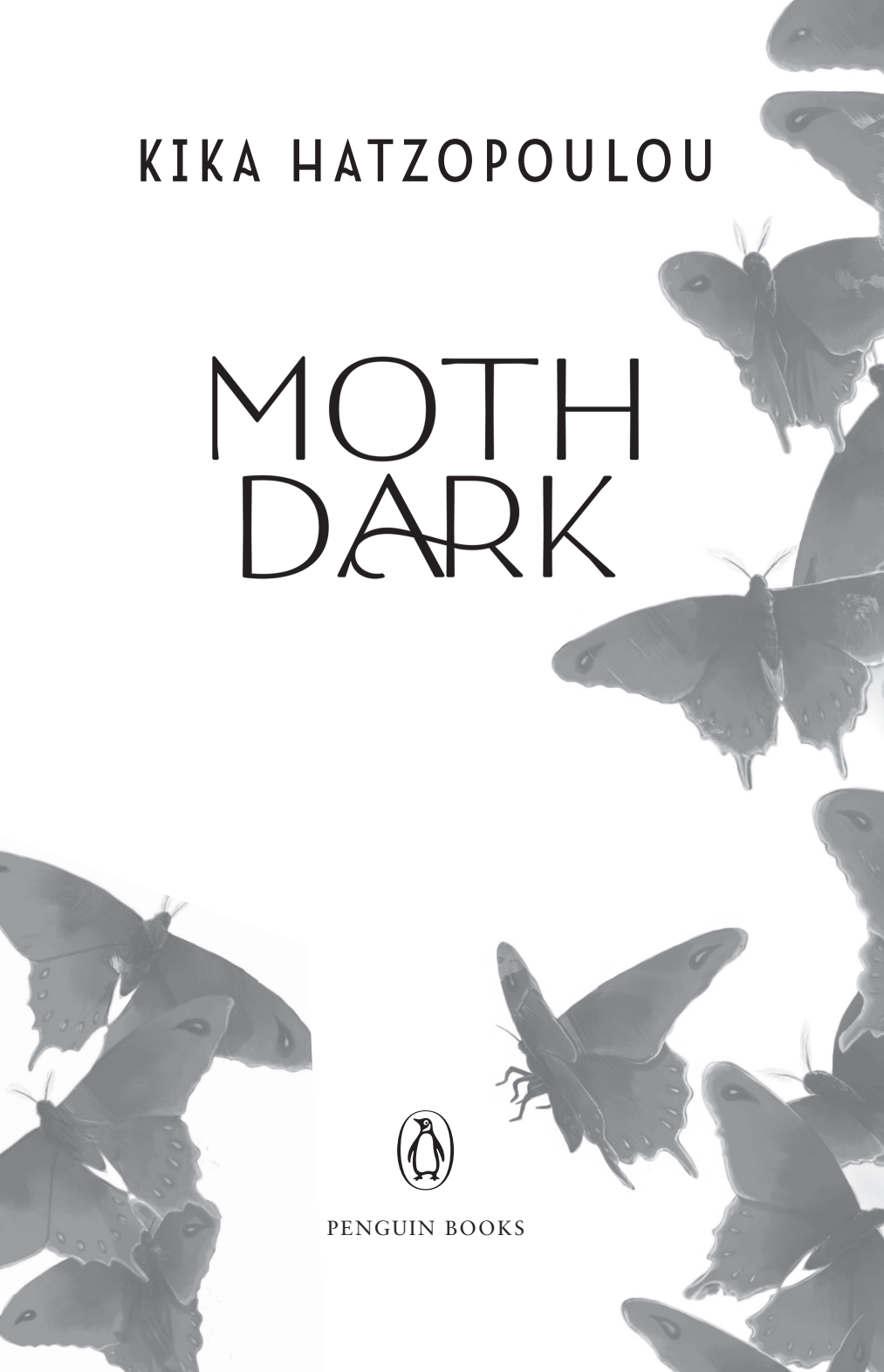
KIKA HATZOPOULOU

MOTH DARK



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Threads That Bind

Hearts That Cut

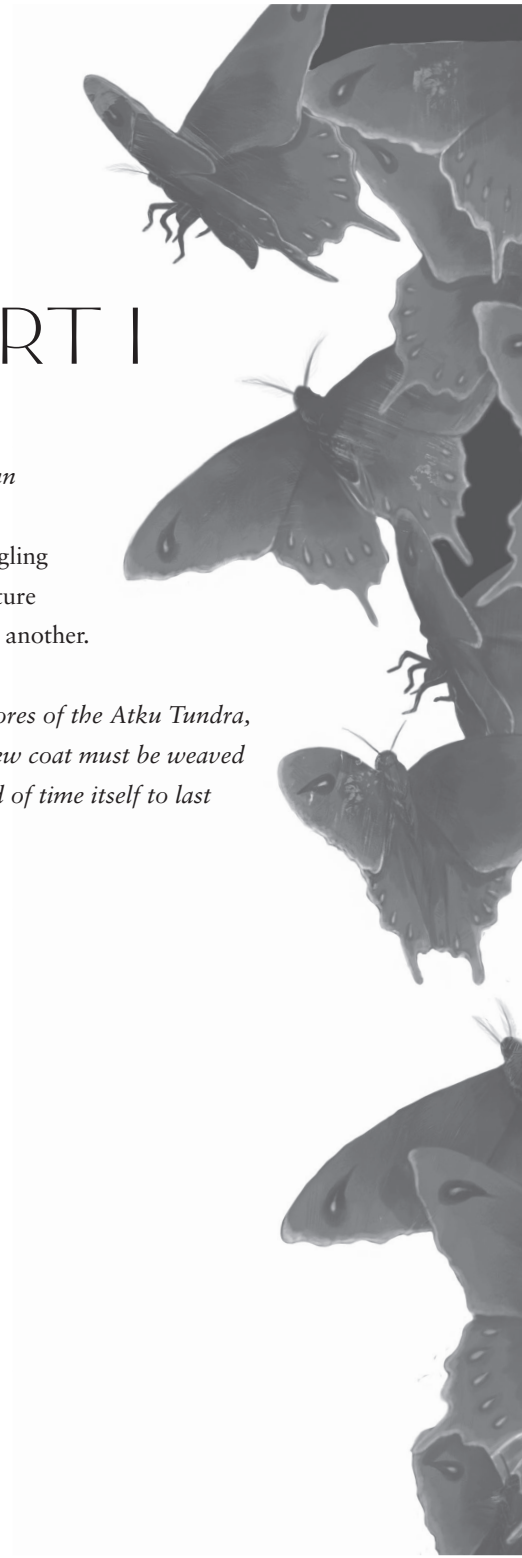


PART I

ymneen (eem·neen) *noun*

knotted time; the entangling
of past, present, and future
between one world and another.

Archaic; from the folklores of the Atku Tundra, where it is believed a new coat must be weaved through with the thread of time itself to last the winter.



1

THE MAW

The Maw opens up between West 18th and 24th Streets, smack in the middle of Manhattan, a giant collapse sinkhole nearly half a mile across, its black so absolute it devours whatever preconceptions you might have had about darkness in one bone-snapping gnash. Nova-lights hang in a concentric ring on the concrete barrier, like a giant chalk line in an old-timey crime movie.

The body: the Maw.

The crime: existing.

On the observation deck at 21st Street, Sascia leans on the rail and watches today's visitors. There are the overeager tourists, pressing against the reinforced glass, smiling at their phone cameras. There are the kids, dashing about in Darkbeast masks. There are the tour guides and security guards droning precautions. If you pay close attention, you'll notice the gazes of this last group, the professionals, are carefully avoidant of what lies inside the barrier.

Sascia first noticed the feeling on her third day giving tours of the Maw six months ago. A sensation along her spine, a muted hiss in her ears. The instinct to just *bolt*. It was one of the security guards who put a name to it, after he noticed Sascia's hunched shoulders. *Feels like something's breathing down there, don't it?*

A monster in the darkness, lurking in anticipation.

But to Sascia, the Maw is far more than a crime to be feared. *Get your life together*, her dad had said after their massive blowout when it became evident Sascia was squandering her once-in-a-lifetime opportunity at an Ivy League education. Except Sascia's life *was* the Dark, and that wasn't socially acceptable, so she settled for the next best thing: running exclusive tours of the New York Darkworld to pay for her ridiculous remedial courses and ridiculous SAT retakes. The Maw is, in a way, her second chance.

"Its scientific name is NY18 Sinkhole," she says now to her latest client, launching into her familiar monologue, "but people call it the Maw, after that viral footage, you know, of the delivery guy on his scooter, racing away from the emerging Dark."

"Yeah," her client says, and dutifully quotes, "*Everything's disappearing into it—like it's a damn maw.*"

Yvonne Coleman-Zhao is from Chicago, a first-year student at Juilliard, a violinist or cellist or something, and she's never seen the Maw before. Her eyes are big and unblinking, her body tense; she refuses to step any closer than necessary. (Chicago might have the occasional runaway Darkbeast, but it does not have a Maw.)

"The Pit of Shanghai is bigger, of course," Sascia recites, "and xenoscientists—scientists who study the Dark—believe there are cracks in the deep ocean that dwarf the ones on land, but, yeah, the Maw of Manhattan is catalogued as the second-largest host of Dark in the world. It is home to a number of monstrosities, as you can see." She gestures at the talon marks on the concrete barrier surrounding the Maw. "As you surely know, there are no humanoids in the world where the Dark comes from, but there's plenty of Darkcreatures, something akin to our own animals, and a few Darkbeasts, ranging in size from an elephant to Godzilla-level giants. Fortunately, no Darkbeasts have managed to burst out of the Maw in five years, since the Blackout. If something big

is crawling through the Dark, movement sensors at the lowest ring of the barrier automatically turn on lights fortified with nova energy to the highest brightness and release light bombs to send the beast scuttling back."

Sascia pauses, because this is the point where most of her clients need to pose the question. Right on cue, Yvonne asks, "Does that happen often?"

"In New York? It happens three, four times a year." Her breezy answer is well rehearsed; after almost half a year on the job, she knows to offer the sense of safety her clients are craving. "Tradition says if the skyline blazes white and you're still alive when the lights switch off, you have to go get blackout drunk."

"Well, let's hope my parents never hear about that. It was hard enough to convince them to let me move to a city with an active Darkhole." The girl glances at the black-and-orange water bottle peeking out of the side pocket of Sascia's backpack—a gift from her father when they visited Columbia University last summer. "So you're at Columbia?"

Uh-oh rings like an alarm in Sascia's head. She doesn't want to have the college conversation, least of all with a bright-eyed first-year student. They're so full of dreams, opportunity ripe for the taking; dreams that Sascia should share, opportunity she should be taking advantage of. *I was recruited by the elite Umbra Program for Young Researchers at sixteen, offered an early provisional spot at Columbia a few months later, botched all my conditional exams at seventeen, and now, at eighteen, I have to complete remedial courses and retake the SATs* just doesn't have a good ring to it.

"Uh-huh," she drones instead. "But I'm taking a gap year right now." (At least this part's kind of true.)

"Oh, fun! And this is your side gig? These private tours?"

This is good money and me getting my life together is the real

answer, but no one should have to say that aloud. "Hey," she evades, pointing at the entrance with her chin, "it looks like there's a big group coming. Do you want a photo before the place gets swamped?"

She opens her palm, but to her surprise, Yvonne doesn't hand her phone over. "Doesn't feel right," the girl mumbles, which earns her another point in Sascia's tally.

(The first one: pronouncing Sascia's name right, when she called to book a tour three days ago. Almost everyone goes for Sasha at first try.)

(For the record, it's: SAH-skee-ah.)

They descend the stairs to a typical late-October day in New York, orange speckling the green along the street, gray clouds peeking between the buildings. The air is thick with fried food and ketchup. Any good guide knows the drill: start with lesser attractions first, like the Darkgriffin sculpture installation at Washington Square Park, move on to the highlight of the tour, aka the Maw, then end the walk with a shopping opportunity at the flea market by the entrance of the observation deck. Street vendors line the cobbled street, booths heavy with Darkworld memorabilia, food stalls packed with Darkbeast-inspired delicacies.

"Sooo," Sascia drawls. "Like we discussed, I charge twenty for the one-hour tour. If you enjoyed it, I'd greatly appreciate you passing the word to your friends."

She notices the infinitesimal drop of Yvonne's eyebrows. Sascia's heartbeat heightens, her senses sharpen. This is the moment. It's why she tolerates the crush of tourists at the Maw and performs her parroted speech in every snippet of free time she has.

Yvonne says, "Oh. I thought—"

Sascia puts a puzzled frown on her face. "Yes?"

"I heard—"

C'mon, Sascia thinks with twin pangs of panic and anticipation. *Don't chicken out now.*

The girl's voice drops to a whisper. "Well, the person who referred me to you said you take your clients . . . *fishing*."

And there it is. Hook, line, and sinker. Sascia shrugs, but it's a hard facade to maintain. Her belly fills with self-congratulatory pleasure. "If they want to."

"I want to," Yvonne hastens to say.

"Fishing in the Dark is not exactly legal," Sascia warns, but Yvonne won't care—the ones who seek Sascia's services never do.

This is, after all, what her word-of-mouth campaign advertises: an immersive, collaborative experience, emphasis on *immersive*. Any proper tour company in the city can show you around the Maw and jabber about the legendary Darkgriffin and its many littler brethren. But only Sascia will take you fishing, so you can see (and let's be honest, *touch*) those littler brethren with your own two hands.

Yvonne says eagerly, "It's a hundred, right? For the fishing tour?"

"Depends on what you want to catch. Darkbeetles and roaches are eighty—"

"I want Darkfireflies," Yvonne replies without skipping a beat.

Sascia has to fight, like full-body wrestle, the urge to roll her eyes. She did it *once* for a visiting Harvard sophomore in June, and now that's all her clients ever ask for. Apparently, that girl was a sorority influencer or something, and she listed a Darkfirefly jar lantern as the must-have item for your dorm room decoration.

Luckily, Darkfireflies are essentially the most harmless, docile creatures to ever come out of the Dark. Catching them is both easy (which is great for Sascia) *and* spectacular (which is great for business).

"Darkfireflies are a hundred, yes," Sascia replies. "I've got a good fishing spot, but it's a bit of a walk."

Yvonne doesn't mind, so they spend the next twenty minutes walking uptown, during which Sascia makes sure to ask the girl lots of questions, carefully steering the conversation away from any facts about her own personal life. When they reach Hell's Kitchen and Sascia leads Yvonne into a narrow, dark side street, the girl is visibly spooked, lingering at the mouth of the alley.

"Don't worry," Sascia soothes. "I've done this dozens of times. It's perfectly safe. Look."

She removes the portable nova-lights from her backpack and arranges them in a circle at the end of the alley. With a click of the remote, the floodlights flick on, washing the brick and cement in white. The lights congregate over a manhole cover emblazoned with geometric designs and the word SEWER in narrow, square letters.

The legitimacy of it seems to settle Yvonne's nerves. She approaches and proceeds to gawk at Sascia's gear. A folding fishing rod (modified to hold bug bait instead of fish bait), a nova-gun (just in case), a waterproof canvas to sit on, and two small plastic specimen cups.

"What's that?" Yvonne asks.

"Our bait," Sascia answers, depositing the tiny Ziploc bag filled with gray dust next to the cups. "It's Darkflowers ground to powder, which research has shown is akin to pollen in the Darkworld. Scientists believe Darkfireflies love it."

(Tactfully, Sascia doesn't say *my* research, or *I* believe.)

She's almost set up, fishing rod extended, glue strips and bait hanging from its tip. There's none of the bone-chilling fear now. The big Dark is terrifying, but the smaller Dark, Sascia can handle just fine. In fact, she kind of excels at it. Her body is brimming

with excitement, movements swift and focused, mind razor-sharp, and when she launches into her familiar fishing directions, she talks a little too fast.

"Here's how it'll go. I'll open the manhole. There'll be absolute Dark down there—this sewage line has been decommissioned by the city, which means there are no light wards. You'll lower the fishing line into the hole, and when you feel the tug, I'll turn off the nova-lights." At Yvonne's startled inhale, Sascia lifts her palms. "I know it's scary, but it's necessary. If we don't turn them off, the lights are going to instantly fry the Darkfireflies, and that's not what you're paying for, right?"

"Why am *I* holding the rod? What will you be doing?" A trickle of panic is leaking into Yvonne's voice. She has arranged herself neatly on the canvas so that no part of her trendy low-rise jeans, cropped tee, leather loafers outfit is touching the grimy cement.

Sascia's in her steady Doc Martens, trusty Levis, and an oversized hoodie. She doesn't care if she gets a little dirty; she kneels on the other side of the manhole and drums her fingers against the nova-gun. "I'm going to be aiming the gun into the Dark, monitoring any movement. Darkfireflies are absolutely harmless, but if we leave the door open too long, other things might come wandering."

"Christ."

This time, Sascia doesn't try to comfort Yvonne. The girl *should* be afraid—this is what she paid for. A roller-coaster ride, heart pumping, stomach dropping, the glorious thrill of danger. "Ready?" Sascia asks.

"*No*—"

Sascia heaves. The manhole cover dislodges with a *thwonk*.

In the hole, there is only Dark. Its abnormality doesn't register at first: It looks like any other lightless crevice. But after a few

moments, your senses go into high alert. Your eyes don't adjust. Your ears pick up no sound: no pipes dripping, no rats scattering, no echoing shifts. There is an eerie lack of smell.

In the before, when darkness came to mind, Sascia could smell dust stirred up in the attic or basement, or dew coating golden leaves, or the smell of lavender detergent as she burrowed under the covers. This smells nothing like darkness used to. It smells *of* nothing.

The silence that follows is small and fragile. Sascia feels the girl's urge to fill it, with questions or prayers or blabbering, and she quickly gestures for Yvonne to lower the line into the sewer hole. The other girl obliges with only the slightest trembling.

"Now what?" Yvonne murmurs.

"Now we wait," Sascia replies calmly, as if she's not about to pop out of her skin with excitement. A hunger is gnawing at her insides, a longing for what is about to happen next. This intermediacy is killing her; she wants the line to tug sooner, the lights to go out faster, she wants darkness and beasts and *magic*.

"So," she asks Yvonne, "where were you?"

"When?" Yvonne's eyes, focused on the manhole, have gone big and glassy, and with the floodlights washing her in white, she is pure doe before the inevitable hit-and-run.

"May second."

"First Contact?"

"I've never met anyone who doesn't remember the precise moment."

"Hard to forget, isn't it?" The girl pulls her braids over one shoulder. "I remember walking into the living room, the TV playing at full volume, and seeing the Shanghai Darkdragon toppling skyscrapers in downtown Shanghai. I thought my parents had put

on a movie. Then I noticed the news title. Heard Angela Herrera's voice, you know, *the gates of Hell have opened* and all that. I remember the screen going white when the air strike hit." Yvonne shudders. "Mom thrust a phone into my hands, told me to try my aunt, who lived in Shanghai at the time. But the lines were down and we didn't get through."

Yvonne stops there, and a stab of guilt courses through Sascia: Has she picked the scab on an old wound? It's a dangerous question, what happened on May 2. First Contact: when the very first Darkbeast, the hundred-foot-tall Darkdragon, tore out of the Dark and through the Xintiandi neighborhood in downtown Shanghai, shattering nearly a mile's worth of populated area and killing thousands.

But more than that, May 2 was the day humans became brutally and irrecoverably aware they weren't *alone*.

It's a dangerous question, but Sascia has yet to meet someone who doesn't want to share. The terror of that day, of the narrow confines of your world blowing up around you, however violent the explosion, however unhealed your wounds—it's a collective memory. Sascia has found that in these moments where they watch the ink-black swirl of the Dark, remembering the violent assault of the otherworldly on their lives, she and her clients find a sense of camaraderie. They all lived this, and there's a comforting togetherness in their struggle.

"Is your aunt all right?" Sascia asks.

Yvonne nods. "She was visiting her friend on the outskirts of the city. She contacted us when the power came back on, two days later—*oh*!"

The fishing rod is vibrating. Yvonne's fingers go white around its handle.

"Sascia! It's biting!"

A laugh escapes Sascia's lips. Here is the plunge part of the roller coaster: fear turning into exhilaration. She sets the gun's blast mode to maximum lumen, then carefully opens the empty collection cups, depositing one on her side and one on Yvonne's.

"I'm turning off the nova-lights now, okay? It's going to get very dark, but don't be fazed. Start pulling up the line and enjoy the spectacle. I'll handle the rest."

At Yvonne's soft "Okay," Sascia kills the lights. Shadows shroud the alley. Without the heat of the lights, the drop in temperature is startling, but Sascia likes it that way—it makes her fishing tours even more of an experience. In the manhole, the Dark is thickening, with a rippling liquid quality. The fishing reel starts gyrating quickly—newbies always spin too fast, but it doesn't matter. Darkfireflies are not fish; they'll come up no matter how suspiciously speedily their food is trying to escape them.

Then, abruptly, Yvonne's frantic reeling stops. "Oh wow."

Darkfireflies are swirling up the long column of the manhole. They're tiny things, their scaled bodies translucent, their wings crystalline. They fly in a murmuration, pirouetting in a synchronized spiral. Magnificent colors flow through them like a wave, blues and purples and soft whites that pulse with a bright interior force, more vivid than any natural phenomenon on Earth. It looks like the aurora borealis on drugs, distilled into a three-foot-wide hole in the ground.

"Go for it," Sascia tells the girl.

No further clarification is needed. Yvonne grabs the plastic cup and leans forward, taking a scoop from the surface of the hole. A dozen Darkfireflies are instantly swept into the plastic, and she screws the top on quickly. The kaleidoscope of light reflects in her irises.

Sascia watches her, utterly entranced.

It's not about the money, as her parents think. Not about the thrill of being the expert, as Danny teases. Sascia craves this, precisely *this*: a stranger's awe, a stranger's fear before the impossibility of a darkness filled with monsters. She wants to pluck a straw and drink up all of the girl's terror and wonder, wonder and terror, slurp, slurp, slurp, brain freeze be damned.

She wants to feel, even for a brief, lying second, what it felt like to stand in front of the Dark for the first time.

(Pass by it on the street enough times and even magic becomes mundane, Danny says.)

(But this should not ever be mundane, Sascia argues. *I mean, look at it*.)

From the corner of her eye, Sascia notices a ripple on the surface of the Dark. The lights have been off a little too long. She moves fast, single-mindedly: dives her hands into the surface of the Dark, the cup in one hand, its top in the other. She always grabs a sample of whatever her clients fish that day, for her own research. She's mid-scoop, her hands as deep into the Dark as she dares to go, when she feels it—

Fingers caress the back of her left hand. Sascia moves away, but the fingers close around her wrist. Panic drops like a stone in the pit of her stomach. She jerks her hand out of the Dark—the fingers come up with it. She can see them properly now, irrefutably: long, blue-gray fingers with pointed black nails. There's even a thumb, nestled into the grooves of Sascia's palm. The sensation is jolting, alarmingly familiar, horribly displaced.

A hand.