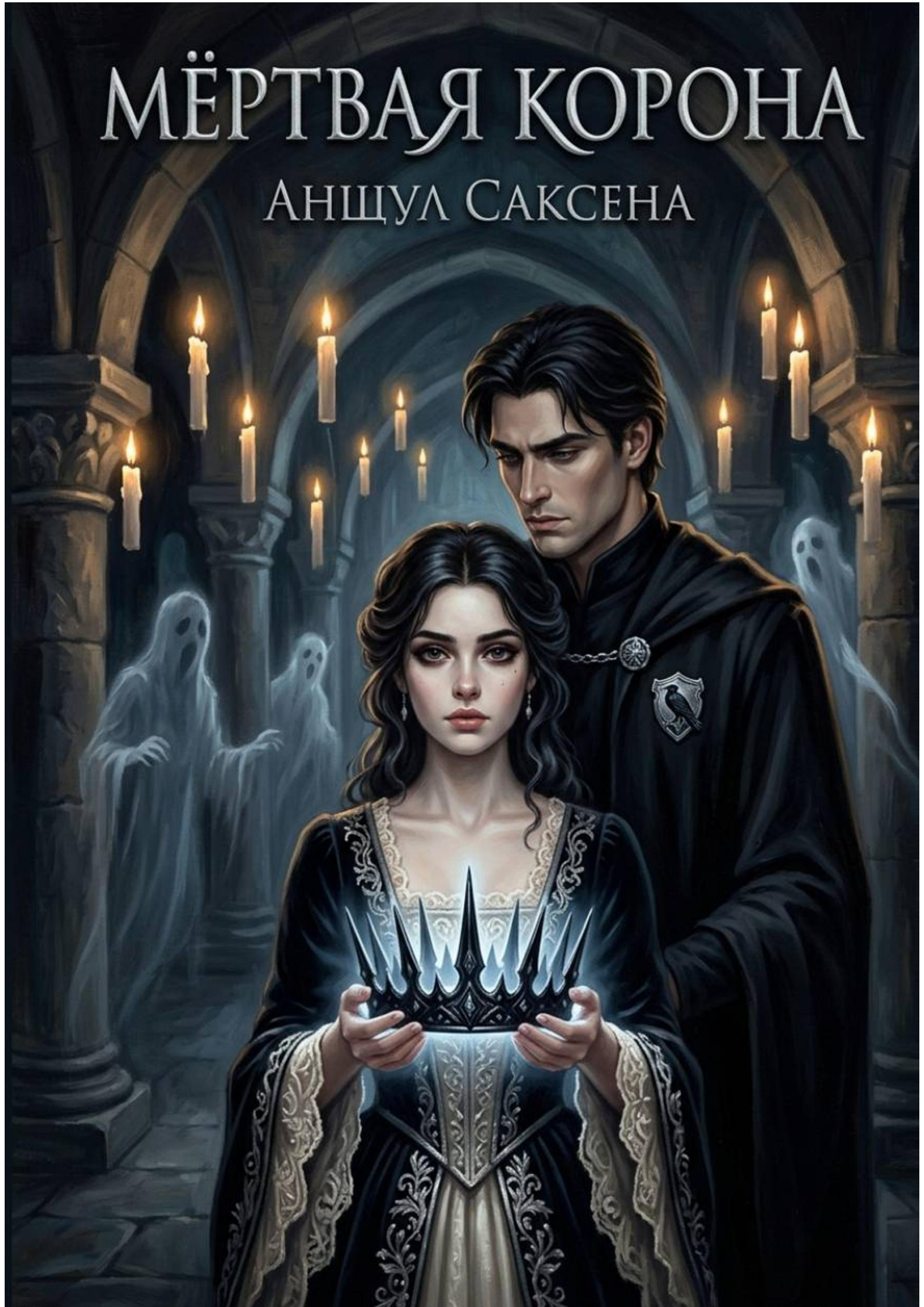


МЁРТВАЯ КОРОНА

АНЩУЛ САКСЕНА



Аншул Саксена
Мёртвая Корона

«Автор»

2026

Саксена А.

Мёртвая Корона / А. Саксена — «Автор», 2026

Серафина умеет слышать мёртвых. В Академии Теней это не дар — это приговор. Первокурсница с запрещённой некромантией и куратор, который знает о ней всё — лорд Вейт, холодный, закрытый, с тайной тяжелее смерти. Когда в катакомбах под академией пробуждается артефакт — Мёртвая Корона — только Серафина может её остановить. Но цена может оказаться выше, чем она готова заплатить. Потому что некоторые тайны хоронят не в склепах. Их хоронят в сердце.

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Мёртвая Корона

Chapter

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First edition

All characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to real people is purely coincidental.

*Dedicated to those who love in the dark.
And to those who are afraid – but still extend a hand.*

*"Death is not the end. Death is only the most honest door."
– from an ancient necromantic treatise, author unknown*

PART ONE

ACADEMY OF THE DARK ARTS

Chapter One

The Academy That Isn't Chosen

The rain started three hours before the carriage delivered Serafina to the gate.

It was a bad start—rain on September 1st, the day when all new students at Obsidian Tower were required to stand in the courtyard for their ceremony. Serafina knew of this tradition from the brochure she'd received with her acceptance letter. It was thin, written in official type, with the academy's crest on the cover—an obsidian tower ringed with thirteen stars—and a note in the bottom corner, handwritten in someone's nervous handwriting: "Don't be late. They don't forgive."

She was twenty minutes late.

The carriage stopped at a stone gate with rusty hinges. The driver—an elderly man with a face that had seen much and chosen to forget half—said not a word. He simply placed her trunk on the wet flagstones and started the horses. Serafina stood in the rain with the trunk, looking at the gate.

The gates were open. It was almost an invitation.

Almost.

"Are you a necromancer?" the voice said.

She turned around. A spirit stood next to the gate—transparent, slightly blurry around the edges, in the form of a student who had clearly been no more than seventeen at the time of his death. The boy looked at her curiously, his head tilted to the side.

“Yes,” said Serafina. “Have you been here long?”

"Since 1842," the spirit replied. "I don't recommend the gate on the left hinge. It'll close while you're dragging the chest, and you'll have to knock. And they don't like it when you knock."

“Thank you,” Seraphina said and took the chest by the handle on the right side.

The spirit nodded and dissolved into the rain.



The courtyard was exactly as she'd imagined it—large, gloomy, with wet flagstones and stone gargoyles on the eaves, looking down with expressions of utter indifference. The remaining students stood in neat rows in the rain: two hundred of them in identical black cloaks, with identical miserable expressions.

Serafina stood at the end of the nearest row. Her neighbor—a tall, blond, freckled young man—glanced at her but said nothing.

Several people in black robes with silver stripes stood on a dais near the main building. Faculty members. Serafina tried to make out their faces through the rain. The rector—an elderly woman with a face made of marble. Two professors flanked her, whom she didn't recognize.

And one—standing slightly apart, as if deliberately not wanting to be part of the formation. Tall. His dark hair was wet and stuck to his forehead. His robe was devoid of silver—only matte black, like the absence of color. His face was sharp, closed, with that special emptiness in his gaze that comes from people who have learned to keep their emotions from expressing themselves.

Serafina looked at him for a second longer than she should have.

The spirit standing at his feet – unnoticed by everyone else – looked at her and slowly shook his head.

She looked away.

"Students of the Obsidian Tower," the rector began, and her voice made it immediately clear she'd been giving this speech for years and intended to give it for just as long again. "Welcome to the academy. You came here because you are different. Not better. Not worse. Different. The magic within you is not like most. Here you will learn to control it, to direct it, and not to kill yourself and those around you. That's all we promise. The rest is up to you."

A short pause.

"The academy rules are simple. You'll receive them in your rooms. Violating the first three is punishable by expulsion. Violating the fourth is punishable by death. We won't accept questions about which rule is the fourth—it's part of the curriculum."

Serafina heard her blond neighbor exhale quietly.

"You will be assigned to wings according to your magic. Necromancers will be in the east wing, with Lord Veith."

The neighbor turned to her. Then he looked where she was looking—at the man in the silver-less robe, still standing to the side.

"That's lucky," whispered the neighbor. "They told me they fear it more than any exam."

"I hear you," said a quiet voice behind her.

They both turned around. There was no one behind them. Only rain.

Serafina looked at Lord Veit again. He was looking straight at her.

Chapter Two

First lesson

The east wing smelled of old paper, candle wax, and something else—sweet, barely perceptible—that Serafina couldn't name. She learned to recognize this scent later. It was called: proximity to what is dead.

There were eight of them in the necromancers' group. Eight people whom the other two hundred avoided as they all walked together towards the buildings. More precisely, they didn't avoid them, didn't take any sudden steps to the side. A gap simply formed between the necromancers and the other students—as if the space were opening up slightly.

Serafina noticed such things.

The group gathered in a circular classroom with tall windows. Stone walls, a blackboard, a table, and a single chair in the center—obviously for the teacher. Eight armchairs were arranged around the chair. Serafina chose the one closest to the window.

A blond guy from the courtyard appeared nearby. He extended his hand.

– Til Rast. From the Eastern Port. I work with the spirits of drowned sea creatures. Not the best experience, but the stories are interesting.

"Serafina Cold." She shook his hand. "Cemetery magic. I can speak to almost any dead person."

– "Almost" is an important word.

– Very.

The door opened without knocking.

Lord Veith walked in as if the auditorium were empty—without looking around, without pausing to make sure everyone was there. He placed a thin folder on the table. He sat down. He looked at them.

Serafina forced herself to look straight ahead.

Up close, he was even less conversational. About twenty-eight, maybe a little older. His dark hair was dry, but still seemed slightly damp. His eyes were gray, the hue clouds take on just before they begin to pour. His gaze swept the group methodically—not appraising, but classifying. Like the gaze of a man sorting objects rather than getting to know people.

"My name is Lord Veith," he said. "You may call me Master or Lord. 'Master' is not acceptable—it's too familiar. A first name is not acceptable at all. That's not friendship, that's education."

A pause. He opened the folder without looking at them.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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