

## Night and Day

### Chapter 1 – Outlanders

#### Kiera

As soon as her fingertips brushed the cold stone, she felt it. The power coursing through the huge wall. The spells imbued in every grain and pore, in the rock and mortar and paint. An ancient power, build up over centuries of constant vigil.

In theory, this wall would keep out any Darkspawn. No imp or golem or undead creatures would be able *scratch* the wall, let alone penetrate it.

The city beyond? It was safe. Protected by the Eternal Light.

In theory.

Kiera kept her fingertips on the wall for just a few seconds. Long enough for the magical tingles to grow into a sharp, painful burning. Then, smiling, she took a step back and raised her now aching fingertips to her lips, tasted the echoes of ancient magic.

It was *strong*. More powerful than she'd expected. If she tried breaking through the wall, or passing through a crack, even walking through one of the city's gates, it would *obliterate* her.

"Not bad," she giggled, walking backwards until there were several feet between her and the Light-blessed wall. "Not bad at all. But not quite good enough."

Kiera looked up at the night sky, smiled.

And, quickly, her body shifted. Morphed.

Tanned skin blossomed to a hellish blood-red. Clothes evaporated into thin air, leaving her naked in all her demonic glory. Horns sprouted from her brow, leathery wings emerged from her back, a serpentine tail grew from the base of her spine. Though she couldn't see it, she knew the whites of her eyes had gone black. The dark hazel eyes of her human form would now glow bright red. Long, coal-black hair flowed down her back – waving and fluttering in a non-existent breeze.

"The problem with walls," Kiera said, voice huskier and deeper than a moment before. "They can only go so high."

Her wings unfurled, spread out wide.

A second later, she was airborne. Flying up into the sky. Above the city walls, up and up and up.

Cool air tickled her bare skin, gentle winds tugging and pulling at her. But she ignored the winds. Continued flying up.

The city wall's spells could only extend so far. A few feet from the walls themselves. Not far at all. Any Darkspawn with the ability to fly could bypass this layer of protection.

She soared up over the city, flew past the walls and their spells, gliding over homes and buildings and cobble streets.

Not many people about this late at night.

A few drunks bumbled about, trying to find their way home – or to a brothel. A few stray prostitutes. Street urchins scouring the streets for easy marks; people to pickpocket or mug. And guards. A smattering of guards here and there.

None of them looked up. Why would they? The city was 'safe'.

If they had, they probably wouldn't have noticed her anyway. A moving red spec in the darkness of night? They'd think it was their eyes playing tricks on them, or that she was some red bird out at night.

Kiera glanced about, searching for her target.

There. Close to the palace. A grand cathedral. Built of bright, white stone. Taller than any other building save for the palace itself. A beacon of hope and light in the dark of night.

Just looking at it made her want to gag.

*"So bland. No sense of style at all."*

For as impressive a feat of architecture as the cathedral was, it looked so *boring*. Lifeless and clean. Soulless.

And yet, that's where Kiera's targets were.

The Outlanders.

*"Outlanders?" Kiera asked, eyebrow raised. "As in they're not from the Empire? So what, they're bumpkins from some small island kingdom somewhere? What does this have to do with us? Shouldn't you be focussing on more important-"*

*The look on his face silenced her instantly. The cold, hateful stare. The silence before a slaughter.*

*A Darkspawn Prince. Ten foot tall, with horns and wings and a foul, murderous temper. In the unending blackness of the Darkspawn realm, the Prince's eyes blazed red hot. Filled with rage and contempt and boring, bland purpose.*

*Destroy the Light. Conquer the realms of Man. Blah, blah.*

*"You ask too many questions," the Prince hissed. "You have been given a task. Perform it or be devoured."*

*"Yeah, yeah," Kiera shrugged. "It'd just help to know where these 'Outlanders' are from, is all. The more I know, the less time I'll waste gathering information you already know and the more time I'll have to-"*

*"They are Outlanders," the Prince stated disdainfully.*

*"Yes, I got that part already. But where are they actually from? The Free Isles, the Wild Tribes, or are they-"*

*"They are Outlanders. They are not of this world."*

Kiera flew as close to the cathedral as she dared.

When she was close enough to taste the magic in the air and feel the spells tugging at her, she found an empty alley to land. She wouldn't be able to get much closer than this to the cathedral in her trueform. Not with the spells they'd put in place there.

In the shadows of the alleyway, she transformed her body. Restored the appearance of a normal, if extremely attractive, human.

A wave of her hand summoned some clothes onto her body; nothing too fancy, but enough that she'd stand out above common peasants. Another hand wave and she had a little bag filled with coins. More than enough gold for her purposes and, if she needed more, it'd be just a wave away.

She began wandering city streets, taking in the sights and scenes. Shouting in the distance, the sounds of cats mewling, the scent of cheap booze in the air. She didn't encounter too many people, but those she did all stopped and stared.

A beautiful woman wandering the streets at night, alone and seemingly defenceless.

Kiera listened to their thoughts. Knew that more than a few would've made a move on her if she hadn't been numbing their lusts and desires. Her dark aura reached out invisibly, chilled her would-be attackers to the bone and robbed them of their will to act.

Much easier to do it this way. And much fewer corpses to draw attention to her presence in the city.

With any luck, there wouldn't be *any* corpses when she was done here. She'd just read a few thoughts, gather the information she needed, and leave. The priests would never know a Darkspawn had ever been in their precious city.

But, before she could get on with any of that, she needed somewhere to stay. A place to lay low while she completed her task.

An inn. Not too pricey or fancy – she didn't need that type of attention on her. Nor one that was too cheep and seedy. No, she needed something in between. Where she

could blend in and disappear and be easily forgotten.

It didn't take her long to find the perfect place.

One day wandering the city streets was all it took for Kiera to piece everything together. As soon as the sun disappeared past the horizon, she headed in towards the city's heart. Began making her way right for the grand cathedral.

The closer she got, the more oppressive the spells of protection grew. Weighing her down, slowing her, robbing her use of abilities, preventing her from accessing her well of power. By the time she reached the building itself, she was as feeble as any human. Weak and frail and powerless.

But she had to get close. She had to know more.

A few days ago, there'd been a gathering at this cathedral. Priests from all over the Empire had converged here to cast some grand, world-altering spell.

A summoning.

They'd reached into the void, plucked out a handful of *special* individuals. People from another world. Champions.

The city was abuzz with the information. It was all anyone had been talking about. Who were the Outlanders? What could they do? Why were they here? What did it mean?

Kiera examined the colossal building before her, tried to taste the magic emanating from it. If it had the same ancient protections as the city wall, Kiera would burst into flame the moment she tried stepping inside. And, even if it didn't, there were any number of warning spells or wards that could trap her inside if she dared entered.

And yet... Something was wrong.

The spells she tasted in the air – the weight of Light pressing down on her – it was all *wrong*. Distorted.

Steeling herself, Kiera strode towards the grand cathedral, walked right through the open doors.

No agony. No bursting into flames. No magical alarm.

Nothing.

The summoning spell the priests had cast here; it'd blown apart every bit of magical protection the building used to have. That weight of Light on her? It was from all the torn and shredded and now-useless spells.

If the grand cathedral had been closer to the city walls, their summoning spell might've even blown apart those protections too. Left the whole city vulnerable to attack.

Did they know? Were the priests aware of the damage they'd done?

Probably not. Light-blind morons.

Kiera let out a breath, grinned, looked around.

Glowing white walls, floating balls of rainbow light. A wide, long hall filled with stone benches. There were dozens of people, and enough space for hundreds more. A handful of men and women in flat, white robes wandering around.

Underwhelming, to say the least.

She spotted a few doors and hallways beyond the main prayer chamber, closed doors that'd lead deeper into the cathedral. Doors that were barred to the public.

Sneaking through one when no one was looking should prove simple enough. All she'd need do was wait for the perfect opportunity, a distraction of some sort. Then, she'd go in search of the Outlanders. Knowing the priests and their rigid beliefs about light and the sun, they'd almost certainly be housing their 'honoured guests' as high up the cathedral as possible.

This task was going to be too easy.

**Lily**

"I'm telling you, we're in a video game!"

"Bro, what are you *on*? There's no way all this is some silly game. Look around you, dude. It's *real*. Has to be."

"Nah, nah! Think about it! Someone drugged us, wired us up to some virtual reality headset shit, and now we're trapped in this video game. It's like that one anime! What's it called..."

Lily ignored both of them. Tried her best to ignore the conversation entirely. The same one they'd been having for *hours*.

It was too much.

Everything was *too much*.

One minute, the five of them had been hanging out. Walking home from the cinema together. Chatting about nonsense and bashing the movie they'd just all seen.

And then they'd appeared here.

There'd been a flash of blinding white light. A rumbling. The sensation of vertigo. The floor had disappeared under them, and they'd all dropped as one – landed unceremoniously onto a hard, stone floor. Surrounded by men and women in white robes.

Shock, panic, uncertainty. There'd been shouting – the four boys all surrounding her protectively, demanding to know who the white-robed people were.

The answers they'd gotten had just confused the gang even more.

Lily was still reeling from the information. Still digesting it, coming to terms with it. And the conversation the guys were having – their debate over if this was all some video game or group hallucination or if they were in purgatory or hell – was *not* helping.

She needed fresh air. Space to breath, think.

But every time she opened her mouth to speak, she felt it gnawing away inside her. The doubt and fear. Anxiety. Dread.

She needed space to think. She needed alone time. But... But what if she got lost? What if she couldn't find her way back?

What if the guys weren't her when she did get back?

Alone in this strange world...

Lily shuddered, clamped her mouth shut. Focused her mind on something else. *Anything* else.

The gem in her hoodie pocket.

As the guys continued their argument, Lily reached into her pocket. Pulled out the strange, rainbow gemstone.

It was a perfectly cut icosahedron. Every side a sharp triangle, with twenty triangles in all. Small, a comfortable fit for the palm of her hand, and utterly bizarre. She's found it in her pocket after appearing in this world – it hadn't been there before. And, when she'd shown it to the guys, they'd all found an identical gem on them.

That alone would've been odd. But the gems – what they did – had convinced everyone that this wasn't some elaborate prank. That they truly were in another world.

The four guys were too absorbed in their debate to notice Lily holding her gem out in front of herself.

The gem glowed – visible only to Lily – and a translucent list of options and windows appeared above it. Everything from 'Equipment' to 'Status Effects' to 'Spells'. So many options, and so many windows with even more options, that it boggled the mind.

Like she was using a computer, Lily dragged a list of magic spells to the forefront, then dragged a specific spell to her 'Equipment' window.

Her fingertip left a glow in the air, though all the menus and lists and windows were invisible to everyone else. To anyone watching, it'd look like she was drawing magical runes in the air with her finger.

She tapped the 'Cast Spell' command.

A strange feeling washed over her. A new sense awakening.

The boys around her all *felt* different as her mind perceived them in a new, alien way.

Gav, the gamer guy. It was as if Lily could *taste* his excitement. Smell it, but not with her nose. With her very *being*. She could feel his enthusiasm, sense his curiosity. And, under it, a sliver of doubt. Worry buried under all the energy and eagerness.

Joe, the muscle-bound man, quiet and reserved. Thoughtful. His worry felt muted, dulled. He was concerned, yes. But more for his friends than himself. Wary of this world and the people in white – their agendas and goals.

Hal, the would-be ladies' man. His chaotic mixture of emotions and surface thoughts was almost enough to give Lily a headache right there and then. Everything from worry to amusement, from panic to eagerness, from dread to excitement.

And Sid, the mega nerd. The 'scientist' of the group, whose mind was working overtime trying to make sense of everything. To put the pieces together like a puzzle, make everything fit. There was a hint of worry in him, but it was pushed deep down – buried by the curiosity and calm, level-headedness.

And... And right there, just beyond the door to the room.

There was someone else. Dark and spicy and wild. If they were a taste, it'd be chocolate-coated chilli. Tempting and titillating and *forbidden*. The dark desire of wanting something you knew you couldn't have. The naughtiness and lust of the taboo. A lip bitten in want, a moan caught in a kiss.

Lily let out a little gasp. Lost herself in that pit of darkness. The person – the *woman* - behind that door.

And, as she felt herself sink into the deep longing, she felt it staring back at her. *Feeling* her as she felt them. A connection. The woman was aware of Lily's stray gaze, was gazing right back at her. Surprise and shock and confusion and curiosity, all buried under the whirring of lust and temptation and darkness.

Then it was gone.

Lily's mana ran dry, the Divine Perception spell coming to an abrupt end.

She lurched forward, fatigue washing over her. A deep, mind-throbbing tiredness that almost had her passing out on the spot.

"That doesn't prove anything," she heard Sid say, though he sounded miles away, his voice a quiet echo. "If we assume that multiverse theory is correct, and that every potential universe can operate under slightly differing laws of physics, it's totally reasonable to assume that 'magic' might exist in an infinite number of the infinite universes. And it's entirely *plausible* that said 'magic' could be used to create a trans-dimensional wormhole capable of-

"Video game," Gav piped in, nodding his head sagely. "I knew it. We're in a video game."

"That's not what-" Sid sighed, defeated. "We're not in a video game. Our world's technology can't-"

"Lily," Joe said, instantly silencing the debate. "You okay? You look pale. Do you need to throw up again?"

"No," Lily blushed. "I'm fine! I just... I'm fine..."

Before she knew what was happening, she was falling backwards. Submitting herself to the deep, dark embrace of sleep.

When she woke, the sun was high in the sky. Birds tweeting and the city below bustling and alive.

Midday. They'd let her sleep past midday.

She was out of bed in an instant, racing out of her barren tower room, rushing down a narrow spiral staircase. By the time she got to the common room she and the guys had

been given, everyone was already packed and kitted out.

Joe in chainmail armour with a sword strapped to his waist and a shield on his back. Gav in hooded leather armour with a bow on his back and a quiver full of arrows. Hal wearing what was probably the most 'stylish' clothes this city had to offer, bright and tight and not even slightly protective, with a lute strapped on his back in lieu of a guitar. And Sid, of course, clad in the most magical, arcane-looking robes imaginable – all blue fabric with glowing white embroidery, with a big, pointy hat to match.

"Mornin' sleepyhead," Joe smiled as she burst into the room.

"Well past morning now," Sid said, looking out a window. "We were supposed to leave hours ago."

"You should've woken me!" Lily wined, face hot.

"And interrupt your beauty sleep?" Hal chimed in. "Not a chance. Besides, looked like you were having some pretty nice dreams..."

"Don't worry about it," Joe chuckled as Lily's face reddened to a cherry glow. "We're gonna have to spend a few nights out camping anyway, if Sid's calculations are right."

"They are," Sid huffed.

"-And it's not like there's any rush to get there-"

"Main quest," Gav tutted. "Side quests are always better."

"-So we all figured it'd be better to let you rest. All this stuff can't have been easy on you."

"I'm fine," Lily murmured, unable to keep the embarrassment and shame from leaking into her voice. "I was just tired."

"Alright," Joe smiled. "Alright. In that case, you better gear up. The priests set out some clothes for you that'll help you blend in. We'll grab some breakfast for you while you change, then we head out. Anyone have any questions?"

"Yeah," Gav muttered quietly. "Who went and made you the party leader?"

"I did," Joe grinned. "Any other questions?"

When no one spoke, Joe nodded his head.

"Good. Then let's give the lady a little privacy, shall we?"

The parade through the city streets was *horrific*.

All those people cheering for Lily and the guys, thousands people all looking at her and celebrating and shouting. All that collective energy directed right at her.

Lily shuddered, was happy to step past the city gate and into the open world beyond.

"Remember," their escort – an elderly priest in white robes – said, voice trembling. "Out here, *they* exist. The city walls... protect from them..."

"Darkspawn," Joe, the self-appointed group leader said knowingly. As if he knew the first thing about the world they'd found themselves in, and the evil monsters inhabiting it. "We'll be careful, I promise."

A few more warnings later, and much thanks and formal speech about destiny and the 'Eternal Light', and the group was on its way. Walking down an empty road together. All five of them, just like it'd always been.

An odd group, full of different types of people who were interested in different things. But, somehow, those differing interests had always seemed to complement each other, or so Lily liked to believe.

No-one else in the group might be as driven and motivated to succeed as Joe, but Gav understood the competitive spirit because of his video games, and Sid understood the conditions for victory and the cost of failure.

Ever since they'd met in kindergarten, they'd all supported and understood each other. Like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. Different, but complementary.

All but her. The only girl in the group. Forever the outsider.

She shook her head, pushed the thought aside.

Now wasn't the time for that.

Now was the time for *adventure*.

They might not have chosen this adventure, might not even *want* it, but it was that – an adventure. Something for them all to enjoy and suffer through and experience together.

Who needed a guide in this alien world anyway?

When they heard footsteps running up to them from behind, the city far in the distance now, the group turned as one to look at their pursuer.

The most beautiful woman Lily had ever seen.

Raven black hair and dark, shadowed eyes. Bright red lips that always seemed curled into a half-smile regardless of whatever expression she was making. Clad in priestess robes that seemed way too tight on her hourglass figure, fabric straining and stretching around her huge bust and ample butt.

"Wait," the woman huffed breathlessly, though she wasn't sweating and didn't seem all too exerted from her sprint. "Please, wait."

"Fucking hell," Lily heard Hal breathe behind her. "She's *hott*. Where were the priests hiding *her*?"

"Shut it," Joe snapped quietly. Then, louder, he spoke to the priestess. "What's the matter? Has something happened at the cathedral? Did we forget something?"

The beautiful woman shook her head quickly, smiled.

Lily's heart hiccupped in her chest at the sight of that smile, those plump red lips curved so sensually. Before she even noticed, her cheeks were turning pink.

"No," the woman panted, though she didn't seem all that out of breath. "No, everything's fine. You didn't leave anything behind. The priests, they changed their minds, thought maybe you could use a guide after all..."

"Hell yes we do!" Hal said loudly, speaking the exact words Lily had been thinking.

"Uh, sure," Joe said after a moment, his own cheeks turning pink at the sight of this radiant beauty. "Happy to have you along..."

"Kiera," the woman smiled, snatching Lily's breath away. "My name is Kiera."

## Kiera

They walked in silence. Two-by-two, with the knightly group leader and the novice mage in front, Kiera herself and the petite priestess in the middle, and the bard and rogue at the rear.

She could feel their eyes on her. Two pairs of lusty eyes watching her hips sway and butt bounce with every step.

Most of the time, it didn't take magic or powers to cloud the minds of men. For the promise of being with Kiera, half the men in this group would beg and plead. Probably, she could convince them to steal for her, snatch a precious little something from someone. Maybe she could even convince them to kill for her, though that might be a stretch with this particular bunch.

A knight, a mage, a rouge, a bard, and whatever *she* was.

All Outlanders. An interesting group, to be sure. But what made them so special? Why had she been given this task? And what in the world had happened last night?

Kiera's eyes flicked sideways to the petite girl – Lily.

The girl, who'd been glancing at Kiera, blushed bright and looked away. Pretended to be interested in the scenery around them. Endless fields of golden grain.

What was she?

She'd spied Kiera last night while Kiera had been eavesdropping. Had detected her with magic that'd shone right through Kiera's disguise. She'd peered right at Kiera's soul.

Shone a light on her.

And it'd been... nice. Pleasant.

Kiera had been touched with Light, and it hadn't scorched her. Hadn't burned her.

That was impossible.

And yet... It'd happened.

She remembered the sensation vividly. The bright, but not blinding, Light. The gentle warmth, loving and kind and filled with hope and longing and compassion. Not a hint of sharpness, not an echo of spite or hatred. It'd washed over Kiera like a tickle, a curious whisper. A lovely, joyous giggle.

A warm glow filled Kiera at the memory. A gentle hand cupping her heart, comforting and bright.

This girl – Lily – was special. Different. Unique.

And Kiera would find out how and why. She'd get to the bottom of it, unravel the mystery. Figure it all out.

Not for the Princes or the Dark Mother. But for her.

She'd find out who this *Lily* was, what that strange and beautiful variant of Light had been, what it all meant. She'd figure it all out, no matter what.

"Hello," she smiled at the girl.

"H-hi," the girl stammered.

And there it was again. The glow. The warmth inside Kiera's chest, tickling her heart and radiating out. Bright and gentle. Unlike anything she'd ever felt before.

*I will figure you out.*

"I've gotta ask," Kiera said, knowing all five of them were listening but only interested in one. "Where are you all from? I know you're Outlanders, that the priests summoned you here, but..."

Unfortunately, it wasn't Lily who answered. The girl's blushing embarrassment prevented her. Instead, it was the guys who vied for Kiera's attention, spilling out information like leaking waterskins. Kiera absorbed it all, scribed it to memory, her eyes never leaving that pretty, blushing face.