

Night and Day

Chapter 3 – Champions

Lily

The cave was dark. Pitch black. Which made sense. It *was* a cave. So, carrying fiery torches and whatever weapons they had to hand, the guys led the way into the cave's blackness. Joe in front, with his chainmail armour and glinting sword. Gav and Hal following close behind, holding knives and a shortsword respectively. Sid behind them, torch in one hand and his twenty-sided gemstone in the other.

And, right at the back, Lily and Kiera.

Lily clutched her special stone, the rainbow-rock that allowed her to cast spells and use unnatural abilities. Her entire body trembled as she glanced left and right, waving a torch around to light the darkness.

Too many shadows. Too many places monsters could be hiding.

"Relax," a soft whisper sounded beside her. "Trust me."

There was a quiet moment of fear-fuelled uncertainty. Then Lily let out a breath, forced herself to calm down.

Nothing here would harm her, Kiera had said. She was safe.

Still, the fear remained. A cold, creeping cloud following her every step. Darkspawn. Monsters. They were *here*. In this cave somewhere. A *dozen* of them. What if they were more dangerous than Kiera thought? What if-

Scratching.

Claws on rock, deeper in the cave.

Everyone froze at the eerie sound. Everyone but Kiera.

"This way," Joe whispered, walking deeper into the darkness. "Follow me, stay alert."

They found the source of the noise just a few feet ahead. A rat the size of a small dog, scratching at the cave floor, completely oblivious to the people approaching it. Even when Joe stepped close, just a single stride away from the creature, it kept scratching – not seeming to register his presence at all.

"What's it doing?" Sid asked, confusion clear in his voice.

"By the look of it?" Kiera hummed, an amused half-smile on her face. "Digging. Or attempting to."

Everyone in the group but Joe turned to look at her.

"Like I told you," she shrugged. "Runties. Brainless, thoughtless little things. They copy actions they've seen animals doing; clawing at the floor to dig holes, waving their arms trying to fly, walking into walls, screeching and howling randomly. A single child with a sharp stick could take care of these."

Joe stepped around the giant rat, keeping his eyes on the creature. Beyond him, the cave opened up. Torchlight shone into an open space, where a handful more giant rats were. One was walking into a wall, another looked like it was trying to swim on the cave's floor. All of them ignored Joe's existence.

"This seems... Anticlimactic," one of the boys said.

"You still owe me a hundred gold," another – Gav – said. "Told you it'd be giant rats."

"They're not actually *rats* though. They just *look* like rats. Isn't that right, priestess?"

"Bullshit!" Gav snapped before Kiera could answer. "Look at them. Giant rats. The bet was that if our first dungeon was giant rats, you'd owe me a hundred gold. Pay up!"

"I wouldn't call them 'giant' either. More like, 'somehwat large rats'. And this isn't a 'dungeon', it's a cave. And we don't even know how much a hundred gold is actually worth!"

It could be enough money to buy a house, or barely enough to pay for some food and drinks! No way. Bet's null and void."

"No, no, no," Gav grumbled. "You're not backing out of this one. You owe me a hundred gold!"

"Why would the priests send us here?" A loud voice boomed. Joe, standing in the middle of the cave's open space, surrounded by brainless giant rats. His narrowed eyes were on Kiera. "If a kid could take care of this, why send us? What's this *really* about?"

Once again, every eye turned to Kiera.

A sharp urge blossomed inside Lily. She wanted to step forward, defend Kiera. *She* didn't know why the priests had sent them all here. She was just as much in the dark as they were. Even *more* so. Kiera didn't have any answers for them. She wasn't even *with* the priests.

But she couldn't tell the guys *that*. Couldn't spill Kiera's secret. Not after she'd promised.

"I don't know," Kiera shrugged. "Maybe they thought this was all you could handle."

Joe grunted, glared at Kiera.

Then he spun on the spot, swung his shiny sword, slashed the nearest giant rat.

The rat didn't react. It'd been attempting to swim on the ground, and kept waving its arms and legs even after Joe's sword passed through it. The only thing that changed was a groove appearing in the giant rat's fur, a plume of black smoke rising from it.

Exactly like the black smoke that'd bled from Kiera last night, when she'd climbed into the tent.

Joe growled, slashed at the giant rat again and again.

More smoke leaks opened up, Dark rising from the mindless creature. Until, at last, the whole rat dissolved into a black smoke cloud.

Then, curiously, the smoke vibrated. Shifted. Started to glow, shine brightly. The blackness vanished, replaced with every colour of light imaginable. And, an instant later, that glowing cloud of light flew into Joe. Sank under his armour and right into his skin. He shone like a star for a moment, eyes wide with fear, then the light faded.

Stunned silence followed.

Joe patted himself down, gulped. He looked back at the group, his face asking the question his mouth wouldn't.

"Levelling system," Gav said sagely. "Open up your menus with the D-20 and I bet you'll have new options there. Here, let me give it a try."

As Gav stalked forward, started stabbing wildly at one of the giant rats, Lily looked over at Kiera.

The undisguised horror in the woman's eyes made Lily shudder.

Sitting on the tent floor, Lily waited. Watched.

Kiera crawled under the tent flap, made her way slowly into the tent. The agony of each movement was written all over the succubus's face; eyes clamped shut, biting her lip, grimacing as she inched forward.

Once her whole body was in the tent, Kiera collapsed. Plumes of black smoke rising from her body.

Lily reached down, took the woman's hand.

Kiera's first reaction was to flinch. Surprised by the physical contact. Then she relaxed, squeezed Lily's hand back. A moment later, the plumes of black smoke were sucked back into Kiera's body. The woman, still holding Lily's hand, sat up.

"Are you okay?" Lily asked softly. "That looked like it hurt."

"I'm fine," Kiera smiled. "Just need a second."

In the short silence that followed, Lily caught herself staring at the succubus. Those full, pillowy lips. Her big, beautiful eyes. Sharp cheeks, tanned skin, dark hair. Too hott to

be real, and yet here she was.

"What is it?" She asked, more to distract herself than anything else. To keep her from staring into those smouldering eyes, keep her from thinking about those lips and what they'd feel like. "The smoke that comes off you, I mean. It's the same as with those rats before they... before they died."

It took a few seconds for Kiera to answer.

"It's Dark," she said. "It's what I'm made of."

The succubus smiled at her, shifted herself closer on the tent floor so that the two of them were face to face. Near enough that Lily could feel Kiera's breath on her face as the woman spoke.

"You're flesh and bone and blood. I'm condensed Dark. All Darkspawn are. When we're injured, you leak red fluid and I leak black smoke. The only difference is, the Dark is still a part of me when it's leaking, so I can suck it back in. Takes focus and concentration, though."

"It's not dangerous though, is it?" Lily asked, worry spilling into her voice. "You coming in and out of the tent. It can't kill you. Can it?"

The giant rats had all started leaking smoke before they'd disappeared completely. Kiera wouldn't dissolve like that too, would she?

"No," Kiera smiled. "It'd take a whole lot more than *this* to end me. 'Death by tent' is not how I'm gonna go, I promise."

Lily nodded, blushed.

Why did that smile always make her blush?

"Have any more questions you want to ask me?" Kiera asked, tilting her head to one side. "This might be the last chance you get."

"What do you mean?" Lily asked quickly, eyes wide.

"Once you and your friends get back to the priests, they'll find out I'm not one. Won't take 'em long to figure out I was spying on you, that I'm the 'enemy'. Might be a bit hard for us to find the time to sit and chat after that."

"I'll tell them the truth," Lily said. "You're not bad or evil or anything. They'll listen, they have to..."

"Joe wants me gone as it is," Kiera said with a sad smile. "And he thinks I'm some holy priestess right now. Imagine how badly he'll want to get rid of me when he learns what I really am."

"That's not true," Lily said, trying to convince herself as much as Kiera. "He's just a little overprotective. The others-"

"Gav, the one who thinks this is all a game, won't trust me in the slightest. Me being a succubus will be a 'plot twist' in his eyes. I'll be some 'quest' for him and all of you to 'beat'. And Sid, the one who thinks he's so clever, distrusts anything he doesn't understand on principle. As soon as he learns what I am, he'll stop seeing me as a person and start seeing me as a monster to learn about and experiment on. Same as he tried doing with the Runties."

"But..." Lily shook her head, desperate. "I'll convince them. I'll make them see..."

"I'm a succubus," Kiera said softly. "They'll just assume I've seduced you, that I'm manipulating you. And the priests will back that up. The only one of your friends who won't want me gone or dead is Hal, and that's just because he'll want me to seduce *him*. Every time I try reading that degenerate's thoughts, it's just sex and sex and more sex. Guy's got a real problem."

"But you're not," Lily whined. "You're not *bad*. They'll see that. They *have* to see that..."

"They'll see what they want to see. Humans always do."

Kiera reached forward, brushed a hair out of Lily's face.

"If tonight is our last night," she said softly. "Best not to waste it, don't you think?"

Kiera

She didn't use her powers. Didn't even reach out with her mind to know Lily's thoughts and feelings. She simply offered the girl the option. A caress of Lily's cheek, a suggestive smile, a whispered word. When she suggested they lay down together, that it'd be more comfortable in these tight confines than sitting, Lily didn't object.

Blushing, the girl had lain down right beside her, face to face. Barely an inch between them. Kiera's chest, large and protruding as it was, squeezed against Lily's. Her hand, starting on Lily's elbow, found itself to the girl's waist.

She was a pretty thing, this Lily. Cute and soft and kind. Innocent. The kind of girl that Kiera wanted to protect, wrap her arms around and hold tight. Those rosy, blushing cheeks made Kiera giddy with excitement. The girl's big, round eyes drew her in like the glow of a campfire on a dark night.

When Kiera inched herself forward, propped herself up on her free hand, Lily rolled onto her back. Not shying away, but positioning herself beneath Kiera.

"Tell me about places," the girl squeaked softly, face red and voice trembling. Nervous. Awkward. But oh-so adorable. "Places you've been. Like last night."

It wasn't a rejection. The look of horror and embarrassment in Lily's eyes was proof of that. The girl just didn't know how to handle the situation she'd found herself in, was trying to calm herself before she lost her mind to the heat and arousal. She was trying to distract herself, was embarrassed by her awkwardness.

"The Crystal Chasm," Kiera purred, allowing the girl a moment to collect herself, calm herself. "In the dry wastes to the far south. A big crack in the ground, miles long, filled with crystals of every shape and colour you can imagine. When the sun is angled just right overhead, they all sparkle and twinkle at once. Like a song of colours."

Kiera's hand, the one on Lily's hip, moved. Began sliding up the petite girl's side.

"And the Night Spear. A tower of obsidian so tall, it reaches above the clouds. That's far to the west, in the middle of an overgrown forest. People say the whole area is cursed and haunted, that Darkspawn roam there, but they're wrong. At night, the tower sings..."

Her hand came up to rest on Lily's cheek. Their lips less than an inch apart.

"There's a long-dead volcano on the other side of the world with a lake inside it and a small island in the middle of that lake. The water is clear blue, the island and volcano covered in plants and life. But it doesn't have a name, because no human has ever set foot there to name it."

"Sounds beautiful," Lily breathed.

"Not as beautiful as some other things I've seen," Kiera smiled.

And, when Lily opened her mouth to ask her next question, Kiera silenced her with a kiss. She leaned down, pressed her lips to Lily's. Timid and testing at first. Then, when Lily didn't push her away, more confident and eager.

Heat flowed between the two of them, hottest at the point their two bodies met.

Before Kiera knew it, Lily's arms were around her, and hers were around Lily. Holding each other like Kiera had never been held before. The feel of Lily's body, so close to hers, those arms around her, was unlike anything Kiera had ever known.

When the kiss broke, both of them were left panting.

Kiera didn't need to breathe, and she still felt breathless and flustered. Filled with heat and excitement and hunger for more.

But she held herself back. Held back the desire.

Lily wasn't ready for more. Kiera could see it in her eyes.

Not ready. And maybe never would be.

"I'd..." Lily panted, glancing away from Kiera, her face red and breathing rapid. "I'd

like to see it... One day..."

"Maybe you will," Kiera said softly. "One day."

Lily

The lists and menus were daunting to look at. Her spell list alone had hundreds of different spells available, all with an option to 'improve' with her 'experience points'. She'd only absorbed the Dark from a single giant rat in the cave, so she was more limited than the others in what she could use it for. But, even so, the multitude of options was overwhelming.

She could dump the points into her 'mana pool' or 'mana recovery rate'. She could put the points into similar stats for 'stamina'. There were options that'd up her resistance to wounds, and the rate at which she'd recover from injuries. So many options that her head throbbed thinking about them all.

Scrolling down her spell list, Lily frowned.

The names of all her spells... They were a little over the top, to say the least. Divine Perception. Holy Fury. Lance of Justice. Righteous Smite. Angelic Annihilation. A whole lot of 'holy' this and 'justice' that, followed by descriptions that sounded downright horrific.

It was like her spells themselves were trying to convince her that they were the 'good guys'.

She shook her head, clenched her fist around the twenty-sided gemstone. Immediately, all the menus disappeared. For a brief instant, she could see a scribbled mess of glowing lines in the air in front of her before that disappeared too.

"It feels wrong," she sighed. "I can't."

"Think of it like eating meat," Sid said, looking back at her as they walked. "Something died for your benefit. You don't *have* to kill animals, but their meat tastes good. You don't *have* to kill monsters, but doing so makes you stronger."

"But I *don't* kill animals," Lily said.

"And you didn't kill that monster rat either, Joe did. It's no different from when we all went fishing and shared some of the cooked fish with you after. It's not *wrong* for you to eat it, just like it's not *wrong* for you to use those points."

"Not like they're alive in the first place," Gav added. "Just monsters in a video game. You're overthinking things, Lil."

For once, Sid didn't argue with Gav.

"Those rats might not have been scary," Hal chimed in from his place at the back of the column. "But other things will be. There are monsters in this world. Dangerous monsters. If we're going to survive here, we need every advantage we can get. Right now, that means spending those points to make yourself tougher."

"I know," Lily sighed again. "I know."

"We're almost there," Kiera said beside her, loud enough to cut off anything anyone else might've been about to say. Coming to Lily's rescue. "See? The city's just there, on the horizon."

"No camping out tonight!" Gav clapped happily. "And no more having to share a tent with Smelly McFarts-In-His-Sleep. Praise the Light!"

"I do not!" Hal said, cheeks turning red as he glanced between Gav and Kiera. "He's making that up!"

Kiera ignored him. Her eyes on Lily.

"Could you come with me for a second?" She asked. "I need tell you something. Privately."

"Sure," Lily said quickly, nodding her head.

"Whatever you have to say, you can say to all of us," Joe grunted.

Kiera ignored him too.

She led Lily away from the guys, far enough away that they wouldn't be able to overhear a word spoken. But they remained in view, and Kiera watched them as she spoke.

"You remember what happened in the cave?" Kiera asked softly, voice barely above a whisper. "When the Dark from the Runties lit up and changed."

Lily nodded her head.

"That's not supposed to be possible," Kiera said.

"What do you mean?"

"Dark and Light are eternal. When a Darkspawn dies – any Darkspawn – the Dark that they're made of dissipates, returns to the Abyss where it's absorbed and made into something new. Another Darkspawn can absorb a fallen Darkspawn's power, use it to make themselves stronger. But the Dark itself doesn't change or disappear, not ever. It *can't*."

"But... But that's what happened."

"Exactly."

Lily looked to Kiera, saw the stony-faced look the succubus was wearing. The hardness in her eyes.

"I was sent to discover why the priests summoned you and your friends here, and now I know. You're weapons, Lily. You're not just here to kill Darkspawn, you're here to eliminate Dark itself. No-one knows it yet, but the priests have just started a war."

"Wh- What does that mean?"

Kiera looked at her then, face relaxing. A familiar half-smile curled Kiera's lips, confident and reassuring.

"For now, nothing. There's an inn not too far away from the cathedral called Hound's Hollow. I'll be there tonight, and tomorrow night, and a maybe few nights more. If you can, come see me, okay?"

"Okay," Lily said with a nod. "I will. I promise."

"You better," Kiera winked, sending tingles down Lily's spine. Butterflies fluttering in her chest. "See you there."

Then the succubus turned, began walking away. Away from Lily. Away from the boys. Away from the facade. The next time Lily saw her, she knew, Kiera wouldn't be wearing that tight-fitting priestess robe anymore.

What would she be wearing instead?

Tonight, Lily promised herself.

She'd find out tonight.