

## Dark and Light

### Chapter 13 - Dark

#### Kiera

As Lily woke, Kiera snuggled her.

She listened to the petite girl's heartbeat; a light, slow rhythm that sped up as Lily grew closer to waking. Shallow, steady breathing stirred into a cute groan. Lily shifted in Kiera's embrace, arms and legs stretching out as the last vestiges of sleep faded away.

Lily mumbled something incoherent, her eyes flicking open and staring right into Kiera's.

The smile that appeared on her face made Kiera tingle.

Before she knew what was happening, they were kissing.

A long, lingering kiss that left Lily breathless and stirred up a fire in Kiera so hot that it took actual willpower for her not to have her way with her lover right there and then.

"Good morning," she whispered instead, smiling as Lily panted. "Sleep well?"

Lily nodded her head, eyes twinkling.

"Dream," she panted. "I had a weird dream..."

"Oh?"

"There was a woman... I think..." Lily pursed her lips, eyebrows scrunching. "We were here. And you... you were asleep? And then... I can't remember..."

Lily shook her head as if to clear it.

"Dreaming about other women?" Kiera raised an eyebrow teasingly. "And getting naughty while I'm asleep too? I never knew you were so wicked."

Red-faced, Lily shook her head quickly.

"It wasn't one of *those* dreams," she squeaked. "It was weird. Like... The woman, I think she said she was your mother? I'm not sure."

"So you're into mother-daughter play too," Kiera tutted. "And here I was thinking you were an innocent, pure priestess girl."

Lily pouted.

Kiera kissed her again.

They stayed in town for a few more days. Enjoying the sights and scenes, Lily savouring the local delicacies while Kiera kept her ear to the ground. Listening for any rumours that might prove useful.

When she heard about some grand crusade to retake the Northern Wastes, she scoffed and laughed. Shook her head at the silliness of humans.

The Northern Wastes were just that – wastes.

Lands swarmed with Darkspawn, with an endless supply of new ones pouring in from the North's many mountains. There was no reclaiming that territory. Not without lighting every cave and crack in the ground, somehow cutting off an entire Path's worth of raw Dark.

It was a fool's errand.

Or, at least, she'd *believed* it was until she'd listened in on a conversation between guards in two different trader convoys.

Paladin.

A holy knight leading the charge.

A man from another world.

One of Lily's friends.

As soon as she heard the news, Kiera knew what it meant. What was coming. But there was nothing she could do about it, so why waste the energy worrying? She'd take

Lily somewhere far away, where they could ignore the world and its conflicts. A little home in some unexplored, exotic place.

A dream.

After those few days, the pair of them headed out. No particular direction in mind, just happy to see the world together.

Before they knew it, the steppe was far behind them.

Surrounding them now was endless farmland. Fields of gold divided by hedgerows and wooden fences.

Beautiful in a simple, ordinary way.

At least until the bedraggled adventurers started showing up.

## Lily

The first two or three, she'd been able to brush off.

Dirty, tired adventurers making their way along the road. Walking in the opposite direction to Lily and Kiera. Those first few men and women hadn't said a word, had barely *looked* at the pair of them. They'd just walked by with their eyes on the ground and their shoulders slumped.

But when the trickle of people became a flood, it became impossible to ignore.

Groups of dozens, tired and weary and beaten. More than a few sporting bruises and bandaged wounds. All walking in the same direction; away from wherever her and Kiera were headed.

One man, a haunted look in his eyes, had warned them. Told them to turn back. When Lily had asked why, the man had uttered just a single word – his entire body shuddering as he did.

Griffin.

That group had been the last they'd seen.

"We should turn back," Kiera said as they walked. "If there's a feral Mythic nearby, I'd rather not stick around."

"Do Mythics go feral?" Lily asked immediately.

"Not really," Kiera shrugged. "They're arrogant, self-important shits. Sometimes, when they don't feel like they're getting the 'respect' they deserve, they snap. Probably, the Griffin demanded some silly offerings from the locals that they couldn't provide. Angry bird brat throws a fit, adventurers get called in to deal with it."

Arrogant. Self-important. Angry.

Words that she knew Priests would use to describe Darkspawn. And *that* certainly hadn't been true.

Who was to say Mythics weren't also misunderstood?

"Those guys said the camp isn't far," Lily said, glancing up at the evening sky. Only an hour or so of sunlight left. "We should at least check it out before we decide to leave."

"It's not going to be friendly," Kiera sighed, shaking her head. "Mythics are... unpleasant."

"It might be friendly," Lily blushed. "After all, I *am* a holy Paladin thingy. That has to count for something."

Just as the last hints of daylight were fading away, they arrived at the camp. The adventurer army, assembled to hunt down and slay the raging Mythic.

It was a mess.

Tents of every shape and size and colour, with no discernible pattern or order. It was like a thousand different people with different tastes had gathered in one place and hitched up their tents together. Which, now that Lily thought of it, was probably exactly what had happened.

A small city of tents, with makeshift mud roads between them. The ground trampled by countless boots. The fields around it scavenged dry of their crops.

And the people. They were just as downtrodden and defeated as those on the road had been. Haunted eyes and stooped backs.

There were men in once-shiny plate armour, women in torn and muddy leather gear. Barbarians whose beards and firs has been singed, mages whose robes were in tatters. All of them, to a one, were dirty and downcast.

No Priests wandering about, Lily noted.

"What happened?" Lily breathed, absorbing it all in.

"They fought," Kiera said beside her. "And lost."

"All of them?"

"Mythics are tough," Kiera shrugged. "And Griffins are far from the weakest Mythics. It'd take a lot of humans to bring one down. More than this, for sure."

As they moved through the camp, two larger tents emerged from the mess. Not tall enough to be seen from the fringes of the camp, but wide as palaces in their own right. One a pure, unstained white – the only clean fabric in the camp, it seemed. The other was constructed of a gold-gilded, purple cloth.

"Guild representatives," Kiera said, pointing at the regal, purple tent. "They'll be in charge here. The white one belongs to the Priests. I can smell the wards from here."

"Priests? Why are they here?"

Mythics were 'holy' and 'divine', weren't they? Why would Priests be here helping people to kill one?

"Healers," Kiera answered.

Lily made a b-line for the white tent.

The nearer she and Kiera got, the louder the sounds got. Grunts and groans of pain. Shouting. Screams. The tent was open in many places, giving Lily a view of the interior.

Rows and rows of beds, all occupied by the wounded. Dozens and dozens; at least a hundred, probably a lot more.

Lily's eyes shot wide open.

She hesitated before stepping forward, marching towards the nearest tent opening.

Kiera snatched her arm and pulled her back before she crossed the threshold into the tent. When she spun around, Lily saw confusion in Kiera's face. Worry.

"I can help," Lily whispered – pleaded. "I can heal."

"Not *that* much," Kiera said. "You're not powerful enough. All you'll do is get in the way."

The words stung. Hurt all the more so because they were true.

Lily slumped.

"I have to do something," she said softly. "I can't... I can't just do nothing."

"Why?"

Lily looked up at Kiera, saw the honest curiosity there.

Why?

Why *did* she want to help?

Even as the sounds rippled out from the tent's entrance, the cries and groans of the dying, Lily looked within. Searched through her jumbled, horrified, chaos of emotions for the truth.

"Because," she gulped, blushed, looked down at her feet. "Because it's right."

Why was she so embarrassed to admit it?

It was *true*.

She wanted to help because it was the right thing to do. Was that so wrong? Was it *silly* for her to want to-

Lily glanced up, expecting to see judgement on Kiera's face. Amusement at how

'innocent' and 'cute' she was. But all she found on her lover's face was a smile and twinkling, loving eyes.

Without a word, Kiera tugged on Lily's arm, led her around the tent. And, wordlessly, Lily followed.

When they reached a dark spot, out of sight, they stopped.

"Promise me something," Kiera said, releasing her.

"Uh," Lily blinked. "I don't-"

Kiera raised both her hands, grabbed hold of her right index finger with her other hand.

"Promise me," Kiera said firmly, "you won't let it go to your head. You won't let it *change* you."

There was something in that tone. A hardness that Lily couldn't refuse. Quickly, she nodded her head. Not sure what she was agreeing to, but trusting Kiera completely.

"I promise."

Then she watched in stunned silence, jaw dropping wide open, as Kiera yanked her own finger off.

The digit vibrated in the air, dissolved into a small cloud of Dark so dense and black that it looked like a hole in reality. An empty void devoid of life and light and colour.

Kiera extended it to Lily.

And, the moment it got close to her, the Dark erupted into Light. A beacon so bright it was like staring into the sun. Only it didn't hurt or blind her, didn't cause any discomfort at all. On the contrary, as that Light flew into Lily, suffused her with power, Lily felt a surge of energy unlike anything she'd ever experienced before.

She gasped, stumbled back.

As suddenly as the Light had appeared, it was gone. Leaving her and Kiera in the same shadowed spot beside a white tent.

"That'll be more than enough power for you to heal the injured," Kiera said, a half-cocked smile on her face. "Just don't go overboard with it. And... be careful."

"You're not," Lily blinked, her entire body buzzing. "You're not coming with me?"

"Tent's warded. I can't go in there without revealing what I am. And the Priests wouldn't like *that* one bit."

"But..."

"Go," Kiera smiled. "Help. I've got something I need to take care of anyway. I'll come find you later."

"Okay..."

It was too much power.

Way, way too much.

If the Darkspawn rat had given Lily a cupful of power, what she now possessed was an ocean's worth. So much raw power that it was difficult for her to even comprehend.

Holding her magical gemstone in one hand, she scrolled through menus and options. Fond herself staring at a list of spells and abilities she could unlock and improve. There, near the top of the list with her other unlocked powers, was her healing magic.

She gulped, hesitated.

Then, inhaling a deep breath, she committed herself. Poured a quarter of Kiera's gift into improving her healing spell.

Another quarter went into her magical reserves. Boosting the amount of raw mana she had available to her to mind-boggling degrees. She felt no different after it, but somehow *knew* she'd be able to cast her healing magic a whole lot more before feeling drained.

The other half of the power, she kept as a standby.

If the healing magic proved too weak to fix someone, she'd commit more of Kiera's

gift to improving it. If she started to feel the fatigue and drain of mana depletion, she'd increase her reserves yet more.

*Don't go overboard*, Kiera had said. *Be careful*.

Was this careful enough?

Lily clutched her gemstone, slipped in back into a pocket.

Then she strode towards the white tent, slipped inside.

What she found inside was like a scene out of a graphic war film. Hundreds of wounded men and women, too many to all have a bed to themselves. Some bandaged and sleeping, others crying out as blood pooled from gashes and cuts, others still with missing limbs. Groups of exhausted-looking Priests crowded around certain beds, performing crude surgeries, trying to save whoever they could.

Lily almost took a step back, almost fled at the carnage.

A Mythic had done *this*?

How?

Why?

On a bed near her, a man started convulsing. Almost his entire body was bandaged. Or, what was left of it was. The man, it seemed, had lost both legs somehow.

The bandages at the ends of his leg-stumps were wet and red.

Lily glanced around quickly, tried speaking.

Her voice was lost in the cacophony of groans and shouting and cries, a deafening din of activity.

No-one but her seemed to have noticed the dying man.

It was too much.

Noise from all directions, so loud she could barely hear herself think. Carnage like she'd never witnessed before. Never dreamed of. A foul stench filled the air, putrid and stomach-churning. Lily wasn't sure if she wanted to curl up into a ball in wail, or hunch over and vomit, or run away and never look back.

She stood in place for long seconds, utterly overwhelmed.

Then the man's thrashing grew less violent. His flails weakening as his life leaked away.

Lily moved.

Her body dashed to the man's bed, hands reaching out to grasp whatever bare skin she could find.

Healing magic flared.

A brilliant golden light pouring from Lily's palms, flowing into the man. Filling him.

It took only an instant.

Lily stepped – stumbled – backwards, eyes wide and mouth agape.

The man was sitting up in bed, alert and alive. His hands reaching down, grasping the legs that'd just sprouted from bleeding stumps. Every wound on his body healed, every scar vanished, every aching joint and tired muscle rejuvenated.

He looked over at Lily, stared at her with open wonder.

Lily's face flushed. In the back of her mind, she could sense her mana reserves. The tiniest bit spent, but the vast majority of it still there – ready to be used.

She turned on the spot, examined the chaos around her.

And, steeling herself, she got to work.

## Kiera

War was inevitable. Lily's moronic friends were seeing to *that*. It was coming, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. She couldn't save this world from human stupidity, any more than she could save it from Light's oppression.

But she could do *this*.

She swept through the air, her True Form sleek in the gentle winds. Darting high above the ground, but near enough that she'd still be able to sense it.

Knowing Mythics, it'd be somewhere around here...

Somewhere elevated. A raised cliff or ridge. Where it'd be able to look down on everything else. But not someplace *too* high. It'd want to be seen. Feared. Respected.

She sent her senses out, searched as far as she could.

There.

A resistance. A *repulsion* of her powers.

The Griffin's own aura clashing with hers.

In that moment, she knew exactly where it was. And it knew she was coming. Heading right for it.

Would it be stupid enough to accept the challenge?

Would it be *that* arrogant?

Kiera beat her huge wings, launched herself in the Griffin's direction. As fast as she could fly. Which, as far as she was aware, was faster than almost any Mythic could match.

If it met her challenge, she'd stomp the beast.

If it ran, she'd hunt it down.

For the sorrow and pain it'd made Lily experience today, Kiera would punish the Mythic.

Come dawn, there'd be one less Griffin in the world.

One Mythic for all the Darkspawn Lily's friends were slaughtering. And for all the countless more that'd perish in the coming war.

Kiera sensed the repulsion – the Griffin – moving away.

Fleeing.

She smirked. Gave chase.

## Lily

"Now is the time to attack!" A grizzled man snapped.

"We don't have enough men!" Another snapped back. "Look what happened last time we tried!"

"The beast won't be expecting us," a third voice piped in. "As far as it knows, we're beaten. If we were to take it by surprise this time..."

Lily zoned the debate out.

Why they'd invited *her*, she had no idea.

Probably had to do with her healing the many injured adventurers with a power beyond anything any of them had witnessed before. But, *even so*, what was *she* supposed to do *here*?! She wasn't a military strategist or a battle planner. She wasn't even a *fighter*. She was just... just...

A healer?

A wanderer?

A nobody?

She'd given all three as answers when the awed Priests had asked her who she was. One of them, in a conspiratorial whisper, had asked her if she was an Elf or an Angel in disguise.

How was she supposed to respond to *that*?

And where in the heck was Kiera?

"Histories from the last Griffin slaying," an old woman in a robe hummed, "record a thousand magi participants. We have fewer than three hundred, and that's including the deserters. We simply don't have the means to—"

"Mages aren't everything," a disgruntled warrior growled. "I'll take a well-trained archer over a pompous mage any day. What we need is..."

Why *had* they invited her to this meeting?

It wasn't as if any of them were even asking her about anything. Not that she'd have any answers in the first place. But still! It was like she was just a prop. A powerful healer for them to point at, claim as a trump card, use to make their arguments on whether to stay and fight, or abandon their grand quest.

Lily glanced around at the dozen faces, the purple cloth walls surrounding them, the table-made-of-many-tables they were all seated at.

Where was Kiera?

She tried not to worry. Tried not to panic.

Being without Kiera... It was like she was missing a part of *herself*. There was a big, ominous void beside her where Kiera should be.

Was she okay?

What was the thing she'd needed to do?

Why wasn't she back yet?

"-with her healing we can-"

"-without it, half our army would be-"

"-useful resource-"

"-we should-"

Lily was near enough ready to clamp her hands over her ears, tell everyone to shut up, when every voice went silent at once.

Dawn light leaked in through an open tent flap, a figure silhouetted against it.

Kiera stepped into the tent, a smirk tugging at her lips.

From the expressions of the people around her, Lily was half expecting to see Kiera in her True Form. But no, in she walked with her Human Form face and her curvy body and a slightly revealing dress. And, it seemed, a cloth sack over her shoulder.

A sack that bulged out wider than her torso.

It was an almost comical sight. Kiera holding a sack that looked like it should be too heavy to carry. All the people around the table staring at her in shocked outrage. Her standing there with that smug, confident smile.

Lily grinned. Almost burst out laughing in sheer joy.

"How dare you!" The grizzled man shouted.

"This is a private meeting," the old mage woman grumbled.

"Get out! Out!" Another cried.

"Guards," someone else called.

Kiera ignored them all.

She hefted her sack like it weighed nothing, tossed it across the tent to the bulky table.

The sack crashed into the table, opening slightly.

A tongue lolled out of a large beak.

"Light," someone breathed, stunned.

A Griffin's head.

"This is a nice tent," Kiera said above the silence, confidence dripping from her voice like molten chocolate. "Very fancy. Lily, you and I will be staying in here tonight. Everyone else, you can all fuck off and find somewhere else to sleep. Now."