

Dark and Light

Chapter 15 - Dark

Lily

Kiera froze.

They were walking across open land, not a road in sight and no civilisation for miles. Just endless grassy fields and a forest in the distance.

"Can you feel that?" Kiera whispered, eyes narrowing on the horizon. "It's... *wrong*. Over there."

Lily blinked at her, turned her gaze to the distant trees.

She was about to answer – tell Kiera she couldn't feel anything at all – when a thought occurred to her. A memory of using magic. The very first time she'd used it, in fact. The thing that'd changed the course of her and Kiera's lives forever.

Her sensing spell.

Lily closed her eyes, focused.

The last time she'd used the spell, it'd been by opening menus with her gemstone and clicking a 'Cast Spell' button. But, if it was anything like her healing magic, she could activate it mentally too.

Even as she thought about it, the sense awakened.

She felt Kiera beside her. Knew that if she pushed her magical sense against her lover, she'd *connect* with her. Same as that first interaction they'd had, so long ago. As tempting as it was to experience Kiera like that again, Lily reached out instead.

The sense only reached a few yards before it became strained. Like a rope that'd reached its full length. It couldn't extend any further.

Maybe if she upgraded the spell...

Lily shook her head.

"I don't feel anything," she said.

Curiously, she didn't feel the fatigue of using her magical senses. It drained a tiny, infinitesimal amount of her mana reserves. So small an amount that Lily barely registered it.

Could she keep the magical sense active all the time?

"That forest," Kiera growled. "I can't feel it. It's like there's nothing there. Emptiness. A hole in the world."

Kiera could sense *that* far away?

The treeline was miles away. Quite literally on the horizon. Walking at their current pace, it'd take at least two hours before they even got close to the treeline, if not more.

"We should check it out!" Lily said happily.

When she glanced over at Kiera, the succubus had a hand over her face, was slowly shaking her head.

"What?" Lily beamed. "C'mon! It'll be fun!"

Kiera let out a dramatic groan, still covering her face.

"I'll make it up to you," Lily promised.

Kiera sighed.

The nearer they got to the treeline, more unusual the forest got. It didn't stretch fully along the horizon, and the section of it they could see looked like a perfect semi-circle. Miles and miles wide. And the trees themselves; ancient willows with dangling green vines, bright green and vibrant.

Everything past the first row of trees was obscured by emerald vines and forest haze. It wasn't dark, not blocked by shadow. But the depths of the forest were a mystery

all the same.

"I don't like this," Kiera whispered as they approached the treeline. "I can't sense *anything*."

"Maybe it's an illusion," Lily hummed.

"I'd sense an illusion."

"It's just some trees," Lily said. "Nothing to worry about!"

Still, as they got closer, a flood of anxiety flushed through Lily. She glanced from the treeline to Kiera and back again.

This wasn't silly right? She wasn't being idiotic?

Kiera knew way, *way* more about this kind of stuff than Lily did. If the forest was making Kiera uncomfortable, Lily should've been downright *terrified* by it. Something unsettling Kiera? Just the *possibility* of that was difficult to comprehend with how powerful Kiera was.

A shiver ran down Lily's spine.

She was being stupid. She should listen to Kiera and-

Lily felt it.

The edge of the forest.

Like an invisible, warm blanket. Offering comfort and safety and rest. A home away from the chaotic world.

A few yards away from the treeline, finally in range of her still-active senses, Lily *felt* the forest. Just the edges of it. Like some invisible, glass dome.

In that instant, she *knew* the forest.

Knew it as intimately as she'd known Kiera that first day.

It was safe.

A place that'd welcome Lily with open arms, keep her safe from anything and everything. It was peace and serenity, the calm in the storm. It was a promise of rest and relaxation, of days spent in joy and laughter and nights spent in simple satisfaction. Contentment.

She continued walking towards the forest's edge.

"Lily?" Kiera's voice sounded behind her. "What're you- Wait! Lily!"

"It's okay," Lily smiled, looking over her shoulder at a worried Kiera. "It's not an illusion. It's..."

The invisible wall around the forest pulsed. It pushed out, moved past Lily and stopped in the gap between her and Kiera. To either side of her, willow trees sprouted from the ground. All along the inside of the barrier, trees grew from nothing to full-grown behemoths in seconds. A new treeline that interwove with the old one seamlessly.

Beautiful, hypnotic music played from deeper in the forest. A curtain of green vines and leaves grew from newly formed tree branches, falling between Lily and Kiera like an emerald veil.

The last thing Lily saw before vibrant green obscured her view was Kiera reaching a hand forward, only for that hand to collide with the invisible barrier – pushing the succubus back, away from Lily and the forest.

Lily tried to speak, to call for Kiera. But her lips refused to shape the words.

Her body moved by itself, leading her deeper into the forest.

Kiera

A barrier of Light!

Why wasn't she able to sense it?!

Since when did Mythics start hiding themselves like *this*?

It didn't matter. All that mattered was Lily. Keeping her safe. Protecting her from...

whatever the fuck was going on.

She was in her True Form in an instant, sending out a spray of weak sparks. Barely powerful enough to scare a rabbit, but more than enough to make the Light barrier react to Dark. Ripples of multi-coloured light shone along the barrier surface in all directions, travelling several feet before fading out.

Kiera launched herself into the air.

While she couldn't sense the barrier directly, the emptiness in her senses would let her know exactly where it was. Anywhere the void in her senses existed, the barrier would extend to.

Still, she sent out low-powered sparks. Tracked the curvature of the barrier by its reaction to the Dark attacks.

All the while, her mind raced.

Anything that could hide itself from her like this *had* to be powerful. She'd never even *heard* of a Mythic power that could block Darkspawn senses. It was a complete unknown.

And unknowns were dangerous.

Lily...

Whatever it took, she'd get Lily out of there. Protect the girl. Even if she had to brute force her way through the barrier, burn the entire forest to cinders. No matter what it cost, she'd save Lily.

She flew over the barrier at a safe distance.

While not as destructive as wards, the barrier wasn't something she wanted to tangle with. She could still feel the tingle in her hand from that contact with it.

Kiera searched the forest from above, trying to see through the canopy. But the leaves were too thick, and there didn't seem to be any openings. No hint as to what waited for Lily within. And no entry points that Kiera could find.

As she flew over the centre of the barrier, she found a tree that was larger than the rest. Bulkier and broader; its limbs like arms, hands of bushy leaves and vines. In its bark, Kiera saw a huge, unmoving face.

Treant.

They were meant to be extinct.

Kiera had only heard stories, legends from the great wars between Dark and Light. The massacre and the hunt and the retribution. Nothing specific, just vague notions. Mythics in the shapes of huge trees that ruled over ancient forests.

She snarled, launched herself over the colossal Mythic. Sped towards the other side of the barrier.

Lily

Lily's body followed the music.

She tried to resist it at first, fight against her body's betrayal. But, the more she listened to that music, the more her will to fight receded.

A single instrument. A harp, perhaps. And a gentle, calming tune.

The notes vibrated through Lily's body. Smothering her worries, washing away her panic. Until all she felt was a serene calmness. A dull blanket of apathy wrapped around her, guiding her on towards the source of that tune.

A vague feeling of wonder forced its way into her chest.

As she walked through a curtain of vines, another section of the forest revealed itself. The floor covered in bright flowers and mushrooms, glowing dust rising from the damp earth. Small, inch-tall fairies flitted about; giggling and dancing in the air before disappearing behind some well-kept shrubs.

In the next section, she saw waist-tall gnome-like creatures. Not quite human in appearance, with beards of moss and colourless skin. They tended the plants in slow, methodical motions, trimming bushes and petting large mushrooms. They paid no attention to Lily as she walked past them, boots trampling flowers as she went.

Past another curtain of vines and Lily found herself in a grove of dryads. Green skinned women with tree-bark clothes and weeds for hair, their eyes like small black pebbles.

Unlike the gnomes, the dryads *did* pay attention to her.

All of them, over a dozen, watched her as she walked through their grove. Unmoving, they stared at her, their faces unreadable.

Lily's heart thundered in her chest. She held her breath.

Those alien eyes followed her every step through the grove, not leaving Lily until she strode through another green curtain.

The next segment was – thankfully – empty.

Her legs kept moving, taking her deeper and deeper into the enchanted forest. She saw creatures out of fairy-tale and legend. Centaurs and minitours, sprites and golems, even a brilliant white unicorn.

Mythics. All of them.

How many were there?

If the forest was as dense with them as it appeared, there'd be entire *legions* of Mythics here.

The thought sent shivers down Lily's spine.

Kiera. She was in danger.

But the worry was quickly crushed under the music that kept tugging Lily onwards. Try as she might, she couldn't muster up any emotion save dreamy wonder. Any time a different feeling began to stir, the music quickly washed it away.

With every step, the music grew louder and clearer.

Until, at last, she found the source.

In a segment all to himself, an elf with flowing silver hair sat down on a raised root, plucking at a small harp.

Every note the elf plucked reverberated inside Lily's body.

She approached him, swaying with each step.

"Another lost soul stumbles upon this haven," the elf man said, not looking away from his harp. His beautiful voice only added to the tune he was playing. "Welcome, weary wanderer."

"S- stop," Lily gasped as she reached the elf. "Music."

"Would that I could," the elf smiled sadly. "I can no more stop playing than you can stop breathing, my lady."

Each sting plucked was like its own cloud fogging Lily's thoughts. Her body swayed to the melody even as she fought against the apathetic haze threatening to overtake her.

"You are an interesting one," the elf said, finally looking at Lily. "No human has ever resisted the Sweet Song so successfully. I can hear the Light in you. Fascinating thing, aren't you?"

Lily tried to speak. No words formed in her mind.

The elf shook his head, stopped playing his tune.

At once, the haze in her mind began to vanish. Lily stumbled in place, almost collapsed. She gasped, clutched her chest.

"I can endure suffocation for a short time," the elf said, his smile widening. "Now answer me human; what are you?"

Kiera

Death as far as the eye could see.

As she watched, the forest moved again. A few yards in the same direction as before. The void in Kiera's senses – the Light barrier – shifted. The trees it left behind, those no longer inside that invisible bubble, died the instant they exited the barrier. Green leaves rotting to nothing in the blink of an eye. Tree trunks collapsing in on themselves, leaving nothing but grey husks behind. Husks that, at the merest of touches, disintegrated to dust.

Those same hollow husks and piles of dust extended all the way to the horizon. A miles-wide trail of death and decay in the wake of the moving forest. A huge circle with the Treant at its centre.

There were no holes in the barrier. No gaps for Kiera to slip inside. No options but brute force.

She hesitated.

If Lily was a prisoner to whatever was inside the forest, Kiera attacking might lead to Lily being harmed. Or worse.

Perhaps... Perhaps Lily would be okay without her.

Maybe the Treant and whatever other Mythics might be in the forest would leave her alone. Let her pass through unharmed.

Not likely.

But then, Lily *was* a Paladin. Chosen by the Eternal Light. That had to count for *something*. Right?

Kiera lowered herself to deadland behind the forest, scoured the area for several miles. Searching for any clues or hints, for *anything* that might help. She'd never really prayed before, but now she found herself praying to the Dark Matron for Lily's safety. Prayed she was making the right choice in not attacking the barrier.

When she found a human skeleton amongst the ruin, Kiera swore.

Instinct launched her high into the air. Rage fuelled her as she sped back to the forest, summoning her whip as the air rushed past her.

She prayed again. This time that she wasn't too late.

The instant she reached the forest, she started throwing all her might against it. Whip crashing and crackling against the invisible barrier.

Light flared and rippled out.

Kiera screamed, lashed out even harder.

Lily

"Paladin," Lily gasped, trembled. "The Priests, they-"

The elf snarled, making Lily jump.

As quickly as the elf's rage flared, it was gone. A mask of serene calm replacing the anger. A pleasant smile, dreamy eyes.

"Welcome, *Priestess*," the word sounded sour, a forced smile on the elf's face as he said it. "To the last bastion of the Light."

"No! I mean, I'm not..." Lily blushed. "I'm not a Priest. I'm... I'm Lily. Me and my friends. We, uhh..."

Where to even begin?

Lily's mind reeled. Like trying to stand on a pair of legs that'd spent all day lounging, it was taking her brain a moment to catch up after the hazy daze. How was she supposed to explain everything and have it make sense like *this*?

"Your friends," the elf said dryly. "Including the demon currently throwing itself at our defences?"

Kiera!

"Yes!" Lily said quickly. "Well, I mean... That's not what I meant. Kiera is... she's..."

"Ah," the elf said, nodding his head slowly. "Brainwashed by a succubus. That might explain your resistance to the song... No matter, I'll simply have to pour more power into it."

"I'm not brainwashed!" Lily snapped loudly.

The elf raised an eyebrow at her. Lily felt her face heat.

"I'm *not*," she said with total certainty.

"As you say," the elf said sceptically. "Regardless, it matters not. The demon won't be able to breach our protections. Nothing of Dark can penetrate the barrier."

Her senses. Lily could *feel* the elf on the edge of her mind.

The magical sense she still had active, she'd forgotten about it in the haze. Had lost track of it. But now that the haze was retreating, her mind becoming more alert, she felt it.

The elf's *essence*.

It was... mournful. Defeated. Accepting.

"Some would consider it rude," the elf said, eyes widening slightly at her, "to *read* another without permission."

"I'm sorry!" Lily said quickly. "I didn't mean to-"

The elf's hand caught Lily's attention, cutting off her line of thought. It was twitching. Fingers curling to pluck strings, though not making actual contact with them.

"A purple face," the elf said, shaking his head. "Clutching my throat, forced to hold my breath while gagging for the relief of fresh, untainted air."

Lily frowned.

"We are slaves to our nature," the elf shrugged, bawling his twitching hand into a fist. "I was made to play. The gnomes were made to tend the fortress. The fairies were made to serve their king. The Phoenix," the elf grimaced, "was made to conquer *Her* spawn and win the war. We cannot resist our purpose."

"Wait," Lily frowned. "When you say 'we', you mean Mythics?"

The elf inclined his head.

"But..." Lily pursed her lips, thought for a moment. "What about Griffins?"

"Some of our purposes allow for more freedom than others," the elf smiled. A fake, forced smile that Lily only recognised as such because of her magical sense. "Griffins are sentinels and scouts, messengers, hunters. Purposes with plenty of choice, and the might to take advantage of that freedom. If only we were all so fortunate."

Lily opened her mouth, but a strum of the small harp silenced her before she could speak. Her eyes widened as the elf shrugged his sympathy.

"I am sorry," he hummed. "This place is safety for us. Here, we need not worry about being slaughtered for our flesh. No trinkets will be made from our bones, another corpse sword won't be forged by our murders. May the Phoenix be cursed for all eternity for *that* abomination. Here is sanctuary, and it must remain so."

The elf played his harp, music filling the forest around them.

Lily felt her thoughts scramble, then disappear entirely.

"I can't say how you'll perish," the elf said in tune with his music. "Thirst, hunger, injury. What I can promise is that you won't feel it. Death will find you calm and relaxed. Happy. With a smile on your lips and joy in your heart."

Lily swayed on the spot, anxiety evaporating away. Terror vanishing like a cool breeze. All that remained was a serene calm.

Her body tugged her away from the elf, led her to a vine curtain and whatever luxuries lay in wait beyond. The music pulsing through her body promised sweet pleasure to wash away every ache and uncertainty.

Lily submitted herself to the tune. Drifted into the forest depths.