

Dark and Light

Chapter 21 - Dark

Kiera

The look of wonder and excitement on Lily's face filled Kiera with purpose. The more she saw those expressions, the more certain she became - this was where she wanted to be. Who she wanted to be with.

"Look! Look!" The petite girl squealed with glee. "What are *those*?! Look at how pretty they are!"

From what Kiera could tell, it was a simple stall selling woven fabrics embroidered with all manner of sea-based images. Serpents peeking out over blue waves, boats and ships on the open ocean, a beach framed by exotic trees.

As Lily gazed at the fabrics letting out little oohs and aahs, Kiera glanced around. Made sure everything was normal.

Sun-bleached buildings around a large, open market. Vendors selling everything from fishes and fruit to books and scrolls. Plenty of tan faces, and plenty of short-skirt dresses and topless men.

There was noise; vendors calling out their wares and trying to entice customers, people chatting and laughing, the sound of dogs barking and birds cawing.

Nothing abnormal. No sign of a trap.

Still, she kept on her guard. Scanned the area with more than just her eyes.

Her senses touched the minds of everyone around, a broad net encompassing all and searching for specific feelings. Duplicity and deceit and aggression, the tension that came before an ambush.

There was plenty of mild deceit; the vendors, no doubt. And some very tame aggression from a few argumentative individuals. But no threat. No real danger.

Not yet, at least. Not here.

Kiera allowed her own tension to ease a little.

"Want to buy any?" She asked, stepping close beside Lily.

"Hmm..." Lily considered for a long moment, then shook her head.

The stall vendor tried to convince her to change her mind; first talking about how fine and regal his tapestries were, then mentioning his 'hungry children'. Kiera stepped in, nudged Lily on as soon as she saw the sympathy in her lover's eyes. Left to her own devices, Kiera was certain the girl would buy every piece of fabric the man had to sell – and the stall itself too – to help feed his imaginary family.

From there, they visited a host of other stalls. Bought an abundance of food and spices, new clothes and gear for the both of them, bedding for long nights in wild places.

"It's so nice here," Lily said as evening came. Sitting atop the flat roof of their inn, she stared up at the purple sky with an easy smile. "We should stay for a while. Rest up."

Kiera didn't respond. Didn't want to disappoint her.

"We can't, can we?"

"I don't think it'd be a good idea," Kiera sighed.

"Because Yasra?"

Kiera nodded her head.

Lily shifted closer to her.

"We can always come back here," Kiera said, wrapping an arm around her flower. "Once Yasra's been dealt with. Spend a few weeks here unwinding, catching fish and building sand statues. Or whatever it is people do in a place like this."

"They'll send someone else," Lily whispered.

The truth of it stabbed at Kiera. If - *when* - she defeated Yasra, nothing would really change. They'd still be on the run together, hiding from the Princes and Priests and

everyone else who wanted to hurt or use Lily. There'd still be the issue of the Eternal Light and Infinite Dark having *far* too much interest in Lily. And the world itself would still be barrelling swiftly towards obliteration.

What could she say? What could she do to reassure Lily?

"If they do," she promised, "we'll take care of it."

"Can't fight the whole world..."

"Watch me," Kiera smiled. "Wherever you wanna go, I'll take you."

She squeezed Lily closer, shifted until the petite girl was practically sitting on her lap. And together they stared skyward, watched as the purple sky and black clouds darkened to night in full.

Chill swept across the rooftop, but Kiera banished it. Sent out a gentle warmth for Lily to relax in.

"You know," the girl said softly, hesitantly, "there *is* another option. We don't *have* to keep running..."

"Going to your world?" Kiera asked.

Lily nodded her head.

"It's possible," Kiera said cautiously. "If you trust 'Mother' was telling the truth. Could be that lil' spell to get you home will send you somewhere else entirely, if it doesn't outright kill you."

"I trust her," Lily said.

Was that it? Did Lily want to go home?

It was an agonising possibility. And an inevitable one. How long could a girl wander around a foreign place before she started getting homesick? It was bound to happen eventually.

"Tell me about it," Kiera said softly. "Your home."

"Not much to tell," Lily murmured, suddenly awkward. "I've told you about cars and phones and stuff. And growing up, and-"

"Tell me about places," Kiera clarified. "If we decide to go, I want to know what I have to look forward to."

"Well, I didn't really see that much of the world," Lily said quickly, a slight hint of embarrassment in her voice. "Earth, I mean. There were places I *wanted* to see, but... I guess where we should go first would have to be..."

Kiera lay back, arm snug around Lily. Stared up at the sky and imagined all the places Lily described. A whole world without magic or Priests, Darkspawn or Mythics. Just the notion seemed absurd. What was the 'electricity' Lily described if not a catalyst for magic? But she tried to imagine it all the same. Towers of mailable stone and glass. Carriages of metal, horseless yet faster than any animal of nature.

A place where Lily would be safe.

Lily

They woke before sunup. Silently made their way back up to the inn's roof. Above them, the sky was barely beginning to brighten. A deep, dark blue stood out behind dark blankets of cloud.

Kiera banished her clothes with a flourish, turned to look at Lily with a smile that set her heart racing.

"We've still got a bit of time," Kiera winked. "What do you say to a little... *warm up*?"

"You're insatiable," Lily rolled her eyes, couldn't hide her blush. "Wasn't it you who said we shouldn't stay in one place too long?"

"Won't take long," Kiera said, "a couple of minutes."

"Oh yeah? When has it ever taken just 'a couple of minutes'?"

Kiera smirked, a twinkle in her eye. "Sounds like a challenge."

Lily focused for a moment, reached inside herself to a place she was growing ever more familiar with. At her behest, two glorious wings burst into existence on Lily's back. Ignoring her clothes, sprawling out wide and wonderful. Glowing, white, feathered wings – each one longer than Lily was tall.

Kiera smiled, shook her head.

"Boo," the Succubus said, taking on her True Form. Red and black, leather and horns. Bat-like wings and a serpentine tail. "You're no fun."

I'll show you 'fun' later, Lily promised.

Then she launched herself into the sky.

It was difficult at first, controlling what were essentially two whole new limbs. But, with a bit of practice, the movements became second nature. Like walking, she didn't think about moving knees or putting one foot in front of the other, she just did it. Scooping air into her wings, pushing it down and scooting herself higher and higher.

When she rose enough, Lily let the wind take over. Used her angelic wings to glide atop invisible currents. Only flapping her wings occasionally, to maintain height or to climb to a more favourable wind.

Kiera kept close at first, there to catch Lily if something went wrong. But, as Lily grew more confident and able, Kiera eased up and relaxed – started swooping and looping and circling, dancing through the air with graceful ease.

"Show off!" Lily yelled, knowing the wind would steal her words.

Kiera dived past her, a wide grin on her face.

-You haven't seen anything yet.-

Lily lurched in surprise.

Kiera's voice in her head? Not something she'd been expecting. And a reply to something the Succubus shouldn't have heard?

Magic.

You'd think I'd be used to it by now.

She shook her head, levelled out, smiled.

"Go on then," she called out. "Woo me!"

The sound of Kiera's laughter echoed in Lily's mind, sending warm tingles coursing through her.

The Succubus launched into a series of flawless patterns, trailing fire and leaving glowing lines in her wake. Lily watched, mesmerised by the bright trails, until she saw what Kiera was painting in the sky for all to see.

A massive, flaming flower.

"So much for being inconspicuous," Lily sighed.

As dawn came and went, they both fell into an easy rhythm. Kiera would lead and Lily would follow in her wake. The same winds and airpaths, with no need for Lily to worry about hitting crosswinds or getting lost.

She took the opportunity to open up her magical menus, distract herself with the myriad options there so she wouldn't fall asleep.

It's a part of me. The gemstone. The magic.

When it clicked that she could open the menus without holding her gemstone, other realisations quickly followed.

She could *interact* with the menus without touching them.

Move them around, open and close them, give herself new spells and abilities, explore options she hadn't known were even there before.

Lily opened a map of the world, gazed at the little dot that showed her current location.

How much of this world had she seen and explored?

Not a lot, she realised quickly.

There were entire provinces she hadn't set foot on, countless cities she'd never visited. The Free Cities, the Northern Wastes, a whole *continent* that was unexplored.

Could she really leave it all behind?

There it was again. The decision she and Kiera had to make.

Stay or flee.

Here or home.

She banished the map, refused to think about it. A time would come when they'd have to decide. But, for now, she just wanted to be free of the choice. The weight of it.

With a twitch of her brow, Lily banished the map.

Another menu called to her.

A certain spell demanding to be unlocked and used.

"We should arrive there tomorrow," Kiera said, slashing out with her tail and cutting clean through a wall of brambles.

"Arrive where?" Lily asked, watching from a thick tree branch.

"You'll see," Kiera smiled, slashing her way through the plants, flattening what was left until all that remained was a thorny bed. "I promised I'd take you there a long while ago."

"The Northern Wastes?" Lily asked, perking up.

"Definitely not," Kiera grimaced. "The last thing I need is you bouncing head-first into a warzone because you want to make friends with a pack of bloodthirsty orcs."

"They're not 'bloodthirsty'," Lily huffed, unable to mask her disappointment. "They're misunderstood."

Atop the flattened brambles, Kiera summoned a huge wooden panel; a square that was taller than Kiera herself. And, on top of that, she conjured furs and bedding enough to make a soft mattress. A nest for Lily to sleep in, while Kiera pretended to sleep next to her.

"I could still take the power that'd stop me needing to sleep," Lily said. "We wouldn't need to stop every day to—"

"Nope," Kiera hummed, pulling a blanket out of thin air. "I like it when you sleep. Your snores are adorable."

"I do *not* snore."

"Besides," Kiera added, stepping back to admire the makeshift mattress. "I've seen what no sleep does to humans."

"They get cranky?" Lily guessed.

"Not that," Kiera said with a brief smile. "No, I mean humans that, for whatever reason, took away their own ability to sleep. It... changes them. Makes them unhinged."

"That's something people can do here?" Lily asked. "Decide to stop sleeping?"

"Not exactly," Kiera hummed.

She didn't elaborate.

"Come on," the Succubus said, hopping onto their bed. "I wanna try something out."

Lily hopped off her branch, joined Kiera.

"Put a barrier up around us," Kiera said, wrapping her arms around Lily. "A big one, so we can move around and stand up. In fact, make it two barriers if you can."

Not what she'd been expecting.

Lily removed her hands from her blouse, which she'd been eagerly unstringing, and focused on the magic inside her.

A wide bubble popped into existence around the pair of them, followed by another. Lily expanded them both, pushing them out until they made up a house-sized dome. Larger barriers meant her magical reserves drained quicker, but with the well of power Lily had, it'd be days – if not weeks – before these two barriers emptied her.

"Perfect," Kiera smiled. "I can't sense anything outside it."

"That's a good thing?"

"It means nothing outside will be able to sense you when you're inside. When Yasra shows her face, you can hide and put up a barrier, keep her from sniffing you out."

Something about that caused Lily to twitch. A tinge of annoyance flaring behind her brow.

"I wonder..." A hint of playfulness entered Kiera's tone. "If your concentration breaks, will the barriers disappear? Can you keep them up while you're asleep? Distracted?"

"I... I don't know."

"Only one way to find out."

Kiera pounced on her.

The next morning, Lily woke to find her barriers still in place.

They took to the skies, Kiera leading the way.

Below them, a dark forest sprawled out in every direction as far as the eye could see. Massive trees, centuries – if not millennia – old covered the whole area, their branches intertwining in an endless web of bark and leaf.

And still. Completely unmoving.

No birds or animals, no rustling leaves or creaking wood.

It felt eerie. Unnerving.

Lily found herself glancing at every dark, shadowed area she flew over. Sure that there were eyes looking up at her but finding none. Only the unnatural stillness. The silence.

She made sure to fly a little higher, just in case.

As focused on the forest directly below her as she was, Lily didn't see it at first. It took Kiera whispering in her mind to snap Lily out of her anxious scrutiny.

-Look.-

Lily's eyes snapped up. First at Kiera, then at the black line on the horizon. Dark as the abyss, poking up from the forest into the sky, a structure that seemed at once impossible and imposing. A spear taller and wider than any skyscraper, piercing through clouds and into the heavens.

-Come.- Kiera's voice urged in her mind, solemn and serious. The tiniest hints of anger and resentment touched Lily's mind along with Kiera's words. *-There's something we need to do here. Something that's been a long time coming.-*

As Kiera rose higher into the air, Lily followed.

Flying ever closer to a pillar that seemed to grow taller and darker the nearer they got.