

Dark and Light

Chapter 22 - Light

Joseph

Men gasped and bowed as he walked by, stepping out of his path and whispering in hushed voices. The same word on every tongue.

Paladin.

By now, there wasn't a single one who hadn't seen Joe in action. The carnage and destruction he was capable of.

The Divine Crusader. The Hope of Mankind. The Chosen One.

Worship and reverie. Adoration.

All misplaced. He didn't care about their 'war'. And he certainly didn't give a shit about their world. This – the battles and the slaughter, him playing the role the Priests had given him – was simply a means to an end. An 'end' that was quickly approaching.

How many Darkspawn had he absorbed now?

Too many to count. Tens of thousands, at a bare minimum.

Enough for him to challenge a Succubus?

Now *that* was the real question.

If the Priests were to be believed, the answer was a resounding 'no'. But was that true, or a lie to keep him following their orders?

And if they *were* telling the truth? If he challenged the Succubus only to find himself outmatched?

Joe pushed the thoughts aside.

Soon, he'd have to make the call. With the war ramping up and the battles growing in size and ferocity, he'd have plenty of access to Dark. But the longer he spent here, the more torture Lily would have to endure at the hands of that monster.

But, for right now, he had other matters to focus on.

A summons from the Priests.

No doubt, they'd 'remind' him of his 'divine purpose', make sure to comment on him not being 'powerful enough' to defeat a Succubus yet. The same stupid powerplays he'd come to expect from the loons.

The walk to the Priesthood war-tent was short and tedious.

So many soldiers and camp servants bowing and kowtowing, practically worshipping him right there in the mud.

The sooner he was away from all this grovelling, the better.

When he stepped into the spacious Priesthood tent, one of the acolytes led Joe to a private room where an old Priest sat waiting at an ornate desk.

On the desk, Joe couldn't help notice, was a sword.

A sword unlike anything he'd seen before.

Its blade, longer than Joe's arm, shone silvery-white – seeming to glow from the inside with a pale light. The hilt a mixture of bone-white and sparkling gold. Elegant and beautiful, the crossguard shaped like two golden wings and the pommel with a matching golden talon.

"The time has come," the old Priest said, eyes on Joe. "For this last war to begin in earnest."

It took effort for Joe to drag his eyes from the beautiful, magical sword. And, as he did so, the whole room seemed to dim a little; the sword growing brighter. When Joe blinked, the tent room was back to ordinary brightness, though the sword continued to glow invitingly.

"The metal was forged from the hearts of Iron Golems," the Priest said softly, "over charcoal made from the corpse of a Treant. A Unicorn horn for the hilt, feathers from a

Griffin boiled in Elf blood and coated in Golem gold, a Pheonix bone core.”

A sword made from the corpses of Mythics?

Joe narrowed his eyes at it.

No. There was more to it than that. He could *feel* the power radiating off it. Taste the brightness in the air.

“We call it Lightbringer,” the old man said, watching Joe closely. “A weapon that will destroy any Darkspawn impaled upon it.”

“Any Darkspawn?”

“Even a Demon,” the old man smiled. “Even a Succubus, yes.”

Joe took a step forward, reached for the sword’s hilt.

The old Priest didn’t move to stop him.

He hesitated, fingers an inch away from Lightbringer’s hilt.

“Some centuries ago,” the old man said, leaning away from the table, “it was used to destroy a Dragon. The very same one that used to reside in these Dark-infested lands. Unfortunately, there were no Paladins then to purify the Dragon’s Dark. It polluted this region of the world, rendering it uninhabitable to man...”

The Priest shook his head sadly.

“Powerful as Lightbringer is,” he continued, “it needs an equally worthy wielder. I can think of none better for that honour than the Eternal Light’s champion.”

“You’re *giving* it to me? What’s the catch?”

“No catch,” the Priest chuckled. “Just a warning.”

Joe gripped the sword hilt, lifted the sword up.

It was light as a feather, yet dense with power and potential.

A weapon that could kill a Succubus...

“Even with Lightbringer, you won’t be able to best a Demon. Not without becoming multitudes stronger yourself.”

He gave the sword a testing swing, felt it vibrate in his hand.

“Fortunately, there may be a way for you to *gain* the power you require to save your friend. One that shouldn’t take very long at all...”

Joe banished Lightbringer to his storage space, levelled his gaze on the old Priest.

The old man smiled at him.

Sid

The Nest. It was a web of interconnected wards, all absorbing Light and channelling it towards... *something*. Massive amounts of Light, over decades – if not centuries.

Charging a spell? A weapon? A mythic?

It didn’t matter. The information itself was enough to make something in Sid’s mind *click*.

A realisation.

Since that moment, he’d worked. Day and night without sleep, not even bothering to eat or drink – his magical enhancements had taken him beyond such base necessities. He worked and worked, learned from his failures and celebrated his victories until – finally – the prototype was complete.

He ushered high-ranking mages and scholars into his workshop, showed them his masterpiece.

The Phoenix’s Nest was, in essence, a huge array of solar panels. Wards absorbing Light, transferring it to an unknown ‘battery’, generating power from sunlight. A magical version of a solar power plant.

So, what was stopping Sid from doing the same? Doing it better?

In the centre of his workshop was something that’d change this backwards,

medieval world forever.

An engine.

Powered by Light, much like the Priests' wards, with a Mythic bone core to act as a battery. Charged fully this morning by Sid himself. Four huge wheels, brass like the engine itself; two on either side of the contraption. With a few levers and buttons to act as basic controls.

It wouldn't be able to turn – there was no steering option for this prototype. It had more in common with a train than an automobile.

But that was perfect!

All Sid needed to do was replicate humankind's innovations. No need to build cars or aircraft right away.

But one day...

He grinned as he flipped a switch, turned on his prototype train engine. Showed off a whole new world of possibilities to these important men. His soon-to-be investors.

"This, gentlemen," he said, watching as the engine rolled away from him, "is the future."

The future? No. This was just the *beginning*.

This whole world was about to experience an industrial revolution, with him at its core.

Inside of a decade, Sid would be the most powerful man in the world.

Hal

"I'm bored."

He tapped on his drum; one of several instruments he'd picked up during his travels. The low, heavy note cut through the silence with ease, carrying Hal's command to his puppets.

Their dancing slowed from a hectic bouncing to a steady, sensual sway.

Goblins. All of them female.

What was the deal with *that*? What were the odds of every Goblin tribe he encountered being monogender? Either all male or all female – not that he'd encountered many of the latter. Was it some strange cultural thing? An odd coincidence?

Why did Goblins even *have* genders? They couldn't reproduce sexually. Could they?

"Where's Sid when you need him?"

He tapped the drum again, sent a command to one specific Goblin.

Immediately, it screeched and lunged for one of its sisters.

Were they sisters? They all looked pretty similar...

Could Darkspawn have siblings?

"God," Hal let out a deep breath. "Why am I thinking so much?"

The answer came without hesitation.

"Because I'm bored."

The Goblin being savaged squealed, thrashed, its body continuing to dance even as it was torn apart. Until, inevitably, it blew apart. Burst into a cloud of black smoke.

Hal commanded the attacker to resume dancing before standing, stepping towards the black cloud and sucking it in.

"If there are chick Goblins," he said, returning to the rock he'd been sitting on. "There must be chick Orcs too. Might be worth searching out some of those to fuck..."

But then he'd run into the same problem he'd had with this little gang of Darkspawn sluts. The bitches were too ugly. He'd gotten the job done with each of them, but it'd been way too much effort for what should've been a few hours of fun.

"South, then?" He mused aloud, tapping his drum and sending the remaining Goblin women into a series of star-jumps and squats. "I could do with some exotic pussy..."

But it was a long way to go. And how exotic would things actually be? Certainly, the coconut bras and palm leaf skirts he was envisioning wouldn't be the reality he'd find.

"Maybe some more priestesses?"

They were fun. Breaking them in, 'corrupting' them, watching their faces as his musical powers faded. The realisation and horror, the confusion.

But how many more until he grew bored of that too?

"Farmers' daughters?"

Butterfaces, for the most part. And far less innocent on average than his fantasies had led him to believe.

"Married women?"

He'd gotten bored of that a while ago now. A dude could only cuck so many other guys before the spark left.

"Adventurers? Mages? Witches? What about werewolves? Does this world have werewolves? Vampires?"

All interesting options, but...

Hal sighed.

So *that* was the source of his melancholy.

A very specific fantasy that he couldn't make happen.

"Deflowering a beautiful princess," he confessed to the Goblins. "Except this shitty world doesn't *have* princesses. Or royalty. Best you've got is random 'nobles' and the 'Priests'. What a load of bullshit *that* is."

A magical fantasy world *without* a cute princess in need.

"What can I do to change that?"

None of the Goblins had an answer. Typical.

He tapped his drum again, watched as another Goblin was torn apart by its comrade.

"Hmm..." Hal hummed, an idea forming in his mind. "I suppose I could always *make* a princess or three. Might take a bit of time... But, if I did..."

Yes. It could work. It'd be a plan years – decades – in the making. But it was possible.

"I'll have to make myself a king, then," he announced, a flare of eagerness blossoming in his chest as he absorbed a cloud of Dark. "The Priests won't like it. But fuck it. I can always *make* them like it. That's kinda my thing."

He grinned, turned to the remaining Goblin ladies.

It was a good idea. Brilliant, even. Definitely worth a few rounds of *celebration*.

He started tapping a new beat on his drum.

Gavin

He crept through the open window, knife drawn. Slow and silent, only the sound of his racing heart in his ears. The shape on the bed wasn't moving. Sound asleep.

Perfect.

Don't do this.

His brow twitched, a scowl forming under his mask.

This is wrong. You know it is.

"Shut up," Gav muttered.

The figure on the bed didn't react to the sound. Still asleep.

It's not too late.

Gav ignored the voice, kept sneaking forward.

As soon as he was at the bed, he lashed out. Grabbed the sleeping man over his mouth to muffle him, slammed the knife into his back over and over and over. Not stopping until the man was limp and unresponsive.

Even then, Gav gave the man one last stab. Just in case.

You're a murderer.

"He's not real," Gav said, dropping the knife. "None of them are. It's a game."

You know it's not.

"Shut up!"

You can't run from this forever.

"Who's running?!" He barked out a laugh. "I'm havin' fun! Speedrunning these assassin quests like a demon!"

"A demon assassin?" A cold, amused voice said.

Gav spun, snatched his bow off his back, nocked an arrow, aimed. Despite the sticky wetness coating his hands, his grip was firm and his aim true. But he didn't loose.

The figure in the window – the same window Gav had used minutes before – was shrouded in darkness. Wearing black robes that blended with the night, a hood that obscured his face. He might as well have been a shadow himself. Unarmed, from what Gav could see. And... was that a *raven* on the man's shoulder?

"Quest event," Gav muttered, aiming at the stranger's chest. "With that getup? Gotta be assassin related. An NPC sent to recruit me to some assassin guild? A rival? Maybe..."

The stranger tilted his head, examined Gav.

Then the raven cawed, leapt off the man's shoulder and darted at Gav.

He reacted on instinct, loosed his arrow at the bird.

It hit.

The bird screeched, exploded into a black cloud. The arrow clattered to the ground.

Gav let out a breath, eyes widening.

The black cloud shifted, drifted towards Gav. When it got close enough, the Dark transformed into glittering Light. Flew into him with a surge of energy.

Gav shuddered, gasped. It took him far too long to nock another arrow, point it at the stranger.

The man, though, didn't move.

"Fascinating," the shadowed figure said. "So it's true."

"Skip," Gav said, loud and clear.

"Pardon?"

"Skip," Gav repeated. "Pass. Continue. Get on with it. What do you want? What's the reward? Quest difficulty?"

"You're an odd one, aren't you?"

He's not wrong there.

"Shut it," Gav muttered. He coughed, addressed the uninvited guest. "What do you want from me?"

"I'm not sure," the man shrugged. "A demon assassin... Or, perhaps, an assassin of demons? I might have use for one of the latter."

"I'm listening," Gav said, lowering his bow. "Can never have enough quests. Who do you want me to kill? And how much are you paying? I don't work for pennies."

"Who? Just a few over-arrogant Darkspawn. Princes who're too proud and blind to see a knife coming. As for pay..."

The man held up his hands, grabbed hold of a finger and *yanked* it off. Tendrils of black smoke rose from the finger stump, quickly forming into a whole new finger. As for the finger the Demon-man had plucked off; he tossed it to Gav.

As it neared him, the finger exploded into Light. Flooded into Gav and spread through every inch of him. Infusing Gav with power unlike anything he'd felt before.

"Consider that a tasty morsel of what's to come," the shadowed Demon said. "Work with me, and you'll see hundreds of times more power than that. *Thousands* more."

Walk away. Run. This is a bad-

"Alright," Gav said, silencing the voice in his head. "You've got my attention. Who are you?"

"Lobo's the name." Through the darkness, Gav saw a toothy smile. "But you can call me 'partner'."

Joseph

Snow crunched under his boots. Wind rushed in his ears and white flakes flittered about him, melting into his hair and tickling his face.

He couldn't feel it. Cold was a thing of the past. All Joe felt was a cool, pleasant breeze.

The thick furs he wore were for his prey's benefit. A disguise to throw off the monster. Keep it from seeing Joe's true power until it was too late.

That'd been the idea, at least.

"I know you're out there!" He called, voice booming over empty valleys and peaks. "Enough games! Come out and face me!"

His magical sense was screaming. Alerting him to the mass of Dark slowly approaching. More Dark than he'd sensed in one place before. Entire armies of Goblins hadn't contained as much Dark as the one entity approaching him now.

A hundred feet away, twenty feet above – on the cliff overlooking Joe's current position.

Ninety feet.

Eighty.

Joe tapped into his strength, leapt the twenty feet up the cliff face to land on the Darkspawn's level.

And there, through the falling snow, he saw his enemy.

In the shape of a human; wearing a disguise like Joe. Just like Kiera had, before she'd abducted Lily and fled into the night.

Rage flared. Righteous fury.

As the Darkspawn approached, Joe tugged on his furs. Tore them off until he was standing there in his underclothes. A single ounce of will, a silent command, and holy armour appeared around him – wrapping him head to toe in impervious, glowing metal.

"A friend of Lily's, I presume?" The Darkspawn asked, a smile on its fake face. "I am Darumaug, a friend of-"

Joe attacked. Shot forward with his hand at his side.

The Darkspawn jumped backwards just in time to avoid the sting of Lightbringer's tip, summoned from Joe's storage place in the gap between moments.

He didn't give the monster a chance to recover from the surprise attack, slashing wildly at the fake human.

"I am not," the creature said, deftly avoiding every attack, "your enemy."

Deception. A Darkspawn's favourite tool.

He'd fallen for the Succubus Kiera's act. He wouldn't do so again.

If it was Dark, it was dead.

Joe roared, sending out a shockwave that launched the monster backwards. He darted forward, intent on slaying the downed creature. Annoyingly, it recovered quickly from the attack, hopping to its feet and dancing aside as Joe lunged and swung. Not a single slash landed.

"Stop!" The Darkspawn shouted. "I don't want to hurt you!"

Joe charged him.

The Darkspawn inhaled, leaned forward and exhaled.

Joe shielded himself, expecting a torrent of flames. Instead, an invisible force blasted him off his feet, sent him sprawling backwards into the snow.

When Joe jumped back to his feet, the 'man' was gone and the true monster was in its place. A massive red dragon towered over Joe, glowering down at him with wide, wicked eyes. Its colossal, outstretched wings swept down through the air, crushing Joe with a blast of wind as it shot itself into the air.

In moments, the dragon was hundreds of feet above him, flying away from Joe as fast as its wings would take it.

"No!" Joe bellowed.

No!

He crouched, tapped into his full might and filled his legs with every ounce of power he could.

For Lily!

Joe rocketed himself into the air, cutting through it faster than a bullet. He summoned his angel wings for a single flap, used them to boost himself even faster.

The Dragon's head turned.

Its eyes widened when it saw Joe shooting towards it.

It lashed out at Joe with its tail.

Too late.

Joe shot past the Dragon's tail, slammed Lightbringer home; buried it from tip to hilt into the Dragon's belly.

A howling screech cut through the mountain range.

Man and dragon fell from the sky, crashed to a rocky outcrop.

Joe rolled off the monster, watched on in wonder as veins of blinding light spread across the wailing creature. Cutting through scale and hide, webbing out from the sword still buried in its stomach. Until, in a blinding flash, the Dragon exploded.

Joe blinked the stars from his vision.

When his eyes opened again, there was a dense black cloud where the Dragon had been. So thick, it looked almost solid.

"One down," Joe breathed.

He rose to his feet, stepped towards the Dark.

Absorbed it.

And stood there in the aftermath, staring at the glowing sword a few feet away.

His imagination granted him glorious images of stabbing that sword into a Succubus, watching Kiera burst apart. Saving Lily. Making things right. Taking her home.

He waved his hand through the air, summoned up a map of the world.

Ten markers stood out on the transparent map. The other 'Dark Guardians' the Priests had told him about and tasked him with destroying. More dragons, other monsters. All very powerful. Powerful enough that, when Joe slew and absorbed all of them, he'd be able to face a Succubus on even footing.

Soon, he promised. I'm coming for you.