

Dark and Light

Chapter 4 – Dark

Lily

The cave. The giant rats. A scene that'd been playing on repeat in Lily's mind for hours. Giant rats with chunks cut out of them, bleeding black smoke from a half-dozen nicks and wounds. And then *poof*. They'd exploded into a cloud of that same black smoke. Pure Dark.

Dead.

She'd seen that same black smoke rising off Kiera, too.

She... Kiera... She'd be okay... Wouldn't she?

Embarrassment and gratitude. That's what Lily had felt as she'd watched Kiera disappear into the night, off to deliver Lily's letter. She'd been thankful.

But then, as the minutes had ticked by, as the silence stretched, new thoughts and feelings had poked their way through Lily's subconscious. Darker thoughts and scarier feelings.

The Priests. They knew about Kiera. Knew what she was.

What if they were waiting for her to show up again?

What if they'd set up some kind of trap?

The images repeated. The cave. Giant rats bleeding black smoke. Those same rats exploding into Dark clouds, dead. Kiera bleeding black smoke. Kiera surrounded by Priests, trapped and unable to escape, doomed. All because Lily had wanted to send a letter. A *letter*. She'd sent Kiera into the lion's den for a *letter*.

Giant rat. Bleeding black smoke. Bursting into a cloud. Dead.

Kiera... Bleeding black smoke...

At first, Lily tried to sleep. Banish the thoughts with the sweet oblivion of slumber. But she wasn't tired. Had tossed and turned on the bed for what must've been hours to no avail, haunted by images that wouldn't stop playing in her head. Then she'd climbed out of bed, began pacing. Walking back and forth, back and forth, trying to clear her head.

What time was it?

How long had Kiera been gone for?

Was she alright?

Should she be back by now?

Where was she?

Was she okay?

It was all too much. Too many questions Lily couldn't answer. Too many thoughts Lily couldn't ignore. Too much. All of it.

She pulled out her special, twenty-sided gem. Held it up in the palm of her hand. Above it, lists and menus and options appeared.

Maybe... Maybe there was a clock somewhere in the maze of options.

But as her fingertip moved, drew lines in the air, Lily realised she wasn't looking for a clock. Wasn't searching for some way to check on Kiera. Menus opened, lists of spells and abilities. And there, above it all, were her 'unspent points'.

The Dark she'd absorbed from those dead rats.

A shiver ran down Lily's spine.

She'd held off on spending those points, in using them to make herself stronger. Something about that – killing Darkspawn to make herself more powerful – felt *wrong*. It was like she and the guys were parasites. Leeches, feeding on death and destruction and slaughter.

She remembered them trying to convince her, telling her it was no different from eating a burger or steak. But... It was different. It *was*.

She inhaled a deep breath. Stared at that unspent power.

An image of Kiera flashed in Lily's mind. The woman's expression after she'd witnessed Lily and the guys absorbing Dark. *Transforming* it. The horror that'd been on Kiera's face...

You're weapons.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to that unspent power. The only thing that remained of the Darkspawn rats they'd killed in that cave. "We shouldn't have... / shouldn't have..."

But it was done. The Darkspawn rats were dead. Lily had a piece of them, their power, in her.

Taking another deep breath, she raised her finger.

Tapped on a spell.

Spent the power on it.

She stepped out onto the street, suppressed a shudder.

Hugging herself to stave off the morning chill, she began walking. Up above, the sky was a dark, murky grey. Dawn still an hour or so away, but quickly approaching.

Kiera should be back by now. Lily was sure of it.

She'd promised to be back by morning, hadn't she?

Had she?

Lily couldn't remember. Had she imagined it?

Stop thinking.

It was why she'd come out here. She couldn't stay in that room anymore, pacing and thinking and worrying. She'd needed fresh air, different surroundings. A distraction.

So, here she was, wandering city streets. Directionless, no destination in mind.

She was barely paying attention. Wasn't focused on where she was going. It was all she could do to keep the thoughts at bay, stop herself from worrying over Kiera. One foot in front of the other, walking until she reached a junction, turning in a random direction.

She wasn't even keeping track of where she'd been.

So, when she found herself lost, surrounded by cracked and run-down, ramshackle buildings, Lily berated herself. Turned around on the spot, tried to figure out where she was. How to get back to the inn.

This place she'd found herself. It felt *off*. Different.

Everywhere else in the city, people had flaunted bright colours. There'd been banners and ribbons hanging from windows, draped over whole buildings. Walls had been painted bright reds and greens and blues, indulgent purples and warm ambers. But here? Everything way grey and brown and bland.

It made sense – not everyone in the city would've been able to afford bright, shiny things. Of course there had to be a poorer area, a slum.

But being here? Finding herself surrounded by it?

Lily shuddered, spun on the spot.

She started moving again, a brisk walk in the direction she'd come from.

Someone stepped out from around a corner ahead of her, looked right at her. A large man with a shadowed face, dark clothes. He was holding something in his hand, a stick or club or *something*.

Lily froze. Eyes wide, heart racing.

The man took a step towards her.

She spun on the spot, started walking – half-running – in the opposite direction.

You're being silly, she told herself as she rounded a corner, walked down a street filled with cracked, dirty houses. All cramped so close together that it left nowhere to turn, nowhere to hide. *It's nothing. You're not being followed. He's just a regular person, going to work or something. You're not-*

Heavy footsteps behind her, loud thumping, getting closer.

She broke into a sprint.

Shouting. A man calling after her, giving chase.

Lily rounded a corner, didn't dare look back. She sprinted down another street, turned another corner. These slums, they were like a *maze*. So many turns, streets at odd angles, so easy to get lost in.

She sprinted around a corner into a particularly narrow street. Made it half-way down there before realising the street stopped in a dead-end.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

Lily turned back, saw the entry to the alleyway blocked by a figure. A large man. Then another two figures following behind him as he strode into the alley after her.

She backed away, heart thundering in her chest.

The three men approached, one carrying a weapon, the other two flanking behind him. The alley was too narrow for all three men to walk side-to-side. Too narrow for her to rush past them.

"What do we have here?" The lead man said, stalking forward. "Don't think I've ever seen you around here before..."

Lily kept backing up, every muscle tense.

She glanced around, searching for a way out. *Anything* she could use to get away.

"Who are you?" The leader said.

"Look at the clothes," one of the sidekicks chuckled. "Cunt's rich. Gotta be."

Lily's back pressed to a wall.

She'd reached the end of the alley. Nowhere left to go.

"These here streets belong to me," the leader said with a smirk. "You wanna use them? You gotta pay the toll..."

The three figures got closer and closer.

And, behind them, a fourth figure dropped into the alley from high above.

Kiera

She landed silently, wings and horns and talons vanishing as she assumed human form. One step forward and she was clothed in a bright red dress, two steps and she was right behind one of the three men.

"So," their leader was saying, sounding smug and lecherous and vile. "What's it gonna be, cunt?"

Kiera lashed out, faster than thought.

A hand on one man's head, throwing him aside without effort or care. He flew, crashed face-first into an alley wall, crumpled to the ground unmoving. Before the second sidekick could react, Kiera's elbow was in his face. She felt bones crunching and shattering, didn't spare the man a glance as he dropped limp to the floor.

The group's leader began to turn. Too slow.

Kiera grabbed the back of his neck, tossed him aside.

He slammed into the wall with a loud *crunch*. Dropped to the floor in a heap, motionless.

Kiera didn't look at him. Stepped forward.

Lily was there, standing with her back to the alley's dead end. Her eyes wide, mouth hanging open. Kiera didn't need to read the girl's feelings to recognise the confused mess of emotion. Panic and confusion, amazement and fear.

"It's okay," Kiera said softly, taking another slow step towards Lily. "Everything's okay... I'm here..."

Without warning, Lily launched herself at Kiera.

Trembling arms wrapped around Kiera's waist as Lily tackle-hugged her, held her

tight.

"It's okay," Kiera cooed, patting Lily gently. "You're safe."

"How did you know where I was?"

The first words Lily had spoken after they were back in their spacious inn room. Until then, it'd been almost complete silence from the girl. Kiera leading the way, Lily gripping onto her hand all the while.

"When I got back," Kiera shrugged, "you weren't here. I sent my senses out, went looking for you."

"Did you... Did you kill them?"

That was a harder question to answer.

She hadn't been *trying* to kill the three thugs. In truth, she'd been holding back as much of her strength as she'd been able to, given the circumstances. But she hadn't exactly been trying *not* to kill them either.

"I don't know," Kiera answered honestly. "Maybe."

The crunching bones. The unmoving bodies...

"We should go back," Lily whispered. "Help them. If they're still alive... We can... I can..."

"You want to save them?"

Lily looked up at her.

"They wanted to hurt you," Kiera said. "Their emotions... They weren't good people, Lily. If they're dead, the world is a better place for it."

A statement that was true of most humans, Kiera had found.

"Even so," Lily said, a little firmer. More confident and sure of herself. "They might not be nice, but we are. We should help them, even if they don't deserve it. Because, if we don't... if we start..."

Lily's hands began to glow. A golden, gentle light spilling from her fingers.

She wobbled, eyes rolling in their sockets.

Kiera darted forward, caught Lily before she dropped.

"We should..." The girl whispered, fatigue straining her voice. "We can't let..."

And then she was gone. Unconscious.

Lily

A voice, soft and feminine. Whispering in her ear. Though what the voice was saying, Lily couldn't make out. The words were like chilly breaths, tickling Lily's cheek and neck. Close, like they were being spoken right next to her. Yet so far away that Lily couldn't hear them, couldn't make sense of them.

She struggled for a moment, strained to listen.

Then she opened her eyes, found herself lying in bed.

Where...?

Oh. The inn. Her and Kiera's room.

"Huh?" Lily groaned, looking around. "What... What happened?"

"You tried using magic," Kiera's voice replied.

Lily flinched, sat up in bed, looked over at the succubus.

Kiera was leaning against a wall, watching Lily closely. She was in her human form, clad in a bright red dress that hugged tight to her hourglass figure. Bright red lips were curled into a little smile, smouldering eyes locked onto Lily.

"I... I did?"

She tried to remember. She'd used magic? Why? When?

It came back in a flood. The men in the alley. The dread and panic, Kiera saving her.

The walk back to the inn. It'd all happened so fast. A blur. But she hadn't used magic. Had she? Right before she'd passed out, she'd been thinking about... About those men. Broken on the ground. Injured. Maybe dead.

"I wanted to heal them," she whispered.

The spell she'd unlocked, spent all her absorbed Dark on, had been a healing one. Something to cure injuries and illnesses. She'd been thinking about it, wanting to use it to help those assholes and...

And the magic had activated. Drained her mana in an instant. Caused her to pass out.

"Why?" Kiera asked, pushing away from her wall and striding over to the bed, towards Lily. "Why heal them after what they were going to do? Why try to help them like that?"

Lily shook her head, fatigue still fogging her mind.

Why *had* she wanted to help them?

A dozen reasons popped into her head all at once.

She wanted to be a good person. She wanted to make the world a better place. It wasn't her place to condemn those men, she didn't know their circumstances. Do no harm. Help those who need it. Put good into the world.

All of it was true. And all of it was bullshit.

The real reason was much simpler, much more selfish.

"Because," Lily whispered, "I'm me."

Kiera raised an eyebrow at her, seemed to weigh Lily. Could she sense Lily's emotions? Feel the turmoil?

"Well, one thing's for certain," Kiera said, hopping up onto the bed and sitting down cross-legged in front of her. "You're terrifyingly good at getting yourself into trouble! Getting yourself summoned to a different world, sent on an adventure to kill Darkspawn in a cave, being kidnapped by a succubus, being accosted by thugs the first chance you get... You, Lily, are going to be *trouble*, aren't you?"

Lily let out a breath, tension evaporating.

"Definitely," she said with a grin, a nod of her head.

Kiera held out her arms, smiling a half-cocked smile that sent warm tingles running up and down Lily's spine.

Without thinking, she leaned forward. Let Kiera hug and hold her. And, for a short time, that's all there was in the world. Kiera's warmth, the gentle embrace.

"I delivered your letter," Kiera said eventually.

"How are they?" Lily asked. "They didn't try attacking you or anything, did they?"

With the abrupt way she and the guys had parted ways, the cuts and bruises Joe must've received, it wouldn't have surprised Lily. She knew the guys, though. Joe might've gotten upset, shouted angrily for a little while. But he was harmless really. All the guys were.

"They're fine," Kiera shrugged. "Hal was the only one I spoke to, but I made sure to spy in on the others. They're all okay. Worried about you, but your letter should help with that."

Lily nodded her head, pulling away from the embrace.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Kiera waved a hand, smiled.

"It was nothing. I'd offer to do it again any time you want a message delivered, but I don't think that'll be feasible anymore. Your friends all seem to be splitting up, going their own ways. Keeping track of where each one goes? I don't think it'll be possible."

The guys were splitting up? But... But they were so close.

Lily tried to think, tried to cut through the fog of fatigue and work it all out, make sense of it. But the weariness was too great. Her mind was too foggy. Her eyelids too

heavy.

“Sleep,” Kiera said, voice quiet. “Don’t worry. I’ll be here with you all the while. Rest, love.”

If Lily’d had the energy to complain, to fight off the tiredness she felt, she would have. As it was, she barely had the energy to sit upright. Slowly, she leaned back, curled up on the bed. Closed her eyes, let darkness take her.