

Dark and Light

Chapter 7 – Dark

Lily

A dragon! It was a motherfreaking dragon!

It towered over them, the size of a small mansion. Eyes blazing as it glowered at Lily, the dragon took another thundering step forward. The mountain shook and trembled, the ground at the dragon's feet cracking and shattering under its mass.

"Who dare defile this most sacred of mountains?" The dragon boomed, voice a shockwave that blasted the chill from the air. Fire leaked out the corners of its mouth. Its glare focused on Lily. "Mortal! Come to offer thyself as sacrifice?"

Lily flinched back, heart pounding.

"Well, mortal?" The dragon demanded, voice conjuring a gust of hot, powerful wind. Lily almost bowled over, knees quaking. "Does thy tongue not-"

"That's enough, Mog."

Kiera's voice. Completely calm, though sounding slightly annoyed. The succubus crossed her arms, stepped towards the dragon.

"Quit being a moron," Kiera continued. "And invite us in."

The dragon's face shifted. Glare vanishing, the heat in its eyes cooling. It looked from Lily to Kiera and back again and, somehow, Lily recognised disappointment in the creature's inhuman features. A hint of a frown on an otherwise monstrous, scaly face. It seemed to slump in place, head lowering. And, with an expression that looked all too human, the dragon let out a deep sigh.

"First time a human's ever set foot here," the dragon said, shaking its head. The thunderous boom in its voice was gone and, though it was still plenty deep, the dragon's tone sounded much softer and calmer. "And I'm not allowed to be all dramatic about it? You're no fun, Kiera."

"I'm plenty fun," the succubus smiled. "Now, stop scaring my flower and try being a good host for once."

The dragon recoiled, eyes wide.

"I'm *always* a good host," it said, offended.

Lily's gaze moved between the two of them. A sexy, sultry succubus. And a huge, fire-breathing dragon. Her heart was still racing, her fight or flight instincts still clashing. Gulping, she tried calming herself, her racing heart.

She wasn't getting eaten. The dragon wasn't going to attack.

Everything was fine...

Inhaling a deep breath, she pushed down the panic. Ignored the rush of adrenaline in her veins, the urge to run away.

"A good host," Kiera was saying, "doesn't scare his guests."

"A good guest," the dragon huffed, "doesn't show up without warning."

"What, was I supposed to hire a Guild messenger to come warn you? I'm sure the humans would've been lining up to accept *that* job."

"Would've been fun if you had," the dragon grinned, jagged teeth glinting in the sunlight. "It's been too long since I've had to rescue a stray."

The dragon glanced at Lily, eyes intense.

Lily gulped.

"My apologies for frightening you, human," the dragon said. It began shifting, shrinking. In mere moments, the colossal dragon collapsed in on itself, compressed down into the shape of a tall – but still human-sized – man. Red scales became red hair and dark skin. Slitted red eyes morphed into regular, handsome, hazel irises. Talons and claws

turned into hands and feet. And the dragon's wings disappeared completely. "Welcome to my mountains."

A deep, baritone voice. A man's voice.

Lily's eyes widened, cheeks flushing. She covered her eyes, looked quickly away.

He was *naked*.

Just like when Kiera took on her human form, the dragon-man was completely nude. His... his *bits* dangling down between his legs without a care in the world.

"Clothes, Mog," Kiera said. Lily could hear the amusement in her voice. "No-one wants to see that."

"Ah! Of course..."

With her peripheral vision, through open fingers, Lily saw the dragon-man wave a hand, summon a red robe around himself. "Better?"

"Might wanna put on a mask too. Hide away that ugly mug."

"Ugly?" The dragon-man huffed in faux-offence. "The audacity! I'll have you know, I'm rather *fetching*."

"The only thing you're 'fetching' is-"

Lily toppled. A gentle gust swept over her just as her legs gave out. Before she knew what was happening, she was teetering backwards. Staring up at a bright blue sky.

Too much excitement. Too many things in too short a time.

She didn't touch the snowy ground, though. A gentle, firm arm caught her. Held her. Dazzling red eyes looked down at her with concern. A beautiful face streaked with two long shadows – her horns standing against the sunlight.

Kiera.

"Are you alright?" She asked softly.

"Y-yeah," Lily murmured. "Just a little..."

"Overwhelmed?" Kiera smiled reassuringly.

"Mm'hm."

Lily closed her eyes, breathed in cool air, relaxed into Kiera's arm. One by one, her worries and tension faded away. Her heart stopped thundering, resumed a calmer rhythm. It took her a minute or two until she felt secure enough to stand up straight again and, even when she did, Kiera kept a comforting arm on her back.

"Better?" Kiera whispered.

"Yeah," Lily smiled. "Better."

Kiera nodded her head. A few moments later, the pair of them were walking towards the dragon-man, whose eyes were bright with curiosity and who stood with his hands behind his back. Nonthreatening. Relaxed.

"Mog," Kiera said, nodding to Lily. "This is Lily. A human from another world. Lily," she gestured to the man. "This is Mog, the 'Scary Strawberry Dragon'."

"Darumaug," the man let out a long-suffering sigh. "The Crimson Terror."

"Nobody calls you that."

"They would if they knew about me!"

Kiera

"Paladins..." Darumaug shook his head. "I don't like it. Not one bit. You're certain *He's* behind it?"

"How else would the Priests know how to summon humans from another world? It has to be Him. The five of them, they have these stones. Gemstones of condensed Light. They're like nothing I've ever seen before. And the Outlanders didn't have them before arriving here. The Priests didn't make them, no question about that."

"Maybe one of the Mythics..."

Kiera stared at him.

"If it was *Him*. If He gave those kids their powers..." Darumaug shook his head again, eyebrows knit together. "The Pact... How is it even possible? He shouldn't be able to create or alter anything. He's bound same as She is."

"I don't know," Kiera shrugged. "Not my problem."

"Do the Princes know?"

"That's what I'm here to find out."

Darumaug grunted, nodded his head.

"You'll look after her until I get back?" Kiera asked.

She already knew the answer. It was one of the reasons she'd chosen this Path in the first place. But still, she had to ask. Had to be sure.

"Of course," her friend said.

And so, several minutes later, after whispering a quiet farewell to a sleeping Lily, Kiera walked deeper into the cave network. Further and further away from Darumaug's lair. Until, after an hour of pitch-black darkness, she reached it.

A foot-long crack in the caves. A vent leaking tendrils of pure Dark. A Path.

There were a dozen of them scattered across the world. Cracks and tunnels that led all the way down to the Abyss. Paths to the void that so many powerful Darkspawn called home. And, while there were easier Paths than this one, Darumaug's Path was by *far* the safest for Lily to be near.

The dragon would protect Lily, defend her with his life if needed.

Compared to the other Paths' guardians, it was a no-brainer. Half of the others would've tried killing Lily on the spot if they knew what she was, and the rest would've fled down to the Abyss to inform the Princes instead. And being forced to kill a Path guardian... Well, that would've caused all *kinds* of problems. More than Kiera wanted to deal with.

So, Darumaug was the right choice...

It was obvious. He was the *only* choice. But, more than that, he was trustworthy. A friend. Someone Kiera could...

She rolled her eyes.

"You're stalling," she told herself.

And she was.

Staring at that crack in the blackness, the raw power rising from it, she couldn't help but hesitate. Hold back.

"The longer you take," she whispered, "the more time Lily will spend worrying about you."

That steeled her.

She straightened her back, pushed all her misgivings and hesitations aside, focused on herself. Her body. Her power.

"I hate this part," she said softly.

And, a moment later, she *burst*.

Physical body blowing apart like smoke in the wind. Black smoke. Dense and thick, twirling and coiling around itself. Holding shape, but not form. Kept together by Kiera's will alone.

Dark form.

Not a 'real' form, so much as it was the *lack* of one. No body, as with her true form and human form. No physical body or mass at all. She was simply *power*. A cloud of Dark bound together by thought and intent.

She flowed into the crack. Flew down the Path at a speed no physical form could hope to match. Miles passing in moments, earth and rock rushing by in a black blur.

It wasn't easy.

Pushing against the raw Dark as it flowed up to the Surface was like swimming against a strong current. At any moment, if she allowed it, a distraction could *scatter* her.

Break her apart. She needed constant focus. Constant will.
She could handle it, she'd done so dozens of times before.
But *shit*, was it a pain in the ass.

Lily

She woke on a pile of furs, wrapped up snugly. Comfortably warm, not too hot. Her mind slow and sluggish, a little smile tugging at her cheeks.

When her eyes flicked open, confusion washed over her.

Where was she? Where was Kiera?

It took a few seconds for the memories to come back to her. The mountains, the dragon, Kiera urging her to rest.

Kiera... She'd said *something*. There was something she'd had to do, would be back before long. The memory was hazy, disjointed. Lily had been falling asleep as Kiera'd been talking, half the words lost while Lily drifted in and out of consciousness.

Slowly, she rose from her nest of furs.

The walls around her were cave-like. Rough and uneven, rocky. The floor, while smoother, was hardly flat. A spacious room, but very much one sized for humans. No way that red dragon would be able to fit in here. Along the walls, several floating flames gave off gentle light. And, at the other end of the room, lounging on a large, stone chair, was a man.

Mog. Darumaug. The dragon in his human form.

And he was... sleeping?

That couldn't be right.

The man's body was slumped, head tilted back, mouth open. His chest rose and fell slowly, each breath coming out as a soft snore.

But... That was *wrong*.

It took Lily a few seconds to put her finger on it. To figure out what the *off* feeling was.

Eyes narrowed, she strode across the room towards Mog.

The man didn't react to her approach. He remained in place, snoring softly, unmoving but for the rise and fall of his chest.

Lily stopped in front of him.

"Cut the act," she said, ignoring her racing heart. "Where's Kiera? Is she okay?"

Mog's eyes snapped open instantly. His chest stopped rising mid-breath. The smile that crossed his face was amused, disarming. But Lily kept her eyes narrowed on him all the same.

"Apologies," Mog shrugged, sitting up straight. "I should've known better. You travel with Kiera, after all..."

Darkspawn didn't sleep. Didn't need to breath.

He hadn't been sleeping. He'd been *pretending* to sleep.

"I decided this was the best way for me to act," the dragon-man said, as if reading her mind. "Less intimidating than you waking up to me watching you, I thought. I wanted to avoid unsettling or panicking you, if at all possible."

Lily's chest thrummed. Her stomach coiled and churned. Fear wrapped around her heart like a cold fist.

She fought it down. Refused to let the panic drown her.

Kiera had left her here. And she'd *never* put Lily in danger. Almost instinctively, Lily knew she was safe. Knew it with a kind of certainty that settled her nerves, helped her smother the rising dread.

"Where is she?" Lily asked, eyeing Mog closely. Looking for any hint of a lie.

"The Abyss," Mog said. "Learning what the Princes know about you and your friends. Lying to them about what you're capable of. Buying as much time as she can."

"Buying time?" Lily began. "What-"

The sound of her own stomach rumbling cut her off.

An instant after the sound, the hunger pangs came.

"Ah!" Mog grinned eagerly. "You're hungry! Come, come! I'll cook you up some breakfast!"

The scents and sounds brought Lily back to simpler times. Sizzling meat on an iron pan, vegetables roasting in a makeshift oven, spices and seasonings wafting through the air. She could remember a time when it'd been her, in her own kitchen, cooking up a grand feast for the guys as they played video games in another room. A memory that, despite only being a few months old, felt like an eternity ago.

Mog, a plain apron over his red robe, skipped around his cave-like facsimile or a kitchen. Checking on cooking meat, grinding up herbs that Lily couldn't recognise. The man beamed from ear to ear, completely immersed in his task.

Curious.

Looking past the fact that a literal *dragon* was making food for her in a cave atop the world's tallest mountain, the notion that Mog even knew *how* to cook was bizarre.

Darkspawn didn't need to eat. Why bother learning to cook?

She didn't ask, not while he seemed so happy and enthralled doing it. But, the moment he'd seated her down, presented her with a feast that smelled divine, she couldn't help herself.

"Why do you have a kitchen?" She asked, mouth watering and stomach rumbling. "You're Darkspawn, aren't you? You don't... you know."

Mog waited until she started eating before answering.

"Every so often," he said, smiling wide as Lily let out a happy groan. The food tasted even more delicious than it smelled. "Adventurous humans find themselves exploring my mountains. I like to keep an eye on them, help them out when they get themselves into trouble. Helps to have plenty of supplies readily available. Your kind have a terrible habit of running out of food in the middle of nowhere, losing their tents and blankets, getting lost."

"You help them?" Lily asked between mouthfuls. "Wait. 'Mountains'? As in *all* of them?"

"My senses cover the mountain range, yes. And yes, I help wayward adventurers back to safety when the need arises."

The *entire* mountain range? But... That was hundreds and hundreds of miles! In every direction! Lily was hardly an expert when it came to powers and their costs, especially for Darkspawn, but even so... That was a *lot*. Too much.

Seeing her wide eyes, the shock in them, Darumaug chuckled.

"My sensing ability is somewhat... *special*. A gift from the Prince that made me. It's not so much a 'sense' as it is an 'area of influence'. I can extend the area covered by it as far as I want. But, the wider the area, the more Dark it costs to maintain. Fortunately, I can also suck in all the Dark from across that same area. In a mountainous region with lots of caves and cervices and dark places, the Dark I draw in covers the cost of maintaining my area of influence."

Lily took a bite out of some spiced meat, shuddered at how juicy and yummy it was.

"I'm surprised Kiera didn't tell you. The moment you entered my mountains, I got the impression you could feel me watching."

"Nuh-uh," Lily mumbled, shaking her head. "She kept *you* a surprise."

"Yeah..." Darumaug smiled. "That'd explain the fainting."

Lily blushed.

She hadn't *actually* fainted. She'd just stumbled a little...

"So you *are* Darkspawn," she said, ignoring the heat in her cheeks and all too happy to change the topic. "I thought maybe dragons were..."

"Mythics?" The dragon-man chuckled. "It's a common mistake people make. Because we drain away all the Dark from an area, there's no chance for new Darkspawn to manifest. Mountain ranges with dragons, and the areas around them, never have to worry about Darkspawn infestations. A lot of humans assume we're Mythics that hunt Darkspawn. Or, if not Mythics, then a neutral 'other' party. Even those that *do* know we're Dark tend to leave dragons well alone. The Priests learned *that* lesson the hard way."

Lily perked up. She gulped down a mouthful of food - ready to ask for more information – but ended up choking. She coughed, reached for a stone cup filled with recently melted snow.

Darumaug chuckled as she gulped down mouthful after mouthful, washed the half-eaten food down.

"The Northern Wastes," Darumaug said. "Used to be a prosperous, mountain nation if you can believe it. The dragon there, Valithor, kept the mountains clear of Darkspawn and everyone lived in relative harmony. Then along came the Priests and their Empire. Somehow, likely with the help of several powerful Mythics, they managed to slay Valithor. Without a dragon there to keep the Dark away, it was only a matter of time before Darkspawn started appearing."

Lily could almost picture it. Endless caves and mountains, spewing out legions of monsters.

"Inside of a decade," Darumaug said with a sigh, "the mountains were swarming with Runties. Half a century later, armies of goblins and lesser Darkspawn were bringing cities and settlements to their knees. And nowadays? Well, there's a reason they call it a 'wasteland'."

He didn't say anything after that. Lily ate in silence while Darumaug was lost in quiet contemplation.

The Northern Wastes.

Lily tried picturing it. Cities nestled between snowy mountains, abandoned and crumbling. Fading away. Gangs and tribes of monsters roaming about, living in the skeletal remains of a once-human civilisation.

She almost wanted to go there. See it for herself.

Would Kiera take her there if Lily asked? Or would it be too dangerous for her? What would a place like that – one ruled by Darkspawn – even be like? She could try to imagine it, sure. But what was the truth? What was it *really* like?

Save for the mindless Runtie rats she'd encountered, every Darkspawn Lily'd met had been nice and pleasant and, well, *good*.

What would a whole civilisation of Darkspawn be like?